

How to Assess the WSSD Results?

A Model for Critical Evaluation and Further Comments on the tasks ahead

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In the aftermath of the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development public opinion around the world was (and is) deeply divided in its judgment of the Johannesburg outcomes. In spite of a widely shared feeling that the results of the Summit were insufficient and sparse, some of the actors present at the different Joburg stages drew a colourful and hopeful perspective. Such could be seen, for example, in the press release issued by the head of the European Parliament delegation to the WSSD, the M.P. Jorge Moreira da Silva, who portrayed the Summit output, although not very encouragingly, as going “beyond the Rio Conference”. ²

I understand the good intentions of my fellow countryman, Jorge Moreira da Silva, but I deeply disagree with the methods chosen to fulfil those aims. The only way to maintain a certain political *momentum* in these difficult times -- in the sphere of both international environmental politics and national environmental policies – is by never compromising our ability to exercise cold judgment and a critical perspective on the most vital issues. In what ground is the statement based that the WSSD was able to go beyond the results of the Rio Conference (1992)? What are the criteria that lead us to such an evaluation?

§ 1 *A four categories Model*

I believe that this is the right moment to think with analytical precision, avoiding any kind of misleading perceptions. If we want to speak with clarity about the WSSD results we need to propose some transparent and unequivocal criteria, which may allow us to draw an objective and accurate assessment of its final output. Therefore I suggest a model containing four different types of criteria against which we may evaluate all the major Environmental International Conferences in terms of their final outcomes.

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² The press release (dated: 4th September 2002) signed by the MP Jorge Moreira da Silva was written in Portuguese, with the following title: “Além do Rio, Aquém do necessário” (in a rough translation: “More than Rio, less than needed”).

According to that model, the various results of such political gatherings may be classified under the following categories:

- > **Declaratory:** Results expressed in statements with ethical content, and potential political and juridical impact.
- > **Regimes:** Results translated into international legislation of binding character, likely to result in lasting effects in both international and domestic policies.
- > **Institutions:** Results driving towards the creation of new organisational tools aimed at the production of political consensus, law enforcement and scientific monitoring, enhancing the capacity of international system to stabilize and secure positive environmental trends.
- > **Actions:** Results of great practical content, which should reflect agreement in *praxis*, translating the will to co-operate in environmental problem solving on a large scale, while choosing a local focus as the unit of implementation. This includes economic co-operation.

§ 2 *A comparative approach to the three major international environmental conferences*

We may now apply the above mentioned model to the three major international environmental conferences promoted by the United Nations since 1972, in order to assess their different sets of results in the framework of a meaningful comparative approach (see Table n° 1).

This comparison gives us a striking feeling of the tremendous degree of failure inherent to the sparse final product of the WSSD. Even at the level of the only fragile anchor for those who sustain a doubtful status of success for the Johannesburg Summit, I mean the positive agreements achieved within the Plan of Implementation, the fact is that there is a world of difference when we compare the careful calculation of the financial resources needed to give life to good ideas, showed by the proponents of the 1992 Agenda 21, with the careless and rather fragmentary manner of dealing with the famous WSSD Plan of Implementation.

This strong statement doesn't mean, however, that the WSSD was in itself useless. On the contrary, even failures and bitter experiences may be tools for better learning and political reform. The best way to explore the narrow Johannesburg results imply, therefore, the acknowledgment of its intrinsic flaws and shortcomings, many of which were already visible at the preparatory stages of the Summit.

Table nº 1: The WSSD Performance in Comparative Perspective

| Events | Results: Declaratory | Results: Regimes | Results: Institutions | Results: Actions |
|---|--|--|---|---|
| United Nation Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE) Stockholm (1972) | The Stockholm Declaration (26 Principles) | None | United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) | Action Plan for the Human Environment (109 recommendations) |
| United Nation Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Rio (1992) | The Rio Declaration (27 Principles) (instead of the <i>Earth Charter</i>) | >Biodiversity >Climate Change (FCCC) > Seeds for the 1994 Desertification Convention | >Commission on Sustainable Development (CDS) >Consolidation of the Global Environment Facility (GEF) | Agenda 21 40 chapters (\$ 625 billion annually needed for implementation) |
| World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Johannesburg (2002) | Near to Nothing (Innocuous 37 points Declaration ³) | None | None | >Plan of Implementation (153 §§) >Loose partnerships |

³ While the previous declarations (from Stockholm and Rio) were submitted to a hard diplomatic and political discussion, given their clear declaratory high profile, the final version of the Johannesburg Summit was reached after a brief discussion in the last hours of the event, when the major actors were already in their way back home. The Johannesburg Declaration was only a ritual element of a larger process. I guess it will be seldom quoted in any serious political discussion in the years to come.

§ 3 *Are we within an environmental policy declining curve?*

We can envisage many possible several and complex sets of reasons why the final output from the WSSD can be evaluated as a major failure. However, a strict analysis of causes and effects is unlikely, in this case, to be helpful. Therefore, I suggest we will try to combine explanation with understanding.

In this way, our efforts to understand the wider picture, against which the WSSD setbacks make more sense, lead us to the admission that we are currently suffering from the negative impact of a declining period in the process of environment policy-making, everywhere in the planet. The concrete results of that are visible in the lower capacity of environmental to gain attention and priority in public agendas, both in domestic and international policies (see Table nº2).

Table nº 2: Major periods in global environmental policy

| Periods | Beginning year(s) | Meaningful event(s) | Changing year(s) | Meaningful event(s) |
|-------------------------|-------------------|--|------------------|--|
| First growing period | 1962 | Rachel Carson's <i>Silent Spring</i> | 1973 | Yom Kippur War |
| First declining period | 1973 1974 | First Oil Crisis | 1983 | Die <i>Grünen</i> in German <i>Bundestag</i> |
| Second growing period | 1984 1985 | Bhopal accident and Vienna Convention on ozone layer | 1997 | Kyoto Protocol |
| Second declining period | 1998 | Environmental deadlock in the US Congress | ?? | ?? |

This trend was already apparent in 1998 and notably so when the Clinton Presidency was unable to overcome the environmental deadlock in the US Congress in the area of environmental justice and on the further development of the 'Superfund'⁴. What is happening now with the George W. Bush's

⁴ Michael Kraft and Denise Scheberle, "Environmental federalism at decade's end: new approaches and strategies", *Publius*, vol. 28, nº 1 (Winter 1998), pp. 131-146; Evan J. Ringquist and David H. Clark, "Local risks, states' rights, and federal mandates: remedying environmental inequities in the US federal system", *Publius*, vol. 29, nº 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 73-93.

administration is more than the mere downsizing of environmental policies and instruments. It looks more like a true environmental counter-revolution, with consequent secondary impacts at global level. The recent extinction of one of the Danish Environmental Councils is but one example showing that the US is not alone in this period of relative environmental policies decline.⁵

§ 4 Lessons from the WSSD to the coming years

We may summarize as follows the three most significant lessons from the WSSD:

1. Exhaustion of the 'soft law' and 'soft institutions' approach: the Rio lessons weren't understood in the decade between 1992 and 2002.
2. Deep asymmetry between two different understandings of the role of science as a part of the policy-making process. One, that looks to the unavoidable uncertainties, inherent to the scientific research of complex systems, as an argument opening the path to a globalisation process driven by trade and economic profit. The other, interpreting uncertainty as a sound invitation to the wise self-containment, as it is apparent in the content of the precautionary principle. The best example of the collision between these two perspectives is well present in the current debate on the climate change.
3. Break of the 'Northern Alliance': Growing environmental isolationism by the US federal administration. This is a core critical element, which we shouldn't expect to be corrected before the federal presidential elections of November 2004 and perhaps not even then.

Therefore, the years ahead of us seem to project a dense and gloomy shade. That's a stronger reason, however, for councils belonging to the EEAC to stick together, standing in a firm position. We have to increment our joint statements bearing in mind the need to intervene in a synergetic manner both at EU and national levels.

The harsh strength of reality will, sooner or later, put an end to this vain endeavour to dismiss the priority of the environmental crisis in the contemporary political agenda. Nevertheless, this fact only increases our duty to be in the right spot when the tide turns, ushering in a new and stronger period of growth in global public attention to the need for sound and effective environmental policies.⁶

⁵ I mean the Danish Nature Council, which was a very active member of the EEAC network.

⁶ I wish to thank Peter Hinchcliff for his useful editing comments on this paper.