

## -Sustainable development cools off- Globalization demands summit take new approach to meeting ecological, social goals

**By Mark Halle**

A decade has now passed since the widely acclaimed Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. Representatives of the world community will gather in Johannesburg on Aug. 26 at the optimistically-named World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) to take stock of progress and to rededicate their best efforts to offering humanity a future based not only on economic growth, but on social justice and environmental stability as well. The world has changed considerably in the 10 years since Rio. Globalization has taken hold. Absolute priority has been given to expanding the scope for trade and investment in line with neo-liberal economics. As a result, the institutions governing the global economy have grown stronger while those promoting social equity, poverty alleviation and environmental co-operation remain weak.

Rio is still remembered as a time of hope. It was perhaps the last global occasion on which it was possible to believe that economic growth might be harnessed for the wider public good -- that the results of growth would be used to combat poverty, reverse social exclusion and stabilize our use of the planet's natural resources. Then globalization hit the accelerator, the barriers to trade and investment began to fall, and the belief that poor countries could grow themselves out of poverty by boarding the liberalization express train took on almost religious force -- at least in the rich countries.

A robust economy, along with social equity and the judicious use of resources and ecosystems, constitute the three traditional pillars of sustainable development. Economic growth can contribute to sustainable development. We have learned, though, that whether or not it does so in fact depends on the institutions that regulate the market and guarantee democratic decision-making.

This is perhaps the most important lesson learned in the post-Rio decade: that the institutions and mechanisms of governance that underpin sustainable

development and on which it depends are so important that they constitute the fourth essential pillar of sustainable development. It is, indeed, this fourth pillar

that confers legitimacy on economic development and holds the development process accountable for what is achieved with development funding. It is predicated on democratic institutions, which provide everyone with a say in decisions that affect their lives. It relies on greater transparency and greater opportunities to participate in making social choices. And it depends on genuine mechanisms to

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oversee and exercise accountability for development decisions. It is now clear that attempts to erect the first three pillars in the absence of the fourth were doomed to failure.

For WSSD to succeed, it will have to go well beyond the largely environmental constituency that is currently behind it. At the same time, it cannot alienate these same people, because they are currently the only ones with the determination to make the summit a success.

For all of its myriad flanking events, the WSSD will, once again, be a gathering of governments at a time when the momentum of innovation has moved well beyond the public sector. To make matters worse, nobody really doubts that WSSD will gather those parts of the public sector with the least influence over the decisions that will, ultimately, have to be taken if sustainable development is to prosper.

The challenge for sustainable development in this first decade of the 21st century is not to ignore or seek to circumvent the macroeconomic system. The challenge, instead, is twofold:

To influence that system so it can accommodate a greater variety of social and environmental priorities.

To reinforce the mechanisms of governance and the institutions of democratic control so economic policy can be embedded in a wider framework made up of sustainable development concern.

The legitimate ambition for the WSSD is to set the stage for this to happen, rather than to make yet another forlorn attempt to generate political will around the environmental and social agenda.

It is no secret that it has proved difficult for WSSD to whip up anywhere near the same enthusiasm as was generated for Rio. This dismal fact is uniformly true across the entire spectrum -- governments, civil society and the private sector. Why this pessimism? It is in part that it is hard to believe, these days, that a major international conference can release the policy logjam and allow the flow towards sustainable development to resume its course. It is in part that we no longer believe governments -- and especially the environment ministers likely to be present in Johannesburg -- hold the key. It is partly that we have spent 10 years watching the promise of Rio fail to

materialize and many of the commitments made in Rio unravel.

Most of all, however, it is that globalization has taken sustainable development away from where WSSD is looking for it.

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This commentary first appeared in the Winnipeg Free Press, July 29, 2002.