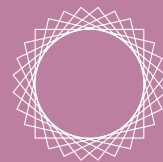


# World Summit on Sustainable Development RING Statement

● JANUARY 2002



The RING alliance  
of policy research  
organisations

For those who take sustainable development seriously, the period since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit has proved disappointing; dashed hopes, failed promises, and missed opportunities outweigh the achievements by far. Even accounting for the naive optimism invested in the Rio process and outputs, the track record since then has been dismal: governments have refused to invest the new resources that had been promised or implied; civil society continues to be distanced from the locus of global decision making, in spite of the fact that it has grown in size and achieved many successes at the local level. The hopes that sustainable development would build new bridges between North and South or between governments and civil society remain largely unrealised. The much-celebrated Rio compact – the supposed understanding between South and North that environment and development needs to be dealt with as an integrated set of concerns within the context of current and future social justice and equity – lies bruised and neglected.

We, the members of RING – a global consortium of policy NGOs dedicated to sustainable development – are concerned that the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg will become yet another venue for rehearsing routine admonishments. Sustainable development was originally deemed powerful – even threatening – because it suggested the possibility of change in the status quo. Today, increasingly divorced from its initial action orientation, sustainable development is on the verge of becoming ineffectual. Yet there is no way forward without it.

Not only is the legacy of Rio under threat but so too is the very future of sustainable development as a viable ideal. The challenge before WSSD is to reorient sustainable development back to its original course. The WSSD needs to recuperate the original vision:

an orientation towards participatory action; the protection of environmental life-support systems; the maintenance of the diversity of life, a priority for the poor; a commitment to social justice and human security; and a respect for human dignity.

While there have been advances in certain areas since Rio, issues that lie at the critical conjunction of poverty and the environment have received only marginal attention. Johannesburg must be judged by the extent to which the policies and actions flowing from it are rooted in the interests of the poorest and most vulnerable. On the basis of our experiences over the last ten years, and our aspirations for the next ten, we offer the following key themes as a means to advance a meaningful sustainable development agenda in Johannesburg.



Centre for  
Sustainable Development



Development  
Alternatives (India)



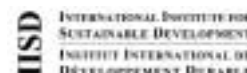
Environnement et  
Développement du Tiers  
Monde (ENDA-TM, Senegal)



International  
Institute for  
Environment and  
Development



Instituto Internacional de  
Medio Ambiente y Desarrollo  
IIED – América Latina



## WHAT CAN JOHANNESBURG DO?

- There is no way forward but sustainable development. Johannesburg must reorient ongoing global discussions back towards sustainable development, with clear investments in participatory action, a commitment to social justice, and a priority for the concerns of the most marginalised.
- There is no need for new institutions for global environmental governance. There *is* an urgency to strengthen existing arrangements – for example, giving UNEP the resources and authority it needs, making GEF more democratic, and uncluttering MEA-proliferation. Most importantly, investments need to be made in enhancing the capacities, space and support for meaningful civil society participation in global environmental governance.
- Sustainable development is not just an environmental demand; it is a developmental necessity. Sustainable development must, therefore, be a central goal of the global trade regime. WSSD must push for this reality to be incorporated into the new Doha Round of the WTO.
- WSSD should initiate discussions on a post-Kyoto climate regime – one that focuses on the needs of the most impoverished and most vulnerable; one that invests in the resilience capacities of the most threatened countries; one that mandates meaningful and real emission reductions; and one that is rooted in a framework of equity and fairness within and between generations.
- WSSD should adopt a global public goods approach to financing for sustainable development. International assistance is not charity; it should be based on a clear understanding that the global ecological services provided by the poor need to be compensated. All institutions – from multilateral development financiers to national and local recipients – must be made transparent and held accountable. Governments, North and South, must be pushed to fulfil the promises they made at Rio.
- Sustainable development policy should facilitate local communities through a process of empowerment in their quest for sustainable livelihoods; top-down programmes and projects must be replaced by an approach that seeks to learn from and support local, culture-based, responses to problems and opportunities. In addition, one of the most pressing issues for sustainable development is to develop strong and accountable local institutions in order to ensure that local needs and priorities are met.

## Global environmental governance

The current debate on global environmental governance – with its dominant focus on establishing a super-organisation for the environment – represents a serious misdiagnosis of the issues and distracts from more pressing ones. This is not to suggest that there is no ‘crisis’ of global environmental governance; indeed, there is. However, the discourse on organisational tinkering only diverts attention from the more important challenges of environmental governance that we face as the Rio compact crumbles around us.

To place the spotlight on organisational minutia is to imply that the ‘institutional will’ for global environmental cooperation already exists and all that remains is to set up an appropriate organisational framework; that global cooperation is a function of inappropriate design, rather than a reflection of a fundamental absence of willingness on the part of states; that the lack of implementation stems from dispersed organisations, rather than from the failure of the countries to own their responsibilities; that improved global environmental governance is a puzzle of administrative efficiency, rather than a challenge of global justice.

This challenge needs to be addressed at four related levels. First, the goal needs to be defined honestly and stated clearly. If the realisation of sustainable development is that goal – as we believe it must be – then institutional investments, implementation designs, and evaluation metrics must reflect this orientation. Second, the principal institution for global environmental governance (UNEP) should be given the resources and authority to match the responsibilities that have been thrust upon it. Third, the multilateral environmental agenda needs to be uncluttered by managing the drift towards MEA-proliferation and its attendant pathologies of ‘negotiation fatigue’. A clustering of treaties has begun to emerge organically; it may be timely to convert this into a deliberate schema. Finally, and most importantly, global environmental governance needs to be ‘civilised’ by providing space and opportunities for meaningful involvement of civil society. Civil society is not just a stakeholder in, but can be a motor of, global environmental governance. Indeed civil society networks could potentially become the real drivers of MEA implementation.

## Trade and sustainable development

The centrepiece of the Rio bargain emerged directly from the passionate belief in market mechanisms that prevailed in the 1990s – aid is a perpetuation of colonial dependency; the real solution is for developing countries to ‘grow their way out of poverty’ through better market access. The Uruguay Round, by then well advanced, seemed to offer a way to put the idea to practice. Ten years later, and at the outset of a new trade round, we are all older and wiser.

The Uruguay Round agreements were aggressively sold as good for all countries – a rising tide floats all boats. Admittedly, it would be better for the richer countries, but all would benefit. In retrospect, the benefits of this cycle of trade liberalisation for most developing countries have proved meagre, while the costs have often been high. Concessions were scant in the industries where the developing countries have the comparative advantage –

agriculture, leather goods, textiles – but were secured at the price of considerable advantages to the rich countries in areas such as intellectual property protection or services. In reality, the rising tide floats all yachts, but some of the smaller boats – still anchored to poverty – go under.

With the Doha round beginning, there is another opportunity to use the trading system to advance sustainable development. This will require developing countries to identify and articulate where their sustainable development interests lie in the context of trade and adopt a positive agenda. It will require the environmental community to come together to agree how they can effectively feed sustainable development into the entire WTO work programme. It will require a merging of the environment and development agendas, and an understanding that sustainable development will not be advanced in the trade regime through technical fixes, but by swinging the WTO tanker slowly and patiently around so that its considerable power and energy pushes it in the direction of a form of economic development that not only creates wealth, but begins to close the gap between rich and poor, promotes social equity, and the sustainable use of environmental resources.

## Climate change and sustainable development

With the impending ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, climate change discussions will take centre-stage at the WSSD. However, the current policy discourse ignores the deep links between climate change and sustainable development. This conscious neglect will not only undermine global efforts towards sustainable development but could ultimately threaten the effectiveness and legitimacy of the global climate regime.

One of the original 'Rio documents', the Climate Convention had raised the hopes that the climate challenge would be viewed within the framework of sustainable development, with due focus on the poor who are most vulnerable to climate change and least able to adapt to its ravages. It has done neither. Today, climate policy is being held hostage by the world's biggest polluter, has degenerated into an exercise in accounting for hot air, and the fascination with 'market mechanisms' is leading to a perverse situation where rewards accrue to the biggest emitters and risks are dumped on the most vulnerable.

Rio's intent was articulated explicitly in the Convention, which called for an emissions reduction so that countries could pursue sustainable development. It was clear that meaningful and real reductions were needed from the largest emitters while developing countries were called upon to not repeat the mistakes of the industrialised world. The meagreness of the original Kyoto targets and their subsequent dilution – first by the US refusal to join the regime and later by the increased prominence given to trading-based flexibility mechanisms – has meant that key human and environmental implications have been marginalised. Issues of poverty abatement, equity, vulnerability and resilience, and capacity building have been left on the sidelines as the Convention is progressively reduced into a regime on carbon trade rather than on emissions abatement. Johannesburg must reorient the

Climate Convention back to its original sustainable development moorings – by refocusing attention on the most impoverished countries and communities, by raising concerns about adaptation capacity in vulnerable countries, and by highlighting the necessity to root the regime within a framework of equity and fairness that treats the atmosphere as a global commons rather than as a polluter's haven.

## Financing for sustainable development

Sustainable development is a difficult goal to begin with. Without adequate financing it will remain elusive as well. Although financing has consistently been the highest Southern priority in international negotiations, the trends since 1992 have been dismal. In less than a decade, the hopes, trust and confidence built during the Rio process have dissipated. In place of a peace dividend, there is the threat of war; instead of the visions of uniform and broad-based growth there is the experience of unequal and unstable development; in place of faith in inter-governmental agreements there is growing cynicism and despair.

Our approach to this issue starts with the need to take globalisation seriously. This means recognising the interdependencies and connections between countries and peoples. It means imagining the entire world as a single country. While this is not a country in the traditional sense – especially since it does not have a single government – it is not much different from many developing countries, which also comprise many ethnicities and nations, and where also the writ of the central government often does not run far beyond the capital city. It means asking how the agenda of *global* sustainable development can be furthered – not how resources can be transferred from one country to another, but how resources can be mobilised for the equitable development of the entire planet.

This places the focus squarely on the question of responsibility. What is the responsibility of the governments and taxpayers of rich countries to the people of poor countries? What is the responsibility of international financial institutions? What is the responsibility of the recipients of development resources? In the absence of a clearly stated understanding of responsibility, foreign aid will either be viewed as a form of charity, to obtain which poor countries have to degrade themselves; or it will become an instrument of domination and imperial control. Difficult as these questions of responsibility are, the WSSD process can no longer afford to ignore or bypass them.

## Sustainable livelihoods and good governance for local communities

A critical measure of sustainable development is the abundance of varied, productive, enjoyable, secure, and environment-friendly livelihoods for communities and people. Centuries of experience in traditional systems of natural resource management and even contemporary experiences with local communities show that sustainable livelihoods are achievable. In fact, it is not poverty *per se* but the pressure of alienation from local natural resources and lifestyles that results in depletion of resources and

miserable livelihoods. Traditional livelihood systems everywhere are being driven down into social and ecological chaos. Local communities are often bypassed. Yet we know from well before Rio that the most potent and powerful examples of real sustainable development come when we are able to recognise and respect the true wealth of communities and people – their indigenous knowledge in managing the natural resources around them, and ultimately their own livelihoods.

Sustainable livelihoods are patterns of local ingenious responses to local problems and opportunities. These need to be developed and mustered by local communities themselves. Sustainable livelihoods cannot be planned, commanded, or controlled from the top. But they can, and must, be supported and strengthened. The most meaningful role of governments and NGOs is to create an environment of support and facilitation in which local communities can themselves go through a process of empowerment in their quest for sustainable livelihoods.

Another critical measure of sustainable development is the quality and effectiveness of local governance. This implies ensuring: 'the rule of law' through which the rights and entitlements of all groups are protected; everyone's needs are met for water, sanitation, drainage, health care, schools, transport, emergency services; local government institutions provide the framework within which provision is guaranteed, standards ensured and prices controlled; robust, effective and accountable democratic processes; enterprises do not contravene environmental regulations or health and safety standards.

One of the most pressing issues for sustainable development is to develop the web of accountable local institutions that ensure progress towards meeting sustainable development goals in each locality. Without such institutions, new projects or investments are profoundly undemocratic. How are national governments and international agencies going to meet their 'global' responsibilities without effective, democratic local institutions as partners? ●

## About the RING

*The Ring is a global alliance of research and policy organisations that seeks to enhance and promote sustainable development through a programme of collaborative research, dissemination and policy advocacy. It was formed in 1991 to stimulate preparations for the 1992 Rio Summit. There are currently 14 Ring member organisations based in 5 continents.*

- The **VISION** of the Ring is to promote and develop collaborative working in support of sustainable development through:
  - Linking grassroots communities and policy makers.
  - Linking civil society and research agendas.
  - Sharing and disseminating knowledge and experience between the North and South, and between regions.
- The **ADDED VALUE** of the Ring is gained from joint research and information sharing and lesson learning between Ring partners. This gives the Ring a unique inter-regional and regional perspective on major sustainable development issues.
- The **OBJECTIVE** of the Ring is to ensure that international sustainable development policy making and institutions are informed and influenced by local realities, and hence are supportive and enabling of local action.

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**Current Ring members:** Africa Centre for Technology Studies (ACTS, Kenya) – [www.acts.or.ke](http://www.acts.or.ke) • Bangladesh Centre for Advanced Studies (BCAS, Bangladesh) – [www.bcas.net](http://www.bcas.net) • Centre for Sustainable Development (CENESTA, Iran) – [www.cenesta.org](http://www.cenesta.org) • Centro de Investigacion y Planificacion del Medio Ambiente (CIPMA, Chile) – [www.cipma.cl](http://www.cipma.cl) • Development Alternatives (India) – [www.deval.org](http://www.deval.org) • Environnement et Developpement du Tiers Monde (ENDA-TM, Senegal) – [www.enda.sn](http://www.enda.sn) • Instituto para o Desenvolvimento, Meio Ambiente, e Paz (Vitaec Civilis, Brazil) – [www.vitaecivilis.org.br](http://www.vitaecivilis.org.br) • International Institute for Environment and Development (IIED, UK) – [www.iied.org](http://www.iied.org) • International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD, Canada) – [www.iisd.ca](http://www.iisd.ca) • IIED América Latina (IIED-AL, Argentina) – email [iied-ac@sei.com.ar](mailto:iied-ac@sei.com.ar) • Nigerian Environmental Study Action Team (NEST, Nigeria) – [www.nest.org.ng](http://www.nest.org.ng) • Stockholm Environment Institute Boston (SEI Boston, USA) – [www.seib.org](http://www.seib.org) • Sustainable Development Policy Institute (SDPI, Pakistan) – [www.sdpi.org](http://www.sdpi.org) • Zero Energy Research Organisation (ZERO, Zimbabwe) – [www.zero.org.zw](http://www.zero.org.zw)

