

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## The International Politics of Sustainable Development

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**T**he World Summit on Sustainable Development, to be held in Johannesburg from Aug. 26 through Sept. 4, 2002, will be different from the previous United Nations conferences on the environment. Its main business will not be to set new goals, but rather to try to find ways to make visible progress toward all the goals set by similar meetings in the past.

A disquieting question awaits the thousands of politicians and environmental activists who will gather at Johannesburg. The earlier meetings in this series—particularly at Stockholm in 1972 and Rio de Janeiro in 1992—were buoyed on waves of high aspirations. There was a general assumption that the various declarations and manifestoes, once stamped with the seal of the United Nations, would generate a moral momentum that would somehow compel the world's governments to carry them out.

As it has turned out, the actual results of these conferences have been disappointingly thin. That is the question before the Johannesburg conference on sustainable development: is the U.N. environmental process capable of producing serious and sustained results? The United Nations process for drafting and negotiating international environmental treaties has developed in a way that proceeds by consensus rather than by divisive up-or-down votes. Maintaining consensus in an organization with 189 members generates great pressure to paper over difficult issues and set aside awkward details. It creates a strong incentive, in particular, not to insist on rigorous procedures for verification and enforcement. The U.N. environmental tradition is based on a belief that it is better to agree on a loosely worded text and trust to governments' good faith than to press for tight legal language that risks sinking the whole enterprise.

One abiding reality of world environmental politics is the deep suspicion among developing countries that these agreements are merely devices to suppress their economic growth, engineered by the rich countries to prevent the emergence of competitors. In repeated attempts to allay this suspicion, the rich countries have made large promises to help the poor ones in many ways. But with little in the way of enforcement, many of the promises have remained unfulfilled. That, in turn, has reinforced the suspicions of the poor and their inclination not to cooperate.

### *Conversations about Sustainable Development*

The phrase "sustainable development" has an instructive history. It originally was used to mean simply that the present generation has an obligation not to use resources in ways that would degrade the lives of its descendants. But that hit a nerve, since one obvious way to save resources is to slow the industrialization of developing countries. Another is to reduce the current consumption levels of rich countries. The architects of sustainable development immediately agreed that the term had to incorporate economic growth. If it incorporated economic growth, sustainable development also had to mean improving education and health. It had to include access for poor countries' exports in rich countries' markets. It had to mean aid to the poor countries, both financial and technical.

As this conversation went on, the definition of sustainable development came to cover the whole agenda for worldwide social equity. It was codified in a book-length document, Agenda 21, and adopted with great applause at the U.N.'s Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro 10 years ago. This summer's Johannesburg meeting is sometimes called Rio + 10.

In preparation for the Johannesburg meeting, the U.N.'s secretary general, Kofi Annan, submitted a report in December 2001 taking stock of developments under Agenda 21.

*"... [P]rogress towards the goals established at UNCED have been slower than anticipated, and in some respects conditions are actually worse than they were 10 years ago," the report said.*

*"Second, no major changes have occurred since UNCED in the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production which are putting the natural life-support system at peril..."*

*"Third, there is a lack of mutually coherent policies or approaches in the areas of finance, trade, investment, technology and sustainable development..."*

*"Fourth, the financial resources required for implementing Agenda 21 have not been forthcoming and mechanisms for the transfer of technology have not improved."*

One reason for nonperformance under Agenda 21 and similar agreements is that U.N. environmental meetings tend to be attended by the respective governments' ministers of the environment who, in the company of kindred spirits, make ambitious declarations that they then carry home and turn over to the finance ministers, on whose desks they gather dust.

In an attempt to address this resistance directly, the U.N. called a meeting in March 2002 in Monterrey, Mexico, attended by finance ministers and heads of state, to discuss development aid. President Bush attended, delivering a notable address in which he said that the United States would increase development assistance by half over the next three years, an increase of \$5 billion a year from the current level. That would be a highly significant jump in American aid. But the total would still be less than one-fourth the UN's longstanding goal of 0.7% of GNP.

Development assistance worldwide is small compared to private investment, Mr. Bush observed, and investment is small compared to the flows of trade. "So to be serious about fighting poverty," the President said, "we must be serious about trade."

Like Agenda 21, the Bush administration is, in principle, strongly in favor of open markets. But its recent restrictions on steel imports were a harsh signal that its tolerance for politically painful imports is low. Even more recently, a large bipartisan majority in Congress passed a huge expansion of agricultural subsidies, which will depress prices for farmers in unprotected countries.

The American enthusiasm for farm subsidies is exceeded only in the European Union, which is now trying to find a way to reconcile admission of Eastern European countries with the preservation of its aggressively protectionist agricultural rules. On this subject, 10 years ago, Agenda 21 called it "essential" that there be "substantial and progressive reduction in the support and protection of agriculture—covering internal regimes, market access and export subsidies... in order to avoid inflicting large losses on the more efficient producers, especially in developing countries."

During the past year, a series of meetings has been under way to prepare for the Johannesburg conference, and these negotiations provide a pretty clear indication of the issues that are going to be most difficult. They are not the issues that the rich countries generally consider environmental, but rather finance and trade—financing for development, and trade rules that benefit the poor countries' products as greatly as the rich countries'.

When the Johannesburg Summit convenes, most of the attention and news coverage in the rich countries is likely to be focused on the tensions between the United States and Europe. The Eu-

Europeans generally support the UN environmental treaties, often with great enthusiasm, and the United States frequently does not. (If the Kyoto Protocol on climate change goes into force later this year, as its supporters hope, it will be the fourth global environmental treaty since 1992 to take effect without the participation of the United States. The others are the conventions on the law of the sea, on the preservation of biodiversity, and on dumping toxic wastes in developing countries.)

These trans-Atlantic tensions spring from deep differences in legal standards and ideas of sovereignty and they are important. But, for the future of the world's environmental regime, they are unlikely to be as important as the growing cynicism and sense of grievance among the poor countries, generated by the United Nations' pattern of calling huge conferences at which it makes sweeping promises that, after everyone goes home, are tacitly abandoned.

UN environmental politics has two sides, a spirit of high idealism but a record of unfulfilled pledges and agreements weak on enforcement. Agenda 21 reflects both sides. As time goes on, the lack of follow-through is alienating those parts of the world in which five-sixths of its population live. Johannesburg is the place where the United Nations will ask its member governments whether they want to do anything about that.

### **Further Readings**

Brack, Duncan, Fanny Calder and Muge Dolun. 2001. "From Rio to Johannesburg: the Earth Summit and Rio+10." Royal Institute of International Affairs, Briefing Paper, New Series No. 19 ([www.riia.org/pdf/briefing\\_papers/from\\_rio\\_to\\_johannesburg.pdf](http://www.riia.org/pdf/briefing_papers/from_rio_to_johannesburg.pdf))

Elliott, Lorraine. 1998. *The Global Politics of the Environment*. New York: New York University Press. An extremely useful account of the development of international environmental policy from the Stockholm Conference of 1972 to mid-1997, just before the Kyoto Conference.

International Institute for Sustainable Development. 2002. *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, Vol. 22, No. 41 (at [www.iisd.ca/linkages/vol22/enb2241e.html](http://www.iisd.ca/linkages/vol22/enb2241e.html)). A detailed summary of the fourth and final preparatory meeting for the Johannesburg Summit, concluding with an excellent analysis of the issues as they stood when that meeting ended on June 7, 2002.

United Nations. 2002. A large collection of documents related to the Johannesburg Summit, including the Secretary General's report, can be found at [www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/documents.html](http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/documents.html).

United Nations. 1992. *Agenda 21* ([www.un.org/esa/sustdev/agenda21.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/agenda21.htm)).

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