



## **Johannesburg Summit – an opportunity lost**

### **A WSSD Assessment**

### **September 2002**

From August 26 through September 4, in Johannesburg, South Africa, government delegates, United Nations officials and representatives of non-governmental organizations (NGOs) and the business sector gathered to address the multifaceted challenges of safeguarding the earth's environment and promoting sustainable development. This "World Summit on Sustainable Development" (WSS D) was the ten- year review of the 1992 United Nations "Earth Summit" held in Rio de Janeiro. As such, the WSSD, or Johannesburg Summit, was charged with addressing the implementation of Rio's "Agenda 21" action plan. This was a daunting task considering that governments have not lived up to the commitments made in Rio and in the 10-year intervening period, the global environment has gotten worse and disparities between rich and poor more pronounced.

For the Johannesburg Summit, Secretary General Annan highlighted five action areas: water, energy, health, agriculture and biodiversity. Dubbing this agenda WEHAB he explained, "We inhabit the Earth. And we must rehabilitate our one and only planet." Annan urged governments to work together in Johannesburg and come up with practical, achievable results. However, rather than addressing the interlinked problems of environment and poverty, government negotiations got bogged down in polarized and acrimonious debates over issues of globalization, finance and trade. As a result the WSSD Plan of Action document suffered from a lowest common denominator negotiation process resulting in a painstakingly negotiated 54-page text that is, in general, ambiguous and insufficient. On some issues, the European Union (EU) took the most progressive position, for instance, in calling for the WSSD Plan of Action to contain clear targets and time frames, the inclusion of renewable energy and a 10- year plan for sustainable consumption and production. However, the U.S. (along with Canada, Japan and Australia) and OPEC nations stood in opposition. The result is that the WSSD document sets new time frames on only three issues: sanitation, restoration of depleted fish stocks and reduction of the extinction rate of the world's plants and animals. Goals on issues such as drinking water, biodiversity, chemicals and overseas development aid (ODA) were either weakly reaffirmed or deleted. In fact, much of the text has been reduced to reiterating previous commitments made in other forums and, as in the cases of agriculture and biodiversity, the WSSD text is even weaker than previous agreements.

Governments squandered a once in a decade opportunity to set forth a resounding reaffirmation of the 1992 Rio Principles and establish sustainable development as an overarching framework that could set ecological and social limits on the process of globalization. For example, many NGOs urged governments to use the Summit as an opportunity to counterbalance the World Trade Organization (WTO) and secure the integrity of multilateral environmental agreements and international labor standards. The International Secretariat of the World Federalist Movement (WFM) went a step further and advocated for the WSSD to launch high- level discussions on the need for a World Environment Organization (WEO). Although the WSSD documentation offers only uninspired suggestions for

integration of sustainable development concerns, related summit side events and symposium discussions as well as mentions of the need for a WEO by France's President Chirac and others, indicate that these critical global governance issues are ripe to be taken up in other forums.

WFM had also called for the Johannesburg Summit to take action towards a Convention on Corporate Accountability and supported developing nations' proposal for an international framework for corporate accountability. Although not openly discussed by governments, Enron, Arthur Anderson and other recent corporate scandals provided a backdrop that allowed for the issue to be debated in Johannesburg up until the last minute. On the last day of negotiations an attempt by the U.S. to further weaken the WSSD document was thwarted by interventions by Ethiopia and Norway. Although the final WSSD Plan of Implementation does not call for commencement of discussions of an international convention, the door remains open for discussions of corporate accountability to be addressed in future international forums.

The Summit could have been a chance for the U.S. to demonstrate leadership and willingness to work with the international community on issues of common concern. Considering the U.S.' desire for allies in its "war on terrorism," the Johannesburg Summit offered a prime opportunity for the U.S. to stem anti-American sentiment. The frustration with the U.S. came to the surface during the speech of Secretary of State Colin Powell when, members of the audience unfurled banners and interrupted three times with jeers and chants of "shame on Bush." The banners were an initiative of NGOs, but applause in response came from government delegates as well.

In spite of the weak official WSSD documents, some important advances were made in the context of the overall Summit. For example, during the month of August, fourteen countries ratified the Kyo to Protocol on climate change, Thailand and China both signed, and during the Summit, Russia announced that it would ratify soon. The addition of Russia will reach the number of countries necessary for the Protocol to come into force. Also significantly, Australia, who had announced during the Summit's final preparatory commission in Bali that it would not join Kyoto, reversed its rejection said that it will "eventually" join. Australia's reversal leaves the U.S. standing alone in opposition to Kyoto. Another outcome related to the Summit includes a substantial replenishment of the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), a World Bank, UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and UN Development Programme (UNDP) managed fund that assists developing countries in implementation of environmental treaties.

Also on the positive side, the South African government and the city of Johannesburg did a praiseworthy job of managing the logistics of the UN Summit and related events. Approximately 21,000 government delegates and business, NGO, and media representatives were accredited to the official UN Conference and 104 heads of states participated in the high-level segment. Other related events in Johannesburg included the World Conservation Union (IUCN) Environment Center that was a dynamic full-time conference in and of itself. In addition, there was a "Civil Society Global Forum;" "Ubuntu Village" and "Water Dome" exhibitions; separate "People's", "Indigenous Peoples'," "Children's," "International Youth" and "African Youth" Summits; "Business," "Science and Technology," and local authorities forums; a Global Judges Symposium, a Parliamentary Workshop, a Smithsonian Institution Institute for Sustainable Development, and numerous other workshops, teachins and even three different official protests organized by various actors. In total, approximately 65,000 people converged in Johannesburg, making it the largest UN Conference ever.

As with all UN Conferences, the Johannesburg Summit served the important purpose of focussing the world's attention on critical issues. Only the UN can convene an event consisting of 104 heads of state and generate worldwide media attention. Even five minutes of the world's attention is something.

More enduring are the results of the opportunities provided by the summit for informal gatherings and networking amongst NGOs and other experts and individuals concerned with the relevant issues. It is these discussions that will have as much, if not greater, impact on spurring the actions necessary for sustainable development.

### **Low point for multilateralism**

The 1992 Rio “Earth Summit” was in many respects a summit of multilateralism. Following soon after the end of the Cold War and while there was still talk of a peace dividend, the “Earth Summit” and its outcomes conveyed a sense that nations could work together to address global problems. In spite of intrinsic differences between the industrialized and developing nations, Rio launched a number of important environmental treaties as well as the forward-looking Agenda 21. Rio was inspirational, however, 10 years later the same spirit, energy and hope was not present in Johannesburg. In contrast, the Johannesburg Summit falls during what seems to be a new low point for multilateralism. The Johannesburg Summit was not spared the Bush Administration’s outright disdain for international law and treaties such as has been witnessed by its outright rejection, and efforts to weaken the Kyoto Protocol, the International Criminal Court, the Comprehensive Nuclear Test Ban Treaty, the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and others.

The WFM International Secretariat had high hopes for the WSSD, but it became evident during the final preparatory commission meeting in Bali that it was the intent of many governments and government groupings – and not just the U.S. – for the Johannesburg Summit to be a failure. The lowest common denominator negotiation process serves the agendas of countries whom do not want to use multilateralism and UN Summits to take issues forward because they would rather work bilaterally or in less representative forums such as the Group of 8 (G8) to promote their own agendas. Will Johannesburg Summit be the last UN mega conference? Most likely not, though in the wake of the Johannesburg Summit the UN has announced a ban on future environmental conferences and is instead setting up a process for submitting reports on individual countries’ progress to the UN General Assembly. For NGOs such as WFM that had hoped to contribute to a meaningful outcome for the Johannesburg Summit, now is the time to redouble our efforts in other forums such as next year’s UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and the Governing Council of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP).

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