

## **PROFILE**

### **No WSSD + 5? Global environmental diplomacy in the twenty-first Century**

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The fifth anniversary of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in August-September 2007 passed largely unnoticed. Yet, ten years earlier the fifth anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit was marked by 'Earth Summit II', held in New York, and in 2002 the WSSD – or 'Rio+10' – was convened to review the progress made in the ten years since Rio. Despite this predilection for marking anniversaries, there was no 'Jo'burg + 5', and it will be 2016-7 before the next overall review of progress, according to the programme of work of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Thus the 'WSSD may well come to be seen as the last of the UN mega-summits, where success is measured by the number of participating heads of state and the conference is preceded by years of negotiation' (Bigg 2004:4).

Why, following the WSSD, has there been a decline in enthusiasm for summit politics? The easiest answer is that during the 1990s and early 2000s there were so many of them that a distinct sense of 'summit fatigue' set in (Chasek and Sherman 2004:163; Wapner 2003:2).

However, looking beyond this there is a growing pessimism about what such summits can achieve. Earth Summit II was widely regarded as a failure (Haas 2002; Jordan and Voisey 1998), and the build-up to the WSSD was dogged by disappointments. The UN Resolution mandating the Summit noted that, despite some progress, 'the environment and the natural resource base that support life on earth continue to deteriorate at an alarming rate' (UN 2000). Delegates from developing countries expressed their concern at the 'huge extent of non-implementation of Agenda 21' (Sell and Spence 2002:3). The Johannesburg Political Declaration admitted that

The global environment continues to suffer. Loss of biodiversity continues, fish stocks continue to be depleted, desertification claims more and more fertile land, the adverse effects of climate change are already evident, natural disasters are more frequent and more devastating, and developing countries more vulnerable, and air, water and marine pollution continue to rob millions of a decent life (UN 2002a:#13).

The WSSD itself did little to reverse such trends. Even an official history conceded that 'the WSSD did not produce a particularly dramatic outcome – there were no agreements that would lead to new treaties and many of the agreed targets were derived from an assortment of other, lower-profile meetings' (Chasek and Sherman 2004:162).

Progress on Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation has not been impressive in the five years since the WSSD. In 2004 the official report of the UN Secretary-General to the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the CSD concluded that 'in many cases, new international and regional initiatives

have yet to translate into detectable improvements in indicators of human well-being and sustainable development' (UN 2004:#100). Whilst assessments inevitably vary, there is a consensus that sustainable development goals are not being met (UN 2006; UNEP 2007).

Moreover, despite being the largest political meeting in world history, the WSSD's impact on multilateralism was negligible, overshadowed by the events of 11 September 2001, the subsequent 'War on Terror' and increasing American unilateralism. Linked to this, there has been a decline in funding and attention for the traditional concerns of sustainable development in relation to security issues – whether focussed on terrorism or climate change (Martens 2003). Therefore, in judging the WSSD against its stated aims – the reinvigoration of 'the global commitment to a North/South partnership and a higher level of international solidarity and to the accelerated implementation of Agenda 21 and the promotion of sustainable development' (UN 2000:#17b) – it is hard to conclude that the Summit was successful.

The role of multilateral summits is thus under question and there is a broad trend away from policy deliberation and formulation, and towards implementation (Seyfang and Jordan 2002). The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation recommended that the international community should

streamline the international sustainable development meeting calendar and, as appropriate, reduce the number of meetings, the length of meetings and the amount of time spent on negotiated outcomes in favour of more time spent on practical matters related to implementation (UN 2002b:#156a).

It was this stress upon implementation that contributed toward the enthusiasm for the 'partnership' approach at the WSSD. There were 251 specific partnerships agreed at or around the WSSD, and these were referred to as 'Type II' outcomes in contrast to the multilaterally negotiated ('Type I') outcomes (Hale and Mauzerall 2004; Martens 2003; 2007). According to its proponents, the partnership approach is more flexible and innovative in responding to the challenges posed by sustainable development than the cumbersome processes of multilateral UN diplomacy, as well as being more implementation-focused (Holliday *et al.* 2002). Famously, Jonathon Lash from the World Resources Institute claimed the WSSD would be

remembered not for the treaties, the commitments, or the declarations it produced, but for the first stirrings of a new way of governing the global commons – the beginnings of a shift from the stiff formal waltz of traditional diplomacy to the jazzier dance of improvisational solution-oriented partnerships that may include non-government organizations, willing governments and other stakeholders (Lash 2002).

Despite repeated injunctions that the Type II partnerships should supplement and not replace formal multilateral agreements, partnerships seem to be the preferred *modus operandi* for many (Martens 2007; UN 2002c; WEF 2005). Whilst the CSD is a designated 'focal point' for the Type IIs, partnerships by definition do not need to be negotiated at multilateral summits, nor do they necessarily require strict monitoring and accountability. Proponents argue that enforced external monitoring would militate against their 'jazzier dance' (Stigson 2003).

This flexibility is a source of concern to many, and critics have expressed doubts about the effectiveness of the partnership approach, as well as its political value, procedural fairness and its capacity to deliver social justice (Hale and

Mauzerall 2004; Martens 2007). Despite these concerns, partnerships have come to dominate mainstream discussions on how to implement sustainable development.

The lack of attention given to the fifth anniversary of the WSSD is thus indicative of the growing strength of an approach to sustainable development that stresses voluntary, bilaterally-agreed partnerships involving non-state and (particularly) private actors, and which simply does not need high level multilateral summits.

However, there is also a realisation within the UN and the international community that a high level summit at the present moment would be rather depressing, given the manifest lack of progress being made on issues recognised at least fifteen years ago. It could also be politically dangerous, since an unsuccessful summit serves to starkly illustrate the limitations of the existing model of liberal, representative politics. The Johannesburg Political Declaration recognised that

unless we act in a manner that fundamentally changes their lives the poor of the world may lose confidence in their representatives and the democratic systems to which we remain committed, seeing their representatives as nothing more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals (UN 2002a:#15).

Summits are moments when the inactivity and/or inability of political leaders to fundamentally change the lives of the poor, or to begin to act decisively on global issues like climate change, is made painfully obvious. As such, international summits since Seattle have become a focus for protests from a wide range of actors and activists (Kingsnorth 2004; Munnik and Wilson 2003). Businesses are also wary of summits' potential to attract protest, and at the WSSD 'many of the potentially controversial partnerships, particularly those involving corporations, held their meetings on the outskirts of the Summit, fearing bad publicity' (La Viña *et al.* 2003:59).

There was another significant anniversary that fell in 2007 – the twentieth anniversary of Gro Harlem Brundtland's *Our Common Future*, the definitive text of mainstream sustainable development (Brundtland 1987). As with 'Jo'burg + 5', it was largely unnoticed. This is perhaps indicative of a broader shift away from a concern with sustainable development, towards a more defensive focus on environmental security. Climate change is no longer just a risk but rather an increasingly dangerous reality, in which sustainable development's promise of relatively painless mitigation seems almost naïve. And when activists on issues ranging from the environment to human rights to economic justice are more likely to condemn and denounce the outcomes of a UN Summit on Sustainable Development than they are to praise it, the promise of Brundtland's win-win vision and assertions of common humanity seems unconvincing. With the decline of enthusiasm for multilateral summits comes a parallel ebbing of faith in the concept of sustainable development.

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