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Rio + 20 – just another UN Summit, or can we really advance the environmental agenda?

I have long since come to believe that people never mean half of what they say, and that it is best to disregard their talk and judge only their actions.

Dorothy Day (1897 – 1980), The Long Loneliness, 1952

In the past 40 years the environment has moved from a special interest topic to an everyday discussion with daily tips on the radio on how to live 'green' and businesses clambering onto the green bandwagon. And yet the environment has deteriorated and continues to do so world wide.

The unique feature of human civilisation is that we can talk to each other about our situation, and develop mutually binding codes of conduct that place limits on our behaviour. We have done this successfully in areas such as disease control and economic regulation, somewhat less successfully in trade and human rights. Why can we not achieve equivalent cooperation on the environment, the destruction of which poses serious long term risks to human health and development?

Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, marks the 20th anniversary of the ground breaking Rio Earth Summit, and will review progress towards achieving its ambitious agreements. One of the key topics at the Summit will be the system of global environmental governance. This paper explores the evolution of the current environmental governance system, and the prospect for real progress on some of the issues.

Some history

The world first came together to discuss environmental problems in 1972, at the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. The timing was not an accident; it was becoming clear that environmental problems cross national boundaries and that natural resources could have limits. Winds carrying the ingredients of acid rain brought destruction from industrialised Europe to the forests of Scandinavia. *Limits to Growth* had just been published and foretold our current world-wide resource limits with uncanny accuracy¹. A decade earlier, Rachel Carson had scared some and enraged others by pointing out in her book, *Silent Spring*, the damage that scientists and their products can do. Science is neutral, but its application is not – and humans seem good at finding highly destructive applications (and not so good at finding constructive applications). The Stockholm conference gave birth to the United Nations Environment Programme and a range of multilateral environmental agreements². These included conventions on trade in endangered species, wetlands, weather warfare, wildlife conservation and air pollution³.

In 1987 the Brundtland Report, *Our Common Future*, defined the concept of sustainable development that we still use today: “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”⁴. Convened by the United Nations to research how the deteriorating natural environment affected social and economic development, the Brundtland Commission introduced the concept of intergenerational equity. This concept states that we should leave behind a liveable world when we die. So, people need development without damage to the environment.

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The next important global meeting about the environment was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, or ‘Earth Summit’, in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. It was unique in its size and participation – it attracted more heads of states than any other international conference before, and for the first time civil society took part in such an event in a significant way⁵.

This summit produced:

- **The Rio Declaration** – 27 principles that define the rights and responsibilities of nations as they pursue human development and well-being;
- **(Local) Agenda 21** – a blueprint for implementing sustainable development;
- **The UN Commission on Sustainable Development** – to monitor and promote implementation of the outcomes from the Summit;
- **Forest Principles** – a statement that acknowledges the importance of forests and contains principles to manage, conserve and develop them sustainably;
- Two multilateral environmental conventions on climate change⁶.

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The WSSD

Ten years after Rio, South Africa hosted the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also called the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which reviewed progress on these commitments. As Director General of the then Department of Environmental Affairs and Tourism, I was the leading South African government official in charge of preparations for this summit. This gave me a unique insight into the summit’s negotiation processes and achievements.

At the WSSD, delegations from governments and major groups met in a United Nations sponsored event, while hundreds of side events and parallel events also took place. Some of these supported the United Nations process while others challenged it⁷. The WSSD produced two official outcomes:

- The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation;
- Type II partnerships.

Before the summit, official announcements claimed that the WSSD would not be “just another Rio” and that it would produce specific commitments, targets, and timetables. When the conference started, large parts of the plan of implementation

were still under discussion. These parts involved most of the contentious North-South issues, including trade, investment, financing, governance and aid. The plan of implementation was designed to bind all countries to specific targets, deadlines, and resource contributions so that they could achieve Agenda 21's sustainable development goals.

In hindsight the final Johannesburg Plan of Implementation did not advance significantly on Agenda 21, or on what had been discussed and agreed upon since Rio on other issues⁸. The most contested sections of the implementation plan were the ones that dealt with sustainable development in a global world, means of implementation, and governance. In the end these sections largely repeated existing agreements, with no substantial new concessions to conserving the environment or to meeting the needs of the poor⁹. NGOs such as Oxfam, the Worldwide Fund for Nature, Greenpeace and Friends of the Earth saw the plan of implementation as a lame duck. In their view, the plan of implementation merely re-iterated or, in some cases, watered down existing commitments¹⁰.

On the other hand, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development insisted that the plan of implementation upheld Agenda 21. For them, the absence of new and specific commitments was not a problem, and they approved of the growing realisation that business is an indispensable part of the solution to the problems of the world¹¹.

At the WSSD the parties clearly deepened their understanding and commitment to alleviating poverty and protecting the environment. Some observers feel that this was an advance over the Rio summit¹². United Nations organisers were officially upbeat about the WSSD but, in private, they felt that Johannesburg produced only half of what had been achieved in Rio¹³.

Type II partnerships

Type II partnerships stand in contrast to global conventions that set legally binding norms and obligations for nation states¹⁴. This type of partnership came into being ahead of the WSSD, with US \$235 million committed to such voluntary, self-enforced agreements between governments, business, and civil society¹⁵. The emphasis on such partnerships at the WSSD showed that participants recognised that governments alone cannot deliver sustainable development. They were also a result of frustration with the slow pace of implementation of many parts of Agenda 21¹⁶.

Apart from a few notable successes, many of these partnerships did not last long; they could not replace governments in creating enabling environments for sustainable development programmes and projects¹⁷. In fact, the Type II partnerships seem to have been a bit of a smokescreen. Many of the listed partners were cash-strapped UN agencies waiting for money to fulfil their promised action or touting actions that they were already undertaking before the WSSD. The idea of multistakeholder partnerships for social and environmental improvement was a good one, but the WSSD did not produce the necessary level of commitment to take these to scale¹⁸.

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What were the constraints on WSSD?

Unfavourable international conditions played a large part in the outcomes of the WSSD. The September 11 attacks dominated the international political agenda and caused a global economic slowdown. The Bush administration was also not known for its environmental concerns, and had little time for the multi-lateral processes of the United Nations. In some respects, in the context of a much more insular and security focused global environment, the maintenance of existing positions and agreements was in itself an achievement.

At the same time, the World Trade Organisation dominated the international development agenda, with many countries determined to maintain the separation between the environment and trade agreements.

And people were just plain tired of summits¹⁹.

Inside the WSSD processes more problems lurked. The United States, Australia, Canada, New Zealand and Japan, operating as the “JUSCANZ” group, blocked or watered down many pro-development and environment proposals and received at least covert support from many of the G77 members. The EU could not muster the support to challenge them. The EU itself refused to address issues of globalisation, trade and investment, and equivocated on issues regarding international governance²⁰.

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At the same time, many developing countries came to the WSSD with no serious proposals to address their own problems with poverty, conservation and governance. They went to Johannesburg to see what the developed countries could offer them, and in doing so they lost much credibility²¹.

Another problem was the bloc system in the United Nations, in which countries with less power form blocs of interest groups. In theory, more decided countries in a bloc could persuade undecided countries on an issue, but in practice it worked the other way around. At the same time, rich, nonbloc countries could form alliances depending on the issue. In one case, the United States teamed up with Iran and Saudi Arabia to block renewable and clean energy targets²².

The United Nations has a built-in requirement for consensus at such conferences. As had happened at the International Conference on Financing for Development in March of the same year, bold and interesting proposals had to make way for the lowest common denominator: the least commitment to sustainable development and the environment²³.

Why can't we just save the world?

The process of establishing a common global approach to regulating and responding to cross-boundary environmental issues will inevitably involve some loss of national sovereignty to global and regional bodies. This will not be easy in a still highly polarised and unequal global economy, currently mired in concerns about debt levels and economic recession.

The Stockholm summit was the launch pad for global environmental governance – the attempt to regulate human behaviour above the nation state level and so improve

the state of the environment. However, global environmental governance has come up against some obstacles²⁴:

- The environment crosses national boundaries, but nation states decide what is good for their nations rather than for the world. They especially do not like ceding their authority to a supra-national institution. At the same time, globalisation is weakening nation states' direct control over their interests.
- The United Nations Environment programme does not have the same standing and resources as other UN agencies do. Its location in Nairobi was a progressive step in the 1970s, but it had to cope with the poor service and infrastructure available there at the time.
- The UN Commission on Sustainable Development has no mechanisms to implement internationally agreed goals and targets, and no financing element. Also, it does not have the status of a UN body that reports to the General Assembly and so it tends to be ignored.
- The multitudes of UN agencies, treaties and conventions that concern environmental problems all have their own objectives and mandates. This results in a fragmented approach to environmental governance with onerous monitoring and reporting requirements. Some countries find the burden too large and are reluctant to be part of the system.
- Many environmental outcomes depend on social and economic priorities and these three areas of policy remain fragmented. Environmental advocates have little or no control over the global financial system which, in its current form, does not encourage sustainable development.
- The World Bank is the main source of funding for environmental programmes, but it has no clear objective to promote sustainable development. Critics argue that the Bank's agenda is donor driven and so it reflects the priorities of the developed world.

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So, after 40 years of global environmental governance (GEG) we have invested much in talks and treaties, but little in the environment. In fact, the number and intensity of GEG negotiations during the last twenty years has created a never-ending negotiation system that can sometimes see negotiation as its primary function. In this system, environmental institutions have become negotiation support services²⁵.

The next step – can Rio+20 save the world?

Some argue that summits fail when they have no grand purpose and suggest that we need to find such a purpose for Rio+20²⁶. The UN has decided that the summit will have two themes: global environmental governance and the 'green' economy. This article has focused on the first issue.

The current system of global environmental governance came into being in steps over thirty years and is ill equipped to deal with the interconnected problems we face. Globalisation and its consequences have outpaced the capabilities of the institutions

and agreements set up to deal with environmental problems. Global environmental governance needs reform. This reform will have to be system wide, realistic and acceptable to many stakeholders. This is a tall order, as history has shown, but the worsened state of the environment compared to 40 years ago compels us to action.

A performance-based system will measure success by an improvement to the state of the environment after implementing an agreement rather than on the number of countries that have complied with the agreement.

A suggested reform to global environmental governance is to focus on ways to make the world-wide institutions that have to govern the global environment more coherent. People are already talking about ways to do this, but the discussions themselves are happening within institutions and not across institutions. A global summit that focuses on improving this coherence could drastically improve the impact and effectiveness of such institutions²⁷.

Opening global environmental governance to actors other than national governments may also bring better environmental governance. Local government, civil society and the private sector are key implementers of environmental programmes and so their involvement in policy decisions will result in policies that have a better chance of being implemented²⁸. The private sector is particularly good at crossing national boundaries to move products and services around the globe. In fact, industry already has a structure to enforce standards around the world – the International Standards Organisation.

One reform that could be especially useful is to base the new global environmental governance system on performance rather than on compliance. A performance-based system will measure success by an improvement to the state of the environment after implementing an agreement rather than on the number of countries that have complied with the agreement²⁹. Such a system should also change the culture of unaccountability for noncompliers that currently pervades global environmental governance.

Improving accountability

To make countries accountable to environmental agreements, we need better metrics and reporting of environmental performance. These should measure and report actual progress, rather than effort: Sisyphus put a lot of effort into his rock, but he never made progress. Countries will need the necessary resources to measure their progress and report on it, especially developing countries. Resources spent on reporting can be reduced if reporting requirements for existing and future environmental agreements could be coordinated. Tailoring reporting requirements to countries' capacity would further encourage them to actually produce the reports. A dearth of capacity is, as in so many other areas, a culprit when it comes to environmental performance. In many cases capacity is so lacking that countries simply cannot implement environmental agreements at all. Such countries will need help to build their capacities both inside and outside of government. In this way, they can create effective and enduring networks of accountability³⁰.

Accountability needs transparency. Third-party reviews and peer-reviews of the impact a country's implementation of an environmental agreement has will greatly improve the effectiveness of such agreements. Peer-review systems such as the African Peer Review Mechanism could have the same function. Environmental whistleblowers could also call national governments to account for failing to make

progress on measures to which they have agreed. The Internet is a useful tool for whistleblowers, as Wikileaks has shown³¹.

A system that holds parties to account should reward good behaviour as much as it punishes bad behaviour. Rewards for countries who keep to their commitments could include trade preference or first access to international credit or support³².

Conclusion

Let us return to the issue of values and human development. Until now, many people have assumed that human welfare depends on development and that development depends on economic growth. This assumption has migrated from the Western world to the emerging economic power houses of Brazil, Russia, China and India. However, economic growth does not necessarily lead to development or human well being.

Rather, traditional economic growth has concentrated wealth into the hands of few at the expense of many. South Africa's large increase in the number of poor people and small increase in the number of middle or upper class people is a good example of this.

The current model of economic growth is also inextricably tied to resource consumption, environmental impact and carbon emissions. We need to find new models that decouple these impacts from growth, and chart a more equitable and sustainable development path. Development, especially sustainable development, needs to consider which values should go together with economic growth to keep people's greed in check, and decouple environmental impact. Global environmental governance needs values that are less destructive than the ones that we are currently using. A summit that could agree on such values would be invaluable.

NOTES

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