



# From Summit to Summit

*The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio was the culmination of thinking that owed a great deal to the green movements of the 60s and 70s which saw the founding, in 1961, of the World Wildlife Fund, the publication of American ecologist Rachel Carson's Silent Spring (which warned of dire consequences of synthetic pesticide use and inspired a regulatory revolution), the establishment of Friends of the Earth at the close of the decade, and the founding of Greenpeace in 1971. Amnesty International also came into being at the start of the 60s and a great deal of "brown issues" thought – concerning individual human rights, and social and economic equity within and among nations – has been added in the intervening years.*

Much has changed since the  
Stockholm conference 30 years ago  
and much has remained the same.  
Chris van der Merwe travels the road  
from Stockholm to Johannesburg.



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**T**he UN Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, Sweden, in 1972, as ordered in 1968 by the United Nations General Assembly. This was a watershed event with representatives from 112 nations. The focus of developed nations was on environmental protection; that of developing nations development. In the same year an ambitious study *Limits to Growth*, was published. A computer model was designed to simulate future outcomes of the world economy. Among the conclusions of this "pessimist model" was that – with no major change in the physical, economic, or social relationships that have traditionally governed world development – society would, within 100 years, run out of the nonrenewable resources on which the industrial base depended. That would trigger a precipitous collapse of the economic system, manifest in massive unemployment, decreased food production and a decline in population as the death rate soared.

Soon after Stockholm, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) – which would organise the Earth Summit 20 years later – was established. UNEP was to act as broker for international environmental cooperation, keep an eye on the state of the world environment and inform governments of emerging problems.

**1980**

In 1980, IUCN published the *World Conservation Strategy*. And in the mid-1980s, the inter-governmental World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Norwegian Prime Minister, Gro Harlem Brundtland, came into being. The commission published *Our Common Future*, an influential report on environment and development and urged the UN to hold another global conference on these themes. It defined "sustainable development" as progress that could "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Southern critics charged that the report was more concerned with moulding future development in the South than with changing growth and consumption in the North.

**1991**

The United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (Unesco) produced a report, *Environmentally Sustainable Economic Development* in 1991. It called for measures then considered radical. It argued that nothing short of massive transfers to the poorer countries and higher prices for their exports would do.

**1992**

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro came soon after the Cold War had ended in a capitalist triumph over communism. Over 170 governments participated in the event that gave the world *Agenda 21*, the "blueprint" of sustainable development into the 21st century. Fidel Castro, self-styled champion of the world's poor, articulately demonstrated in his UNCED address how easily redspeak and greenspeak could be merged. That led some analysts to speculate that in a markets-dominated world sustainable development could help to fill the void left by the demise of communism. The NGO sector, which met at a separate venue, made a major contribution to the quality of debates and to strategic thinking at Rio and published over 30 "alternative" treaties, many advancing what appeared to be a socialist agenda. UNCED also adopted the *Declaration on Environment and Development and the Forest (conservation and management) Principles*.

Two legally binding conventions were also opened for signature by the nations of the world: The *Biodiversity Convention* – aimed at countering species extinction and ecosystems damage around the globe and the *Climate Change Convention* – aimed at slowing down global climate

## The hot issues

What could be expected to be among the hottest issues for the WSSD – and for South Africa? That's something many journalists, faced with the bewildering task of untangling the WSSD, have been asking. After a round of networking and web-surfing, Chris van der Merwe sticks his neck out in offering a provisional list.

While it was impossible to predict at the time of writing (June 2002) what might dominate the headlines at the Summit two months later, a number of issues represent a virtually inexhaustible lode of potential editorial. These include:

- A Political Declaration
- Finance, trade and implementation
- "Ecological debt"
- "Equal but differentiated responsibilities"
- "Precautionary principle"
- The Kyoto Protocol
- US "unilateralism"
- The role of the military
- Peace and sustainable development
- Good governance
- Partnerships
- Corporate responsibility
- Nepad
- Zimbabwe
- The concept of sustainable development
- National Strategy for Sustainable Development
- Energy



- Food security, access to land and the use and ownership of resources
- HIV/Aids
- Women's rights
- Pollution
- Biodiversity
- The right to know and environmental education or education for sustainability which cuts across all the hot topics.

As the authoritative Bali-review *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, published by the International Institute of Sustainable Development, notes, progress on agreeing on elements for the Political Declaration was likely to influence decisions by some Heads of State and Government regarding their attendance at the Summit. The Declaration "may provide the most authoritative and decisive place to deal with the core trade and finance issues...".

"The WSSD presents an opportunity for world leaders to face up to the contradictions embedded in the architecture of global governance when it comes to trade and sustainable development," adds the *Bulletin*.

"In the language of the new UNEP *Global Environmental Outlook* report, the choice is to pursue either a 'Markets First' scenario or a 'Sustainability First' scenario where global policy is no longer the servant of the trade regime."

In their *Declaration for Bali*, South African civil society major groups – including NGOs, faith-based groups, labour, the disabled, women, youth, civics, indigenous peoples, but excluding business, local government, science and farmers – charged that the impact market deregulation had reduced the state's role in the economy and that state power was increasingly weakened "by unaccountable corporate powers".

"In the process, justice, rights, democracy and the environment continue to be undermined. The divide between rich and poor becomes ever wider and the exclusion of disaffection of people ever stronger..."

Counters Lauraine Lotter, Executive Director of the Chemical and Allied Industries Association (CAIA) and an author of the *Draft Business Plan* of South Africa's Business Co-ordinating Forum for the Johannesburg Summit, "Increasingly individual citizens are feeling disempowered in respect to having their government's address their concerns. This is reflected in the lower numbers of eligible voters exercising their vote. However corporations are not states and the mechanisms to hold them to account are different.

"Increasingly consumers are exercising their buying power to bring corporations to account. In comparing the 'power' of corporations and states it is important that the states have the power to raise taxes and enforce laws which can regulate every aspect of an individual's life. Corporations on the other hand must persuade enough individuals to purchase their goods and services to remain in 'power'."

change caused by human activity.

In signing the convention, governments agreed to the target of stabilising greenhouse gas emissions at 1990 levels by the end of 2000. This goal, advocated by the EU, but opposed by the US, is to be reached voluntarily. The US did not sign the *Biodiversity Convention* on the grounds that provisions in the convention would unduly restrict the biotechnology industry. At the insistence of African countries, UNCED agreed to set up an Inter-governmental Negotiating Committee to negotiate, by June 1994, a UN *Framework Convention on Desertification*.

Developed countries agreed to providing "new and additional" finance – Official Development Assistance (ODA) amounting to 0.7% of gross domestic product targets – to enable developing countries to meet their obligations in implementing sustainable development.

The Earth Summit left many matters, seen as critically important by the NGO movement, unattended. For instance, the continuing addiction to fossil fuels, especially oil, was maintained; it left the field wide open for misuse of biotechnology and pesticides and omitted to crystallise the role of transnational corporations and the military in environmental destruction.

## Agenda 21

Although *Agenda 21* "put the human being at the centre of environmental concern", issues of poverty did not receive the same attention at Rio as ecological matters.

NGOs were highly critical of the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (GATT) and the Bretton Woods global financial institutions. Yet they remained unaffected by UNCED.

World leaders and diplomats were criticised for displaying a lack of vision and for focusing on national issues at the expense of global ones.

When the Earth Summit ended, developed and developing country blocs still had vastly different agendas, which according to one expert looked like this:

- |   |                                |
|---|--------------------------------|
| ● Developed                             | Developing                     |
| ● Pollution                             | Land degradation               |
| ● Acid rain/ozone depletion             | Loss of biomass                |
| ● Water quality                         | Water quantity/access          |
| ● Over-production of crops              | Monoculture crops              |
| ● Landscape destruction (road-building) | Landscape destruction (mining) |
| ● Climate change                        | Desertification                |
| ● Crime/drug abuse                      | Conflicts/civil strife         |





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- Loss of biodiversity (in the developing world)
- Population stagnation
- Loss of biodiversity (own)
- Rapid population growth

There had been heated, inconclusive debates around the relative importance of “overpopulation” (seen as a problem in the developing world) and “over-consumption” (considered prevalent especially in developed countries) in environmental degradation.

Rio had its limitations, but it did succeed in putting issues of economic and social equity and environment on the same world agenda.

### Media

The media in particular – whose eyes typically glaze over at the mention of “process reporting” – should recognise that the WSSD was conceived not as an exercise in rewriting *Agenda 21*, but as a forward-looking event informed by the lessons of Rio. Rio was a stepping-stone in a process, as many expect the WSSD to be.

At Rio, NGOs lobbied fervently for the establishment of an international post-Rio sustainable development watchdog body. The conference recommended the establishment of a high-level Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) that would meet annually to review progress.

### 1994

In 1994, the World Trade Organisation (WTO) was set up. It has been credited with massively stimulating global trade, but is blamed for exacerbating poverty. Increasing trade liberalisation has had the effect of perpetuating the imbalances in economic relations between rich and poor nations. The situation has been likened to the shark saying to the fish, “I’ll let you take a bite out of me, if you’ll let me take a bite out of you.”

Industrialised countries have continued to protect their own economies against competition from developing ones. WTO director general Mike Moore cited a recent study that said developing countries would gain US\$155-billion a year from further trade liberalisation. That was more than three times the US\$43-billion they receive annually in overseas aid. Sadly, predatory trade and bondage through debt have continued since Rio.

### 1997 Rio+5

The CSD has had much to complain about. Progress since Rio was slower than anticipated. By 1997, at the acrimonious Rio+5 Special Session of the UN in New York, little had changed for the better. The majority of

developed countries stood accused of not having honoured their ODA commitment. Rio+5 degenerated into a slanging match between developed and developing world delegates over broken promises.

The developed countries tried very hard to commit all governments to timeframes in implementing all agreements. They also tried to bring new issues to the table. The developing countries, on the other hand, argued that if developed countries were not serious about contributing the 0,7% of GDP to ODA, developing countries would not be prepared to take on board targets or new issues.

By 1997 the ODA level had dropped to 0,34% of GDP. The developing countries were of the opinion that they were not even in a position to implement *Agenda 21* – more than 2 500 activities.

However, Rio+5 did issue a five-year programme for further implementation of *Agenda 21*. A comprehensive review would be done in 2002. That review comes with the World Summit.

### 2000 New York

At the Millennium Summit in New York in 2000 world leaders decided that the first 15 years of this century should be used for a major onslaught on global poverty, and set a number of targets – the *Millennium Development Goals* – for doing so.

### 2001 and Kyoto

The year 2001 brought both bad and good news. Shortly before the September 11th attacks, the US (which remains responsible for about 25% of the world’s greenhouse gases) announced it would not back the Kyoto Protocol on climate change. Yet, in November there was a historic agreement in Marrakesh, Morocco, at the 7th Conference of the Parties (COP 7) to the UN *Framework*



*Convention Climate Change* that paved the way for the ratification of the *Kyoto Protocol* by almost all nations.

### 2002 Bali

As UN Secretary General Kofi Annan saw it, “Bali offered an opportunity to regain some of the momentum that had been so strongly felt at Rio. Already, the process leading up to PrepCom 4 had brought renewed attention to issues that had been largely overshadowed by conflicts, globalisation and, most recently, terrorism.”

Annan proposed five specific areas where “concrete results were both essential and achievable”. He offered an acronym to remember them by: “WEHAB” – Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture, Biodiversity.

South Africa was among the nations that hoped that PrepCom 4 would deliver a concise and focused document that would emphasise the need for a global sustainable development partnership and reconfirm the need for an integrated and strategically focused approach to the implementation of *Agenda 21*.

Developing countries raised the stakes. And, early in the second week, “the NGO community began to urge negotiators to bring their brackets (denoting controversial text that required further debate and, most



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likely, alteration) to Johannesburg rather than settle for a bad deal.” Developing countries insisted that a poverty eradication strategy should not ignore the most important causes of poverty, among them unfair terms of trade and, in particular, the lack of market access for agricultural products from poor countries.

South Africa’s Valli Moosa, charged with breaking the stalemate, presented negotiators with a package put together in behind-the-scenes consultations. But they remained divided and the Moosa deal was dropped. Ultimately, delegates failed to reach consensus on the “Draft Plan of Implementation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development”. Discussions for Johannesburg would be based on the latest draft, and *Bali’s Outcomes* would be subjected to renewed scrutiny in Johannesburg.

Failure to make progress on trade and finance issues, records the Bulletin, “was reflective of the problems in integrating the three pillars of sustainable development: Doha was negotiated by trade ministers; Monterrey by finance ministers; while the summit process had been flooded with environment and foreign affairs ministers.”

The Bulletin neatly encapsulates outstanding issues, which falls into two categories.

“The first and perhaps fundamental set of issues that led to stalemate concern finance, terms of trade and globalisation. A second set of issues concerns the development of the Programme of Work spawned by *Agenda 21*, including a series of time-bound targets. Progress on these and other issues will only be unlocked when confidence is regained in the process.”

In the uncertain days after the horror of 9/11, it seemed at least possible that there might be less unilateralism in the world and that The Johannesburg Summit might take up a theme of healing across historical divides. Bali put a damper on such hopes. The political will to make the world a fairer, safer and healthier place, which universal endorsement of *Agenda 21* at the Earth Summit seemed to signify, appears to have waned dramatically.

The US remained firm in its resolve to remain outside the Kyoto ratification fold. The US also voiced opposition to the inclusion of the “common and differentiated responsibilities” principle, and advocated individual responsibility instead.

That was seen by many Bali delegates as reflecting the unilateralist stance the US had taken since September 11 – a stance that many analysts say could wreck the Johannesburg summit.

Upon his return from Bali, minister Valli Moosa said in a statement that South Africa was “pleased that there was now global consensus on the main framework for the Summit”.

It would focus on all three pillars of sustainable development: social development, economic development and the protection of the environment.

He reaffirmed that:

- the overall target of the Summit was the Millennium Development Goal to halve poverty by 2015;
- agreement on a global partnership between rich and poor countries, and between governments, business and civil society for sustainable development would be pursued, as well as
- agreement on a concrete programme of action in the areas of water and sanitation, energy, health, agriculture and food security, education and biodiversity.

Bali saw the launch of a million-signature anti-globalisation petition drive. And, as predicted, the interseasonal period has been marked by a high level of civil society preparations – the stalemate at Bali providing added focus for campaigns around key unresolved issues – trade, globalisation, debt and the means, mechanisms and timetables for the financing of sustainable development.

## Post-Bali

Post-Bali, the pressure on the host country, charged with the management of the WSSD process, has been greater than ever. “With uncertainty and political risk associated with significant sections of the agenda after PrepCom 4,” asserts the Bulletin, “the ‘Summit’ status of the meeting cannot be taken for granted.”

## G8

The G8 Summit in Canada, at the end of June, had the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) among the most important issues on its agenda (along the “war on terror” which, for the US, reportedly took higher priority). In terms of Africa’s showpiece strategy for the G8 and Johannesburg summit, the developed world would provide more aid, untied to trade, write off debt, encourage investment and access to its markets, and assist with good governance, infrastructural development, military training and conflict resolution. Africa would in turn be expected to embrace democracy, respect human rights, fight corruption, implement commercial, legal and financial systems acceptable to developed world partners, broker agreements for peace and provide troops to police them. Among African nations, the World Summit host country has been setting an example in doing exactly that.

In the final weeks before the Johannesburg Summit, dual First World-Third World agendas are obviously still a fact of life. Yet it seems that Nepad is still a serious prospect for providing a bridge at least between Africa and the rich nations. Bali seemed not to have dented the confidence of Nepad’s architects at all as they persevered in selling the plan to fellow-Africans and to the developed world.

## July 2002 AU

In an opinion piece published in *Business Day*, 27 June 2002, Dennis Brutus, emeritus professor of African Studies at the University of Pittsburgh, internationalist and former Robben Island prisoner, warned: “South Africa and the world are faced with critical ideological choices in coming weeks. What kind of case is the global left making?”

“The stakes couldn’t be higher. When the World Summit on Sustainable Development convenes in Sandton in late August, it will literally be deciding on an agenda for the planet. When countries joining the African Union (AU) met in Durban in July, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad) was set as the agenda for our continent. But in reality, much of the agenda for both these events has already been determined by the Group of Eight (G8) leadership in its mountain hideout in Canada.

“... we learn... that the host country for the world summit and the AU are apparently intent on selling out the continent under the rubric of a plan crafted by the same technocrats who wrote Pretoria’s failed Gear economic programme, under the guidance of Washington and the corporate leaders of Davos.”

The AU launch is the last milestone event before the Johannesburg Summit where, as at Bali, developing countries will seize the moment to push for meaningful and action-oriented commitments on finance, trade and capacity building.

“Key to meeting the developing countries’ demands will be the transformation of the Monterrey Consensus into an action agenda, and the delivery of political commitments set out in the Doha Declaration,” says the Bulletin. If confidence is to be restored in the post-UNCED agenda, there will have to be an authoritative commitment to fairness.”

Clearly, the concept of sustainable development, so appealingly defined in *Our Common Future* and elaborated in *Agenda 21*, has not come through the Rio Decade unscathed. Some argue that it is a flawed concept, because it does not take into account the nature of humans, which is to consume, and that that is too inclusive and therefore unfocused and impractical.

Certainly, as the Bulletin observes, the complexity of the sustainable development agenda – seeking to “institutionalise a meaningful conversation between finance, trade and environment discourses” – presents a unique challenge to the multilateral system at the UN. “The problem has outgrown the system...”

The stakes for the champions of sustainable development are higher at the threshold of the WSSD than they were at Rio. At Rio, the concept still wore the blush of novelty; 10 years later, tried and tested, it also bears scars of failure.