

# Sustaining the interest

*Even though the World Summit on Sustainable Development is the first global conference devoted specifically to “sustainable development”, that phrase has been with us for quite a while, says Jack Freeman. It was the centerpiece of the Earth Summit held in Rio de Janeiro 10 years ago.*



**A**lthough “sustainable development” has been on the front burner of global diplomacy for a decade, to the ordinary newspaper reader or television news watcher it remains, at best, only vaguely understood – and hardly a priority concern. I would be astonished if even one percent of the people anywhere – except at the UN – could tell you what it means or why it might be important.

The fact is that the UN’s efforts to promote sustainable development have received very little coverage in the mainstream news media, leading some to question whether the media might be shirking their responsibility to keep the public informed about such important issues. As a journalist who took part in coverage of the Earth Summit and dozens of international meetings and conferences since then, I would argue that the media have no cause to be ashamed. They have done about as well as they could, given the difficulties inherent in the task of explaining to the public:

- The unique complexities of the UN conference system and the documents it produces;
- the very specialised meanings that people at the UN give to such fundamental (and commonplace) terms such as “environment” and “development”;
- and, not least, the welter of conflicting ideas about what “sustainable development” is or should be, and the international community’s inconsistent commitment to it as a guiding principle.

## The UN conference system

When I covered my first UN conference (the 1992 Earth Summit) I had 40 years of experience as a newspaper reporter,

editor and television news writer and producer under my belt. Yet I was totally unprepared for the way such a conference does its work and arrives at its conclusions. For one thing, nothing is ever put to a vote, so the concepts of “majority” and “minority” are meaningless. Instead, the wording of the conference’s final or outcome document is decided by a mass negotiation, in which each delegation – counting participating “observers” such as the Holy See (the Vatican) and Switzerland along with the UN’s member states, there can be more than 190 such delegations – is free to propose changes or raise objections to anything that anyone else has proposed. Whenever such an objection is raised – whether to a word, a phrase, a sentence, a paragraph or an entire chapter of the document – that portion of the text is placed in square brackets [like this]. Once in place, the brackets can be removed only by finding some alternative wording for the bracketed text that is acceptable to everyone. At the end of the process, any part of the text still bracketed is expunged.

As you might imagine, such a process requires a great deal of watering-down, blurring, fudging and other forms of evasion. (I once spent an entire morning covering a discussion as to whether a chapter heading in the document should be “The Family” or “Families” – and the session ended without resolution.) The end product of a UN conference is, therefore, necessarily bland and – almost quite literally – unexceptionable. (I say “almost” because, at the end of the conference, delegations may still enter “exceptions” to any sections of the document, which means they do not consider their governments bound by them.) In any case, the documents produced by this process certainly cannot begin to measure up to the

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“man bites dog” definition of newsworthiness. It is almost impossible for a journalist to explain them in simple, direct language that readers can understand and relate to. It is also all but impossible to explain to readers the significance of such documents, since, except for those dealing with international trade, they never provide for any mechanism to ensure that the promises made in them are honoured.

As if that weren't challenge enough for journalists covering UN conferences, many of these negotiations – and certainly those dealing with more sensitive or controversial matters – are conducted in “informal” sessions, which means they are closed to the press (even though NGOs may be able to attend them). Reporters can learn what transpired only at second hand: either from official briefings (which tend to play down whatever conflict might have flared) or from participants in the session, whose accounts might also be coloured by their own agendas.

### The definition confusion

The Rio Earth Summit was officially about “environment and development”. And, although it was the environment aspect that got most of the attention (the Brazilians even called the event “Ecologia”), the real focus of the participants was on development. The difficulty, though, is that for the Rio Summit (and the UN in general) the terms “environment” and “development” meant and mean something very different from what ordinary people (and ordinary journalists) think they mean.

“Environment,” according to the dictionary, means surroundings. The environmental movement deals mainly in efforts to improve people's surroundings by eliminating or cleaning up pollutants, contaminants and pathogens in the air, water and soil, along with efforts to protect wildlife and green spaces. At UN conferences, however, “environment” refers specifically to global environmental issues, such as global warming and the thinning of the planet's ozone-layer shield. None of these issues were nearly as “sexy” or emotional as the local water and air pollution issues that most people think of as “environmental”.

“Development” is defined by the dictionary as the act of bringing to a more advanced state, expansion. Most people think of it in terms of building up of homes and businesses, of infrastructure, of progress and modernisation, of industrialisation. In the UN context, though, “development” refers almost exclusively to what is formally known as “international development co-operation” or “official development assistance” and is commonly known as foreign aid. The centerpiece of just about every UN conference is the negotiation of a deal between the countries that provide such assistance (the “donors”) on the one hand, and the recipient countries on the other – “the North” and “South.” The deal up for approval at Rio was that the recipient countries would agree to limit their economic expansion to ways that were “sustainable” (ie: not destructive of the planet's ecosystem) and the donor countries would agree to increase the level of their aid to those countries to make it feasible.

International development co-operation has been around for a little more than half a century, having begun with the Marshall Plan that the United States used to help rebuild the economies of Western Europe after World War 2. The Marshall Plan was also a major weapon in the cold war between the free market West and the Communist East. In the 1970s and 1980s, the East and West blocs stepped up the level of such aid to friendly governments as the cold war intensified. (Very little of that money was actually used to bring the economies of the recipient countries to a higher state – that is, for development – a fact which didn't seem to trouble

either the donor governments or the recipients.) But the collapse of the Soviet Union and the fall of the Berlin Wall at the end of the 80s raised fears (quite correctly, it turns out) that these aid flows would shrivel without the impetus of cold-war rivalry. At the beginning of the 90s, the real purpose of the Earth Summit, for many of the so-called developing countries in particular, was to provide a new rationale – saving the planet for future generations – for the donors to keep on providing this “development” aid.

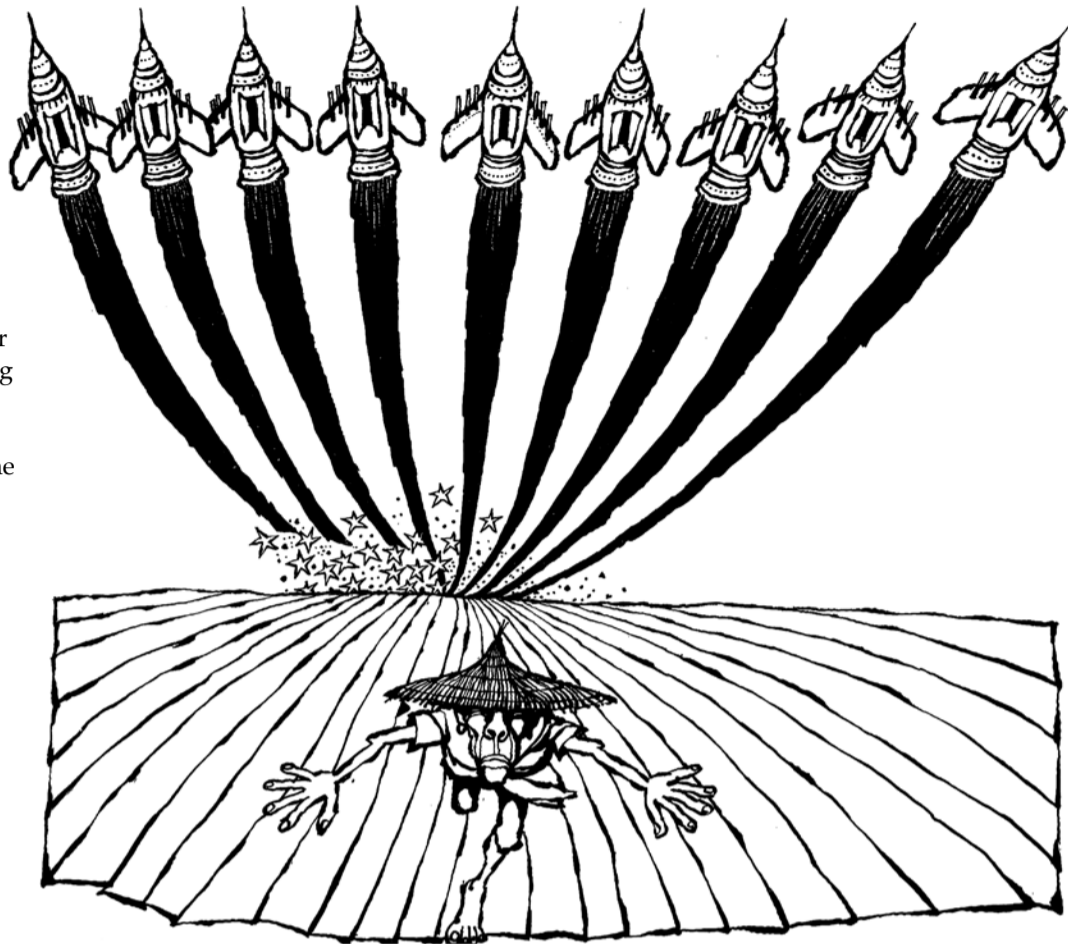
### The broken link

But the link that was forged at Rio between environment and development – dubbed “sustainable development” – was never very strong, quite possibly because it didn't make as much sense to the donors as the previous link between cash payments (or credits) and political loyalty. Donors cut back sharply on their aid flows despite their promise at Rio to enlarge them. The poor countries felt betrayed and abandoned. They were also offended that the donor countries refused even to discuss their own unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. The “sustainable development” deal simply fell apart, as was made quite clear at the UN conferences that followed Rio.

The next big conference, on Barbados, was supposed to deal with the sustainable development of the small island developing states. It was convened with the idea of providing small-scale environmental “pilot projects” to show how the Rio arrangement between North and South was supposed to work. (The Barbados conference was one of the few tangible consequences of the Rio summit). Unfortunately, by the time the conference rolled around, the donors had lost interest in the whole project – there was a recession going on.

Other UN conferences that followed put the spotlight on population and development, on gender issues and development, on urbanisation, on food security – and with each one, the environmental emphasis of Rio was pushed further into the background. At the Millennium Summit, the donors made continued development assistance contingent on the poor countries' own efforts to combat poverty at home. At the Monterrey conference earlier this year, aid was made contingent on reform of governance and markets. And, of course, since last September 11, anti-terrorism considerations have trumped everything else on the list.

The environmental conventions that were signed at Rio and the funding mechanism that was approved there (the Global Environment Facility) now have lives of their own, for better or worse. But the North-South deal that was supposedly struck at Rio, with “development” aid contingent on environmentally sound policies, now has no life left in it at all. Which is why the organisers of the Johannesburg summit are so insistent



on looking to the future rather than the past.

### Now add journalism

I have sketched out some of the reasons why journalists might not find “sustainable development” a subject worth pursuing. It's too complex, too obscure, too fraught with words and phrases that don't mean what we think they mean. And even though some people might wish, for partisan purposes, to focus attention on the failures of some national administrations in this area, it is all but impossible to explain those failures in terms that ordinary people will find intelligible, let alone compelling. As a result, politicians (at least in the donor countries) shy away from public debate over these issues, and, without such public controversy, there can't be much of a “story” for journalists to cover.

I remember that, just before the Rio summit, there was a very brief spate of columns dealing with environmental issues published on editorial pages of US newspapers. Those columns (which I should note were all contributed by non-journalists) called attention to the upcoming Earth Summit, but none seemed able to explain what was so important about it. Indeed, in the 10 years since then, I have never spoken to anyone outside the UN's “sustainable development” loop who had any understanding of what the Earth Summit was about – or, consequently, any real interest in the subject.

Should we journalists feel a sense of guilt or inadequacy because we have not been able to enlighten our readers about this? I don't think so. At a press conference given by UN Secretary General Boutros Boutros-Ghali at the Social Summit in Copenhagen in 1994, I called his attention to the fact that many reporters covering the summit were complaining that they were having difficulty getting their stories printed; their editors found them lacking in interest. Was there anything that the Secretary General could say that might help these reporters overcome this hurdle? Boutros-Ghali hesitated for a moment and then responded: “Perhaps the editors are right. We may be making history here but we are not making news.”