

FROM RIO TO JOHANNESBURG AND BEYOND - THE LONG MARCH TOWARDS SUSTAINABILITY

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The International Union of Air Pollution Prevention and Environmental Protection (IUAPPA)*

It is a great pleasure to be here in Sao Paulo in Brazil to address this important and prestigious conference.

My last visit to Brazil was to the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro ten years ago. That famous event changed my life forever. It affected the many thousands of others who were there, and the many millions more who were influenced and inspired by its work.

What Rio did was to direct the world's attention to the big picture - the biggest picture there is - the world as a whole. We had to confront together the whole of the planet and its ecosystems - their resilience and their fragility - and the extent and pace of the changes which humanity is imposing on those fundamental systems. We had to put that understanding alongside our understanding of human society and its problems and aspirations and to try to establish future paths for humanity that may better protect and sustain the ecosystems that support us all

Rio was a triumphant success. Rio was a sad failure.

It was a success because it adopted a set of basic principles for guiding the future development of human society on our planet in a more sustainable way. It agreed a comprehensive agenda for action at all levels throughout the world to advance sustainability. It agreed two great conventions on Climate Change and Biodiversity to tackle these two crucial areas of global threat to sustainability.

It was agreed at Rio that an essential element of the transition to sustainability would need to be a major effort by the countries of the North to restrain or transform their own unsustainable consumption and production patterns, and to help the poorer countries of the South to manage their own development in a more sustainable way. Improved access for the South to world markets, and a substantial increase in development assistance to the South were a crucial part of the overall Rio deal.

Rio also marked an enormous step forward in drawing in all the major sectors of society - business and trade unions, local government, scientists, educators, farmers, women, youth and a wide range of non-

governmental organisations to share their knowledge, understanding, influence and commitment to the task which confronts the whole of human society in managing the transition to a more sustainable future.

All of these elements were major successes. Nevertheless at the same time Rio was a sad failure in one crucial respect. It did not create effective machinery for ensuring that its analysis, its promises and commitments became translated into effective action. It had no machinery for implementation, monitoring and enforcement. As the decade since Rio has gone by these weaknesses have appeared more and more strongly. Implementation has been very partial.

The Rio principles have remained aspirational, or at best have acquired some of the status of soft law - concepts which may exercise some influence at the margin in legal and political disputes, but have no hard-edged substantive force.

Agenda 21 has remained what it is called - an agenda - a shopping list or signpost to desirable actions or policies but with no machinery to compel implementation or enforcement when other short-term political priorities intervene. Some actions have been implemented - but many have not, or not fully.

Ten years laborious work by the parties to the Climate Change convention have produced one modest protocol with supposedly binding targets and the beginnings of some carbon trading arrangements - but meanwhile the growth of greenhouse gases has gone on apace, and the rate of climate change and its impacts has accelerated. The rate of loss of biodiversity in the world has continued at a great pace, virtually unaffected by the provisions of the Biodiversity Convention.

The economic new deal and partnership between North and South totally failed to arrive in the 1990s. Northern trading restrictions remained. Northern investment in the South was concentrated in very few areas and was extremely volatile. Aid levels diminished instead of increasing as promised.

Only in the non-governmental sector did substantial progress continue to be made. Many local governments around the world adopted Local Agenda 21 with enthusiasm and commitment. Some individual states and regions made similar progress. A number of leading international companies made very significant efforts to move their businesses in a more sustainable direction.

The annual meetings of the United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development were intended to provide the means for monitoring progress and enabling corrective action to be taken where movement is in the wrong direction. The reports that have been made to the CSD have flagged up all too clearly the deteriorating situation and the adverse trends in many areas. But sadly these meetings have lacked the authority and political commitment to generate major change. For a variety of reasons countries have found it easier to dispute or ignore the evidence, or to get bogged down in sterile debate over the allocation of responsibility for the state we are in and for taking action to correct it. The annual meetings have attempted to cover too many subjects at once, and as a result have not dealt with any of them well or to the point at which serious policy changes can be agreed.

The special five-year review in 1997 whose negotiations I had the honour to co-chair with Ambassador Amorim of Brazil did something to streamline and focus the subsequent CSD discussions, but not enough to secure major change in the level and pace of implementation.

Now in 2002 another Summit ten years after Rio has once again attempted to breathe new life and momentum into the sustainable development agenda. Once again the result is both a failure and a success.

It is a failure because many countries are still dragging their feet about effective implementation of Agenda 21 and the sustainability agenda. Many still see the changes needed as a burden rather than an opportunity. Many are still reluctant to contemplate meaningful action until all others do likewise, and hide their own reluctance behind the deliberate obstruction of a few of the leading players. The scale of resources committed to helping the poorer parts of the world manage their transition to more sustainable patterns of development in the future is still woefully inadequate to the needs.

Over the whole debate there also stands the long shadow of conflict and political insecurity in many parts of the world. To many politicians and other actors in the more difficult and dangerous parts of the world these threats and conflicts loom so large that talk of promoting sustainable development seems like a distant mirage. At a fundamental level it must of course be true that the promotion of more sustainable development involving more justice and equity in society as well as better protection of the environment and natural resources should help to make the world a safer and more peaceful place. It ought to be a central part of the rebuilding of societies that have been ravaged by conflict and disaster as well as those which are more stable. A more sustainable pattern of development is particularly needed in Afghanistan, in the Middle East, in central Africa and in all the other troubled parts of the world. But we still sadly lack the machinery to bring this to the fore in making plans for the recovery of those areas.

In spite of all these difficulties Johannesburg did have its successes - and has the potential to have a lasting influence for good. South Africa proved to be a generous and imaginative host country hosting the many different events as creatively and constructively as our Brazilian hosts of ten years ago. The debates did manage to draw together and consolidate several different strands of the sustainability debate. It brought together and integrated crucial forward movements in each of the three main dimensions of sustainability - the economic, social and environmental.

On the economic side the Summit reinforced the impetus for the new trade round initiated at Doha, and underlined the crucial importance of conducting the round in an equitable way which will recognise and support the legitimate aspirations of the South for access to world markets on fairer terms than they have enjoyed in the past. On the social side the Summit recognised and endorsed crucial importance of the development targets agreed at the Millennium Summit in 2000, and the growth in aid levels that donor countries agreed to at the Monterrey Conference on Finance for Development earlier this year. On the environmental side it integrated a number of core environmental objectives and targets into some core development objectives, particularly in the five key areas of water and sanitation, energy, health, sustainable agriculture and food production, and biodiversity (the WEHSAB goals) which the UN Secretary General flagged up as key issues, and added

a number of new goals and targets, particularly in the area of sanitation which is so crucial for public health and for the satisfactory management of the whole water cycle.

Johannesburg was a success too in recognising, celebrating and encouraging the major contributions to sustainable development being made by many different groups in society around the world. In a whole series of parallel events, local and regional government, businesses and trade unions, farmers, scientists and educators, women and youth, NGOs of all sizes and shapes shared their experience, entered into new partnerships for action and undertook new commitments. Many of these groups should no longer be regarded primarily as lobbyists of governments at international meetings, but as actors in their own right making their own agreements and undertaking their own commitments. Of course they need the framework and context of powerful international intergovernmental agreements to support their work. But their work and plans need to be considered and evaluated in their own right as significant additional elements in the transition to sustainability.

If, on this occasion, all the Johannesburg governmental agreements together with all the parallel commitment made by other actors can actually be delivered, this will be a really substantial practical achievement. Once again we shall only really be able to tell how far the Johannesburg conclusions are a success or another failure when we see whether they are this time followed into effective action.

What then should be done to capture the energy and commitment that was generated at Johannesburg, and to ensure that it is carried forward into the next stages of implementation?

Action is needed at all levels and in all sectors. There needs to be effective follow-up and monitoring in the United Nations itself and the CSD. The continental regions of the world are natural groupings for advancing many of the specific environmental and sustainable development goals, and I shall come back to this in a moment in relation to international action to deal with cross boundary air pollution. National governments must of course be at the centre of effective action developing their own comprehensive sustainable development strategies and engaging all the different national actors in their vigorous implementation.

Sub national regions and provinces frequently have a vital part to play and it was encouraging to find many of them coming together for the first time at Johannesburg to record their common determination to advance sustainability at their level in the Gauteng Declaration and to establish a new global network to share experience and build capacity and new partnerships at that level. Local government has a crucial part to play in many of the most basic sustainability tasks. Business, trade unions, farmers, scientists, educationalist, and NGOs of all kinds, all need to follow up on their own commitments.

Brazil is a crucial exemplar in the transition to sustainable development. Brazil has one of the most dynamic economies in the world, and also one of the most volatile. Brazil has some of the richest natural resources and biodiversity in the planet. It has also had a rapidly growing population and some of the most destructive forms of development and degradation of natural resources, forests and ecosystems. Brazil has some of the most advanced and dynamic businesses in the world. It also has some of the most extreme poverty, and virtually untouched communities of original indigenous peoples. In Brazil extremes of all kinds co-exist, and the challenge of sustainable development is both more urgent and more difficult to achieve than in many other parts of the world.

It is no surprise then to find that Brazil has always been at the forefront of global and regional debates about sustainable development. Of course it played a crucial and highly regarded part at the Rio Summit itself ten years ago. In a less high profile way it played a key role on the progressive side of the debate in South Africa. I salute that achievement, and I very much hope that Brazil will form one of that important group - of like-minded countries that are determined to go further than the Johannesburg agreements, and to undertake additional commitments in some of the crucial areas.

On energy, for example, many countries found it frustrating not to be able to reach consensus on a more decisive set of policy goals and measures to accelerate the transition to a more energy efficient society, and one which places greater reliance on renewable sources of energy and less on the consumption of fossil fuels. Some of the more progressive countries from both North and South have signalled their determination to make progress on these issues together even in the

absence of full consensus in the United Nations as a whole.

In relation to air pollution the Johannesburg Plan of Action agreed (Para 37) "to enhance co-operation at the international, regional and national levels to reduce air pollution, including trans-boundary air pollution, acid deposition and ozone depletion and to strengthen capacities of developing countries and countries with economies in transition to measure, reduce and assess the impacts of air pollution, including health impacts, and provide technical support for those activities."

This commitment provides the backdrop to some of the parallel conference work here this week. There is growing international recognition of the problems which air pollution causes to health, and the damage that it does to the natural environment and to manmade structures. These problems have been amply documented in numerous national and international studies, and were graphically highlighted by the Executive Director of UNEP shortly before Johannesburg in a report that focused particular attention on the brown clouds over Asia. Sadly there is nothing unique about Asia in this respect, and similar pollution is causing growing concern in many areas of the world, including the very city in which this conference is taking place.

There is commitment too to the concept of taking appropriate action at national, regional and global levels to tackle these problems.

National level action is of course always crucial in dealing with a widespread pollution problem of this kind. But common observation confirmed by scientific analysis has shown that air pollution is no respecter of national boundaries, and that much pollution is transported between neighbouring countries in a region, and to some extent even over further distance between different regions of the world. Cleaning up air pollution cannot therefore be dealt with in a country by that country acting alone. It needs co-operative action between neighbouring countries in a region.

I believe there is also a need for some collaboration at global level, and scope for a global framework agreement to help the different regional agreements and action plans fit together in an optimal way, and to help disseminate ideas and expertise about the causes of air pollution and their elimination or minimisation.

Such an agreement could also provide the framework within which any global plan to establish agreement on the different levels of responsibility for the creation of air pollution and for remediating it in different parts of the world. I hope that this week's work may help to prepare the ground for a concerted approach at global, regional and national level to tackle air pollution more vigorously.

In conclusion I would say this. Just as some historians say that it is still too soon to judge whether the French Revolution was a success, so it is too soon to reach a firm judgement on the impact of Rio and still less of Johannesburg. The true impact of these great events lies not in the words and agreement that are created at the time, important though these are, but in the influence they continue to have on leaders and ordinary people around the world in the years that follow. On that scale the spirit of Rio is alive and well in the world today, and has been powerfully reinforced this year by the summit in Johannesburg. What is crucial now is that all those who wish to see progress on sustainability around the world should join hands to drive that progress forward. I know that Brazil has much to be proud of already in the progress that has been made here towards sustainability. I have no doubt that those of us in Europe who share the same concerns will want to continue to work closely with you here to make further progress, and to join hands with those in many other parts of the world who are determined to make the vision of sustainable development a living reality.

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Currently he is a member of the UK Sustainable Development Commission. He is also chairman of the Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future, an international multi-stakeholder organisation devoted to sustainable development.