

# **The Future of Sustainable Development: The Johannesburg Conference and What Happens Next**

J.W. Anderson and Richard Morgenstern

July 2003 • Issue Brief 03-06



**RESOURCES**  
FOR THE FUTURE

Resources for the Future  
1616 P Street, NW  
Washington, D.C. 20036  
Telephone: 202-328-5000  
Fax: 202-939-3460  
Internet: <http://www.rff.org>

© 2003 Resources for the Future. All rights reserved. No portion of this paper may be reproduced without permission of the authors.

Issue Briefs are short reports designed to provide topical, timely information and analysis to a broad, nontechnical audience.

## **The Future of Sustainable Development: The Johannesburg Conference and What Happens Next**

J.W. Anderson and Richard Morgenstern

In terms of representation, the United Nations' World Summit on Sustainable Development in the late summer of 2002 was the biggest political meeting of the year. Nearly every country in the world sent delegates, as did hundreds of advocacy groups, international agencies, business corporations, trade associations, and scientific and social research organizations—in total, some 21,000 people, most of them with strongly held points of view.

The Summit's central achievement was the expression of a moral position addressing the widening gap between the world's rich and its poor. In 1980 the average per capita income in the 44 least developed countries was 1.5 per cent of the average in the industrialized economies, the United Nations reported. By 1999, it had fallen to 1.1 per cent. The locus of the conference, Johannesburg, South Africa, gave special force to its message, coming from the continent that has participated least in recent economic development.

In a formal declaration the Summit spoke of globalization and the rapid integration of markets that distribute their benefits and costs unevenly. It warned that unless their condition of life can be changed, the poor of the world may lose confidence in “the democratic systems to which we remain committed, seeing their representatives as nothing more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals.”

In the Plan of Implementation that was the conference's concluding statement, it agreed to halve by 2015 the proportion of the world's people who live without access to basic sanitation. Two years ago the General Assembly had called for the more dramatic goals of halving by 2015 the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day and those without access to safe drinking water. The Summit reaffirmed those promises. But the sanitation goal acquired great symbolic importance at Johannesburg as an indication of the conference's determination to make a further specific commitment with a target date attached to it.

The rich countries' trade barriers to the exports of the poor—above all, agricultural products—became a major issue at the conference. After much controversy it was resolved in an agreement to call on the World Trade Organization to negotiate reductions in the barriers “with a view to phasing out all forms of export subsidies” and reducing trade-distorting domestic farm price supports. No dates were established.

The conference gave much attention to the concept of transnational partnerships among non-governmental organizations, including businesses and scientific associations. It was an acknowledgement that the great changes it envisioned would not be carried out by governments alone, or by official aid alone. At the same time many of the people at Johannesburg expressed great concern about the behavior of corporations, especially foreign corporations coming into newly opened markets. After much wrestling over wording, the conference noted this concern in a gently phrased paragraph about the need to “promote corporate responsibility and accountability.”

It is a fair summary of this conference to say that its chief effect was to shift the top priorities in sustainable development, as the United Nations judges them, from the global threats that the developed countries identified late in the last century to the national needs of the developing countries themselves. At the last world environment conference, the main focus was on climate change and the loss of biodiversity. At this one the focus was on the provision of safe drinking water to the 1.1 billion people who lack it, safe sanitation to the 2.4 billion people who lack it, adequate nutrition for the 815 million people who lack it, and the basic health care and education that the richer countries of the world take for granted.

The Johannesburg conference was the third that the United Nations has held on the relationship between economic development and environmental protection. The first, in Stockholm in 1972, performed the service of bringing the subject to international attention. The second, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, adopted Agenda 21, an ambitious manifesto for social equity and higher living standards in the developing world. But Rio’s most notable products were the treaties to address global warming and the loss of biodiversity. There the U.N. environmental process seemed to be moving from the statement of ideals and goals to the means of actually achieving them.

At Johannesburg the process slid back to goal-setting and enunciation of ideals, with little advancement in the difficult task of carrying them out.

The United Nations originally intended the Johannesburg conference to find ways to carry out Agenda 21 and all its sweeping promises to the people of the poor countries. That’s why its key document was titled the Plan of Implementation. In December 2001 the United Nations’ Secretary General, Kofi Annan, tried to steer the preparations for Johannesburg in that direction with an extensive report noting the many areas in which the world had made little progress toward the Agenda 21 goals or, indeed, had retrogressed. He called on the Johannesburg conference “to launch new concrete program initiatives, whose success will require strong

political will, practical steps and strong partnerships.”

The great failure of Johannesburg was that it produced few signs of that political will or of practical steps to pursue the promises of Agenda 21. The managers of the conference took much satisfaction in pledges by the United States to invest \$970 million over the next three years in water and sanitation projects, and by the European Union to establish a \$700 million partnership on energy development. But experience suggests that there are limits to the effects of financial aid alone in economic development. These pledges did not represent the kind of enduring institutional change that Annan’s report seemed to envision.

Supporters of the U.N. process argue that the reaffirmation of its high ideals give them a moral force that generates action. That claim was more plausible early in the process, after the Stockholm conference, than more recently. As the Annan report showed in poignant detail, progress in lifting standards of living for the world’s poor and protecting the environment has been scarce in the decade since Rio. The poor countries generally applauded the escalation of promises of social betterment at Johannesburg, but on present evidence it is unclear that these promises will have any more effect than those in the past. It has become necessary to ask whether the United Nations’ continued expression of ideals, unattached to any binding commitment or any plausible means to carry them out, has not become a substitute for action.

The language of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation suggests an inability to specify the locus of responsibility for progress. There is a conspicuous frequency of sentences that state sweeping intentions, but give no indication who or what is to do what the statement requires. Sentences lack subjects; their verbs specify action but in the absence of subjects offer no clue as to who is to undertake it. Perhaps the subject of these sentences can be inferred to be “we,” everyone in general at Johannesburg and consequently no one in particular. To cite several examples from the Plan’s section on means of implementation:

“88. Commit to actively pursue the WTO [World Trade Organization] work programme to address the trade-related issues and concerns affecting the fuller integration of small, vulnerable economies...

“89. Build the capacity of commodity-dependent countries to diversify exports...

“90. Enhance the benefits for developing countries, as well as countries with economies in transition, from trade liberalization...”

This language is the product of intense negotiations that began early in the year 2002 and wound through four preparatory committee meetings between April and June before being

finally decided in the last hours of the conference. While much of the Plan's language may be grammatically unsatisfactory, there is nothing in it that is accidental. When the carefully drafted pronouncement of a major international meeting is left fuzzy, the reason usually is unresolved differences over policy.

The only detailed negotiating record available to the public is published by the International Institute for Sustainable Development in its Earth Negotiations Bulletin (see Further Readings). The IISD, which issued daily reports on the conference (and provides them on most United Nations-sponsored environmental meetings), is funded by a number of governments, and the variety of its sources of support appears to provide a considerable degree of independence to this highly specialized and indispensable exercise in journalism.

The IISD summary reports a series of differences between the United States and the European Union over targets and timetables. In general the European Union wanted to specify the progress to be achieved by a given date, on grounds that the conference's goals would otherwise remain vague. The United States frequently objected that the scientific basis did not exist for hard targets, or that information was inadequate to judge compliance. Often the European Union was supported by other European governments, and the United States by Canada, Japan, and the bloc of developing countries known as the G-77/China.

Behind the diplomats' arguments lay the deep political differences among the three dominant blocs that currently shape all international discussions of the environment. Pressed by their powerful Green movements and accustomed to supranational regulation through the European Union, the Europeans generally worked for an active and vigorous international regime. The United States was led by a conservative Republican administration that usually regards environmental advocacy as an attack on American industry, and regulation as a threat to growth. The developing countries, determined to avoid any new rules that would constrain their own economic growth, supported the United States more often than the Europeans. In any case the developing countries are more interested in social and economic equity in relation to the industrial economies than in the kind of environmental values that prevail there. The speeches at Johannesburg often seemed to imply that everyone agreed on the definition of sustainable development, but that is far from the case.

One notable case concerned the pledge to improve sanitation in poor countries. Both the United States and the Europeans agreed to a linkage to the United Nations' promise two years earlier to halve the proportion of the world's population without access to safe water by 2015. But through the long preparatory process they had not been able to agree whether to be equally

specific regarding sanitation. This dispute drew great attention as it resonated through the advocacy organizations attending the conference, and they took it as a victory when ultimately the European Union's position prevailed (Paragraph 7 of the Plan of Implementation).

On policy toward depleted fisheries, which touched substantial economic interests of many countries, the European Union wanted 2015 set as a firm target date for restoring fish stocks to levels that would produce a maximum sustainable yield. The compromise was to insert the words "where possible" (Paragraph 30 (a)).

The European Union wanted the conference to call for an explicit timetable for phasing out energy subsidies. The United States led a coalition in opposition, including the G-77/China, Australia, Canada, and Japan. The eventual compromise was to employ the conditional tense: "Policies to reduce market distortions would promote energy systems compatible with sustainable development through the use of improved market signals and by removing market distortions, including restructuring taxation and phasing out harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, with such policies taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries..." (Paragraph 19 (p)).

Similarly, the European Union supported firm targets and timetables for increasing the use of renewable energy. The United States argued that countries' circumstances differ greatly. The final text of the Plan leaves it to the various countries' governments to encourage the use of renewables, but sets no quantities or deadlines (Paragraph 19).

More broadly, the European Union wanted timetables for reversing the general trend in natural resource degradation. The United States and other countries argued that in many instances the data do not exist to establish baselines from which changes can be precisely measured (and in many instances that is correct). The solution was a statement calling on national governments and, where appropriate, regions to adopt their own targets (Paragraph 23).

The only notable exception to this pattern of disagreement on mandatory timetables between the United States and the European Union occurred when the subject of subsidized agricultural exports arose. Both of them, as well as Japan, heavily subsidize their farmers, a matter of great importance in their domestic politics. Here they came together on language that merely calls on the members of the World Trade Organization to live up to their commitments, at an earlier conference on trade, to negotiate in good faith on these subsidies (Paragraph 86(c)).

So what did the Johannesburg conference accomplish? It is quite correct to say that there was a great deal going on besides the highly politicized negotiations over the Plan of Implementation. Hundreds of advocacy groups and research organizations in the environmental

fields attended, less to influence the negotiations than to exchange ideas and data, to find out who else is at work in areas of interest to them, and to make worldwide connections. These conferences have been instrumental in raising the vision of the various countries' environmental movements from their own domestic preoccupations. Businesses send people to report on the evolution of environmental policy, and often to look among the non-governmental organizations for partners with whom they can work in addressing issues with which, they now know, they are going to have to deal.

But the Plan of Implementation is an accurate measure of political will—or the lack thereof—and intention among the governments that wrote it. The Plan continues the United Nations' practice of making large promises while providing little reason to hope that they will actually be fulfilled. The gap between pledge and performance is becoming a widely recognized characteristic of the U.N. process, generating cynicism and distrust of it especially among the developing countries that are supposed to be its primary beneficiaries.

The structure of the United Nations' environmental process has served well its original purpose of establishing a moral position and bringing it to worldwide attention. But that battle has now been won. Experience is demonstrating that the United Nations' next objective, to move from moral position to practical effect, will require a different approach.

If the Johannesburg conference has produced less than the United Nations itself considered necessary, what changes might make this process more effective? It would be useful, first, to acknowledge that a conference of 190 governments, approaching decisions by consensus on a very broad agenda of highly complex subjects, is not likely to arrive at a sharply focused plan of action. One solution might be to restrict any future conference on sustainable development to a more manageable agenda. But that could not be accomplished without vehement protest from many countries and many constituencies. Particularly among the smaller countries and among the environmental advocacy organizations, these big conferences have become an important vehicle for making their concerns heard by a worldwide audience. The United Nations is hardly likely to turn its back on them.

But the present institutional structure of the process clearly is not taking the United Nations and its members where they want to go.

A more promising way to move forward might be to supplement a big general conference like Johannesburg with single-topic meetings to take up those subjects that, in the diplomats' judgment, might be ripe for action. Instead of hoping, unrealistically, that a Johannesburg-style convocation might produce a real plan of implementation, the United Nations would use it to

discuss the current issues of sustainable development and suggest a rough order of priority—as Johannesburg did. Then the United Nations would take a second step, in which it called a meeting limited to one subject that it considered both urgently important and ready for a sustained international effort.

In the present circumstances, the obvious candidate for the follow-up meeting would be the Johannesburg pledges regarding safe drinking water and sanitation. While Johannesburg was hampered by deep political divisions, they do not appear to have involved water and sanitation. Here the rich countries see improved water supplies and sanitation as environmental protection, while the poor countries see them as economic development. Similarly, people on both sides of the Atlantic see water and sanitation as necessary to public health and therefore exempt from the ideological jousting that's going on between them. One indicator is the Bush administration's strikingly large offer of financial aid for building sanitation facilities, its only real indication of interest in anything that happened at the conference. (The outbreak of malaria in a Washington, D.C., suburb in September 2002, just after the Johannesburg conference, can only sharpen the administration's interest in public health standards in the countries from which the United States' visitors and immigrants come.)

Rapid acceleration of action toward the Johannesburg goals seems to require institutional innovation. The Global Environment Facility, although it addresses different issues, is worth careful consideration as a model. It provides funding for projects under six United Nations-sponsored environmental treaties, yet it does not duplicate the work of agencies already in the field. The projects are actually managed by the World Bank, the U.N. Development Program, and the U.N. Environment Program. But the GEF has proved very effective at mobilizing substantial amounts of money—\$4 billion in project resources so far, leveraging another \$12 billion in financing—to allow these projects to go forward without having to compete with the development agencies' long list of other priorities. If the governments that met at Johannesburg truly believe that the water and sanitation goals are of paramount importance, they will need a similar source of dedicated funding to achieve them. Because the Johannesburg conference turned from the GEF's global environmental concerns to the national needs of poor countries, there is a strong case for a parallel financing facility for the national needs identified as Johannesburg as primary.

Expanding access to safe water and sanitation has been an objective of the health and development agencies for many years, and they have accomplished a great deal. But the rapid growth of population in the developing world means that the present rate of progress would have to be accelerated sharply to fulfill the Johannesburg promises.



The task ahead is quantified in The Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000 Report, published by the World Health Organization and UNICEF. In the decade from 1990 to 2000, the report said, the number of people worldwide with access to safe water rose by about 816 million and the number with access to sanitation rose by 747 million. That constitutes a heroic achievement, conveying huge benefits in health and productivity. But to reach the Johannesburg goals in the three regions of greatest need, Africa, Asia and Latin America, would require extending water supplies to an additional 1.5 billion people by 2015, and sanitation to an additional 2.2 billion people. That would require speeding up the rate of constructing water systems by 25 per cent, and doubling the rate of sewerage construction. A feat on that scale is highly unlikely in the absence of new institutional arrangements and political focus.

At present writing, seven months after the Johannesburg conference, it has to be said that there is little indication of a major acceleration of worldwide efforts in this area. The third World Water Forum, meeting in Japan in March 2003, discussed the subject along with many others. The Forum provided the deeply useful service of keeping the conversation going regarding drinking water and sewerage. Less usefully, it raised a prospect that further expansion may become entangled in the highly polarized debate over whether access to safe water is to be defined as a human right. That question is related to the debate over whether water supply and sanitation should be in the hands of government, or for-profit private companies, or public-private partnerships capable of paying their costs while making provision for the poor.

With more than 170 governments represented at the World Water Forum, many thousands of people taking part, and an agenda organized around 33 themes, the scope of this meeting was inevitably very diffused—like the Johannesburg Conference itself. The Water Forum culminated in a ministerial declaration that only called on national governments to pursue the Johannesburg goals for access to safe drinking water and sanitation. But the necessary increase in the rate of improvement can result only from vigorous pushing from the top of the world's leading governments. That hasn't happened yet.

The point here is not simply to promote sanitation, important though it is. The point is to suggest a system of governance to enable the United Nations to go beyond discussions and moral standard-setting. When it deals with environment and development, the United Nations needs to be able to locate those opportunities on its agenda that are not deadlocked by political quarrels and that can command genuine commitments and commensurate resources. It then needs to be able to attack those opportunities with a force that produces achievements beyond anything likely to emerge from business-as-usual development aid. More effective governance by the

United Nations would also put it in a stronger position to deal with the separate but related topic of governance in the countries receiving assistance.

If U.N. action on drinking water and sanitation—for example—could significantly accelerate the work already under way by the development banks, aid programs, and governments around the world, it would stand as a major achievement of the Johannesburg conference. Without some concrete examples of accomplishment, the United Nations' whole campaign for sustainable development will be in danger of collapsing.

It's not a new idea to look for narrow areas of possible agreement, when the governments of the big countries broadly disagree. But a great concerted effort to bring better water and sanitation to poor people could transform the quality of life for millions of them and provide an example of success on which, a decade from now, the United Nations could construct its next conference on sustainable development.

**Further Reading:**

World Summit on Sustainable Development, 2002, The Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development. This document, as well as the two that follow, can be found at [www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/documents.html](http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/documents.html).

WSSD, 2002, Plan of Implementation. United Nations Economic and Social Council, 2001, Implementing Agenda 21: Report of the Secretary-General. E/CN.17/2002/PC.2/7.

International Institute for Sustainable Development: Earth Negotiations Bulletin, Vol. 22 No. 51, Summary of the World Summit on Sustainable Development: 26 August – 4 September 2002. [www.iisd.ca/linkages/download/pdf/enb2251e.pdf](http://www.iisd.ca/linkages/download/pdf/enb2251e.pdf).

World Health Organization/UNICEF Joint Monitoring Project, 2000, The Global Water Supply and Sanitation Assessment 2000 Report. [www.who.int/water\\_sanitation\\_health/wss/Monitoring1.html](http://www.who.int/water_sanitation_health/wss/Monitoring1.html).