

Spheres of Influence





The Down-to-Earth Summit

Lessening Our Ecological Footprint

Numbering 6 billion and counting, the human race is steadily depleting many of the natural resources it depends on to survive. Claude Martin, director-general of World Wildlife Fund International in Gland, Switzerland, says that at current rates of consumption, the human “ecological footprint” will reach twice the Earth’s regenerative capacity by 2050. This footprint represents the total area humans require for agriculture, timber production, and fishing, combined with the area needed to absorb carbon dioxide released by burning fossil fuels.

Hoping to keep the footprint in check, stakeholders from around the world are focusing on ways to promote sustainability. The United Nations (UN) World Summit on Sustainable Development, convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August–4 September 2002, reflected the concept’s growing influence on international policy by its sheer size. A total of 100 heads of state were present, in addition to 22,000 other participants, including 10,000 delegates from national government agencies, 8,000 nongovernmental organization (NGO) representatives, and 4,000 members of the press.

The Path to Johannesburg

The Johannesburg summit is the latest in a series of meetings that have sought to define and promote sustainable development. In the decade prior to Johannesburg, the major milestone on this path was the UN Conference on Environment and Development, commonly

referred to as the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992.

The Earth Summit gave rise to a number of important policy instruments for safeguarding the environment, including the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and Agenda 21, a 294-page blueprint for achieving sustainable human societies. Conspicuously absent since 1992, however, is tangible progress on many of these environmental fronts, says Gerry Morvell, executive policy advisor at the summit secretariat in New York City. Biodiversity, forests, and fisheries are all dwindling despite existing international agreements designed to reverse these trends, he says.

Citing the lack of progress as a fundamental problem, UN officials and other stakeholders preparing for Johannesburg pushed for an emphasis on action over dialogue. “We chose to drive down a different path,” explains Morvell. “No more treaties and policies—what we really needed was a focus on the commitment to act.” Adds Jacob Scherr, director of international programs with the Natural Resources Defense Council in Washington, D.C., “If Rio was the Earth Summit, then Johannesburg was the Down-to-Earth Summit. If Rio was about principles and planning, Johannesburg was about action and accountability.”

A Focus on Progress

An emphasis on progress is evident in a pair of key documents hammered out during the often

rancorous Johannesburg negotiations. In the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, governments commit to “act together” and to “monitor progress at regular intervals towards the achievement of sustainable goals and objectives.” The 54-page Johannesburg Plan of Implementation builds on the goals of Agenda 21 and other UN efforts related to sustainability, with an ambitious agenda concentrated in five areas: water and sanitation, energy, health, agriculture, and biodiversity and ecosystem management.

A basic theme at the conference was that these five priority areas are deeply interconnected causes of poverty and barriers to sustainability. For example, illness makes people poor, because it prevents them from being able to work and carry out other basic responsibilities of life. Conversely, people who are poor often lack access to clean water and hygienic environments, which in turn makes them sick. Approximately 1.2 billion people lack safe drinking water, and 2 billion lack adequate sanitation, both considered by experts to be among the biggest risk factors for disease. And villagers who lack access to modern power grids burn timber for heating and cooking, an activity that contributes to respiratory illness while stripping natural resources in ways that lead to desertification and erosion.

Dozens of agreements and targets for action are contained in the non-binding plan. However, the addition to the plan of several specific items has been trumpeted by stakeholders as a major accomplishment. One is a commitment to halve the proportion of people without access to sanitation and safe drinking water by 2015. Others include a commitment to use and produce chemicals in ways that don't harm human health and the environment by 2020 (including an effort to increase developing countries' access to alternatives to ozone-depleting chemicals by 2010), restoration of fisheries to maximum sustainable yields by 2015, reduction of desertification and development of food security strategies in Africa by 2005, and a commitment to increase developing countries' access to modern energy services. Although countries didn't agree on a target date for phasing in renewable energy, they did admit that energy sources consistent with sustainable development should be pursued “with urgency.”

The Partnerships

What makes the Johannesburg approach unique, sources say, is that multistakeholder partnerships will have a large responsibility in achieving these goals. As many as 220 partnerships comprising government agencies, NGOs, and businesses were identified during the summit, and 60 more were announced there. Each has a mission to promote some aspect of sustainable development at the grassroots level.

According to Morvell, an emphasis on partnerships, which currently represents

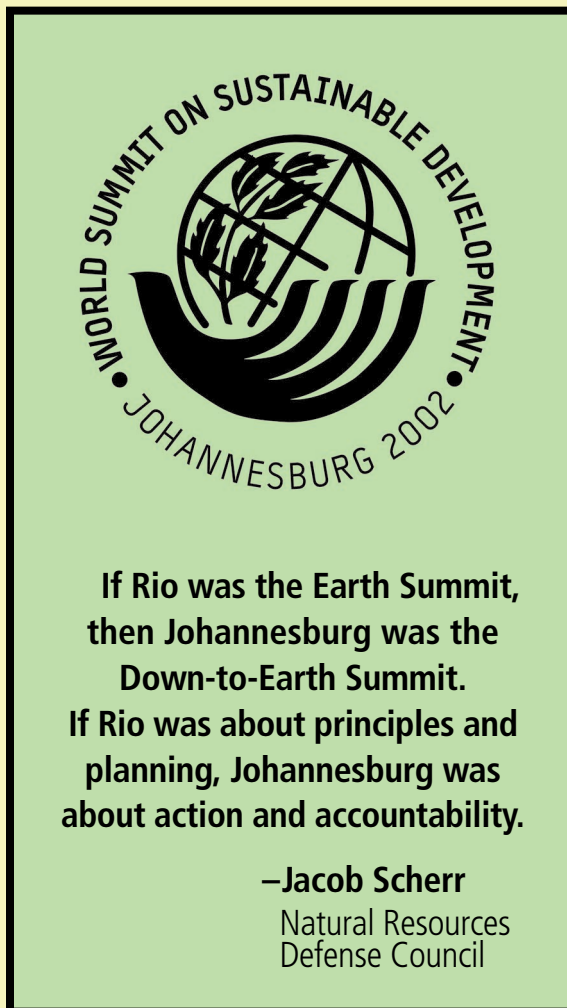
Not all stakeholders share this view, however. Some NGOs have criticized the partnerships, saying they deflect responsibility from governments while shifting the burden to a set of diffuse entities with no formal system of accountability. June Zeitlin, executive director of the Women's Environment and Development Organization, a New York City-based advocacy group, argues, “If you're going to bring in the private sector, then you need standards and transparency and accountability, and you don't have that with these partnership arrangements.”

Morvell concedes that a mechanism for UN oversight of the partnerships still needs to be worked out. In a likely scenario, he says, the partnerships will coordinate with the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which will monitor their progress in a global context. “Early next year, we'll determine appropriate roles for the UN agencies,” he says. “It will be [the commission's] task to pull this all together. The commission is the glue that holds the goals and timetables in place.”

In the meantime, partnerships registered at Johannesburg are already organizing and planning for the future. One group, comprising the Natural Resources Defense Council, the UN Environment Programme and Department of Economic and Social Affairs, national governments, industry, and NGOs, is working to eliminate leaded gasoline in developing countries.

Another registered partnership, the Healthy Environments for Children initiative, introduced by World Health Organization director-general Gro Harlem Brundtland, seeks to improve children's health on several fronts: increased access to fresh water, better hygiene, improved sanitation, and reduced exposure to air pollution and disease vectors such as malaria-transmitting mosquitoes.

Because these tasks are too great for any single entity, the movement will be guided by an alliance of institutions and organizations that should be fully functional by early 2003, sources say. The initiative is currently sponsored by the World Health Organization and supported by several UN agencies, governments, and NGOs. Says Brundtland, “The magnitude of the environmental health crisis affecting children is great: up to one-third of the thirteen thousand daily child deaths are due to the dangers present in the environments in which



\$235 million in resources, was fostered during a series of preparatory meetings that took place prior to the summit itself. “We found that governments have, for the most part, simply been unable to follow through on the commitments made at Rio,” he explains. “And we began to realize that the reason for this is that most of the world's financial, technical, and intellectual knowledge resides outside of government. Governments need access to these other resources. That's why the partnerships are such a critical outcome of the summit.”

children live, play, and learn. The problem needs urgent attention.”

The plan’s energy objectives are being spearheaded by a partnership among various UN agencies and a collection of nine electric utilities from Japan, Europe, and North America initially formed at the Rio conference. Collectively, the groups within the partnership aim to expand access to modern power grids among the roughly 2 billion people in developing countries who lack electricity. In this capacity, a main focus is poverty alleviation—access to electricity is a critical requisite for development, experts say. However, the specific means by which electrical production would be increased was not made clear.

Philosophical Differences

A defining feature at Johannesburg was the unrelenting criticism leveled against the United States by many of those in attendance. Critics tended to focus on a few certain issues. First, despite having just 3% of the world’s population, the United States consumes nearly 25% of the world’s energy, making it the largest emitter of greenhouse gases. Second, the United States has refused to ratify the Kyoto Protocol, the main international treaty to reduce greenhouse gases, while also refusing to strengthen energy efficiency standards for vehicles, which are among the largest greenhouse gas sources. Third, even as it subsidizes its own agricultural sector, the United States insists that developing countries provide free access to international markets. Fourth, during the summit, the U.S. delegation resisted timetables on renewable energy targets and—to the skepticism of some environmentalists—emphasized action by private industry and partnerships over government programs as the key agents of sustainability. Finally, President Bush did not attend the summit, a move widely perceived as an arrogant dismissal of the sustainability movement.

However, Gregg Easterbrook, senior editor at *The New Republic* and a widely recognized expert on environmental policy, says U.S. positions on these issues are couched in more nuance than critics are willing to accept. “There are a lot of environmental groups who wanted to use Johannesburg as an opportunity to denounce the United States for ideological reasons,” he says. “The reality is that many of these criticisms no longer resonate with developing countries. Most of them now believe market principles hold the keys to economic growth.”

The role of market economics and its influence on sustainability was, Morvell

says, a difficult point of contention hanging over the summit negotiations. The sustainability movement has paralleled the economic and political trends of globalization, which several NGOs blame for many of the environmental problems found in developing countries. However, the champions of globalization—including the United States and other industrialized countries—insist that wealth creation, facilitated by open trade, must precede environmental protection.

To the consternation of many environmentalists, these issues were never raised at Johannesburg, leading them to conclude that the summit itself was a failure, at least in this regard. But Morvell disagrees, pointing out that in the UN’s view, the appropriate forum for addressing trade imbalances is the World Trade Organization. “These issues were not deliberately avoided; they were never going to be discussed at Johannesburg in any detail,” he says.

One Step Further

International views on Kyoto evolved toward its favor at Johannesburg. Delegations from China, Russia, Australia, and Canada all indicated their intent to ratify, further isolating the United States in its refusal to do so. Says Eileen Claussen, president of the Pew Center on Global Climate Change, a policy research organization based in Arlington, Virginia, “After Johannesburg, I think we’re seeing increased pressure on the U.S. administration to reconsider its position [on Kyoto]—not that the administration is more likely to ratify, but it could lead to a political environment that encourages more domestic programs to reduce greenhouse gases.”

Agreements were reached in many other important areas, including a framework of programs to accelerate sustainable consumption and production, the elimination of subsidies that contribute to unregulated fishing, and the goal of reducing the mortality rate for children under age five to two-thirds of current levels by 2015.

Ultimately, says Scherr, the true test of the accomplishments at Johannesburg will be time. “Was it a success or a failure?” he asks. “We probably won’t know for three to four years. There was a lot of emphasis on action and accountability, and the development of these new partnerships is very exciting. I saw a tremendous amount of energy and enthusiasm coming out of this meeting.”

Charles W. Schmidt

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