



Fairness in a Fragile World: The Johannesburg Agenda¹

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ABSTRACT *Wolfgang Sachs, in his capacity as co-ordinator and editor of a group of 15 people that produced 'The Johannesburg Memo: Fairness in a Fragile World', reflects on what has to be radically different in Johannesburg if it is to catch up with the ecological disasters we are facing 10 years on (see <www.joburgmemo.org> for the full text). This article draws largely on part 2 of that document, 'The Johannesburg Agenda', which recommends a southern-led, people- and poverty-centred agenda with a move to sustainable livelihoods in a post-fossil fuel age.*

KEYWORDS *ecology; equity; poverty; power; solar energy; sustainable livelihoods*

Putting Rio into context

The Rio Conference on Environment and Development strove to address two major crises: the crisis of nature and that of justice. Environmentalists – often from the North – were expected to take into account the desire of the majority of the world's citizens for a life beyond poverty and distress. By contrast, developmentalists – often from the South – were called upon to recognize the disastrous repercussions of a deteriorated nature base. Typically, environmentalists were seen to be opposing deforestation, chemical agriculture or expansion of power plants, while developmentalists were pushing for marketing timber, expanding food supplies or electrifying villages. Therefore, the Earth Summit aimed at integrating the environment and development agendas to liberate policy makers from the dilemma of either aggravating the crisis of nature by pushing for development, or conversely, aggravating the crisis of justice by insisting on the protection of nature.

The Rio process fell short of fulfilling this ambition. How to respond to the desire for justice without upsetting the biosphere is still a puzzle for the 21st century. Despite the prominence of 'development' in all the Rio documents, the demand of the South for recognition and equity has largely been frustrated

during the past decade, reinforcing the fear of many southern countries of falling further behind, and remaining forever excluded from the blessings of the modern world.

Against this background, the South – and in particular South Africa – intend to transform Johannesburg into a development summit rather than an environment summit. While Rio was considered to be dominated by the North, it is hoped that Johannesburg will be the summit for the South. Indeed, the conference title ‘World Summit for Sustainable Development’ clearly reflects the intention to elevate ‘development’ on the political agenda.

Yet focusing on a development agenda as if the worldwide crisis of nature did not exist would signify sliding back behind Rio. It would be a disservice to the South, since equity can no longer be separated from ecology. Instead, fulfilling the ambition of Rio requires the effective response to the demand for equity arising from the South, but in a manner which takes full account of the biophysical limits of the Earth. Meeting this challenge, however, requires revisiting the technologies, the institutions, and the world views that dominate the globe today. Johannesburg can forge a new beginning.

Shrug off copycat development

The times of copycat development are over. Not because emulation of the North has not produced the desired results, but because the development model of the North is historically obsolete. Up until the environmental crisis broke, one could still attribute a certain degree of superiority to the technological civilization, which had emerged on both sides of the northern Atlantic in the last quarter of the 20th century. But it has become obvious that many of its glorious achievements are actually optical illusions. They essentially consist in transferring power from nature to man, leaving nature degraded and depleted in the process. As a consequence, natural systems, which serve as sources (water, timber, oil, minerals, etc.), sites (land for mines, settlements, infrastructure), and sinks (soils, oceans, atmosphere) for economic development are disrupted or seriously degraded.

Consider the environmental trends of the last 50 years: greenhouse gas concentrations have surpassed tolerable levels, one third of arable land has been degraded worldwide, just as one third of tropical forests, one fourth of the available freshwater, and one fourth of the fish reserves have disappeared, not to mention the extinction of plant and animal species. Although it was just a minority of the world population which fed off nature for just a couple of generations, the feast is quickly coming to an end.

A dramatic situation has now emerged. At present, the world consumes more resources than nature can regenerate. Calculations suggest that human activities have exceeded the biosphere’s capacity since the mid-1970s. Since then, ecological overshoot has become the distinguishing mark of human history. In 1997, the overshoot amounted to 30 percent of the Earth’s carrying capacity, or even to 40–50 percent if the needs of other living beings are taken into account (WWF, 2000). A large part of this overshoot is due to the extravagant use of fossil fuels, whose carbon waste would require a vast bio-productive surface area as a natural sink. Indeed, the global fossil fuel bonanza is mainly responsible for the quandary of conventional development, which presently only offers the uncomfortable choice between social injustice and biospherical disruption. If, for instance, the present average carbon emissions per capita in the industrial world were extrapolated to all countries, the atmosphere would have to absorb five times more emissions than it can take – without even counting the expected increase in population. In other words, if all the countries of the globe followed the industrial model, five planets would be required to provide the carbon sinks needed by economic development. As humanity is left with just one, such an equity approach would become the mother of all disasters.

Consequently, there is no escape from the conclusion that the world’s growing population cannot attain a western standard of living by following conventional paths to development. The resources required are too vast, too expensive, and too damaging to local and global ecosystems. Probably as never before in history, there is an opportunity to transform ‘underdevelopment’ into a

blessing. At the historical juncture where fossil-fuel dependency drives industrial societies into an impasse, economies that once were seen as lagging behind suddenly find themselves in a favourable position. Not yet fully locked into an old-style model of industrialization, they have the prospect of leapfrogging into a post-fossil age, skipping the resource-intensive styles of production and consumption so dear to the industrial world. Thus the challenge they face is to choose a path that is both pro-environment and pro-poor. This window of opportunity, however, will close rather fast if the South continues to stick to copycat development. It will only remain open if the South musters the courage to envisage models of wealth that are different from those in the North.

Reduce the footprint of the rich

Without ecology there will be no equity in the world. Otherwise, the biosphere will be thrown into turbulence. The insight that the globally available environmental space is finite, albeit within flexible boundaries, has added a new dimension to justice. The quest for greater justice has, for time immemorial, required us to contain the use of power in society, but now it also requires us to contain the use of nature. The powerful have to yield both political and environmental space to the powerless, if justice is to have a chance. It is for this reason that, after the age of environmental innocence, the question of nature is inherent to the question of power, just as the question of power is inherent to the question of nature.

Power determines who occupies how much of the environmental space. Neither all nations nor all citizens use equal shares. On the contrary, the environmental space is divided in a highly unfair manner. It still holds true that about 20 percent of the world's population consume 70–80 percent of the world's resources. It is those 20 percent who eat 45 percent of all the meat and fish, consume 68 percent of all electricity, 84 percent of all the paper, and own 87 percent of all the automobiles (UNDP, 1998: 2). Above all, it is the industrialized countries which tap into the heritage of nature to an excessive extent; they draw on the environment far beyond their national boundaries. Their ecological

footprint is larger – and in some cases very much larger – than their own territories, with a great deal of the resources and sinks they utilize squandered from other countries. In fact, the OECD countries surpass (in terms of ecology and equity) the admissible average size of such a footprint by a magnitude of about 75–85 percent. The wealthy 25 percent of humanity occupy a footprint as large as the entire biologically productive surface area of the Earth (Wackernagel and Rees, 1997).

Most importantly, though, the conventional North–South distinction obscures the fact that the dividing line in today's world, if there is any, is not primarily running between northern and southern societies, but right across all of these societies. The major rift appears to be between the globalized rich and the localized poor. The North–South divide, instead of separating nations, cuts through each society, albeit in different configurations. It separates the global consumer class, on the one side, from the social majority outside the global circuits, on the other. This global middle class is made up of the majority of citizens in the North, along with a varying number of elites in the South, with about four-fifths of it found in North America, western as well as eastern Europe, and Japan. One-fifth of it can be found dispersed throughout the South. Its overall size equates roughly to those 20 percent of the world population who have direct access to an automobile.

In the last decade, globalization has accelerated and intensified the integration of this class into the worldwide circuit of goods, communication and travel, most clearly so in newly industrializing countries and eastern Europe/Russia. Transnational corporations largely cater to this class, just as they provide its symbolic means of expression, such as films, fashion, music, and brand names. But entire categories of people in the North, like the unemployed, the elderly and the competitively weak, along with entire regions in the South, find themselves excluded from the circuits of the world economy. In all countries, an invisible border separates the fast from the slow, the connected from the unconnected, the rich from the poor. There is a global North as there is a global South, encompassing even the area of the former eastern bloc. This reality thus disappears in the conventional terms of 'North' and 'South'.

The corporate-driven consumer classes, in the North as well as in the South, have the power to bring the bulk of the world's marketed natural resources into their service. Due to their purchasing power, they are able to command the resource flows, which fuel their commodity-intensive patterns of production and consumption. In attracting resources, their geographical reach is both global and national. On the global level, a network of resource flows, generally organized by transnational corporations, extends like a spider web across the planet, pulling energy and materials towards the high-consumption zones. On the national level, the urban-based middle classes succeed equally in capturing resources to their benefit, thanks to patterns of ownership, subsidies, and superior demand.

Reduction of the ecological footprint of the consumer classes around the world is not just a matter of ecology, but also a matter of equity. Though trade in resources may help economically, it is deleterious ecologically since the excessive use of environmental space withdraws resources from the social majority in the world, constraining their capacity to enhance their lives and to move towards a brighter future. More so, wealth on the one side is at times co-responsible for poverty on the other. As the consumer class corners resources through the global reach of corporations, they contribute to the marginalization of that third of the world population which derives their livelihood directly from free access to land, water, and forests.

Ensuring livelihood rights

In contrast to Rio, the Johannesburg Summit will concentrate on poverty eradication. The South may pin up the badge of poverty, demanding a greater share in the world economy. However, while the task is a noble one, its politics are ambivalent. There is certainly no doubt that the elimination of poverty calls for enormous efforts on the part of the international community. But it is questionable whether these efforts should primarily consist of higher development assistance, increased grants, or increased world market integration. For what is good for government is not necessarily good for the poor. Much too often, and for quite some time now,

the southern governments, supported by their elites, have indulged in the expansion of their own consumer classes and have secured their own power base under the banner of poverty eradication. Against this background, it is clear that the struggle for poverty reduction will not be decided in controversies between southern and northern governments, but in conflicts between the marginalized majority and the global middle class – which includes domestic governments, corporations and multilateral institutions.

We need to turn to the poor themselves and recognize them as actors who shape their lives even under conditions of hardship and destitution. In this view, poverty derives from a deficit of power rather than a lack of money. Far from being needy persons awaiting provisions, the poor must be seen as citizens who are constrained by a lack of rights, entitlements, salaries and political leverage. Any attempt, therefore, to mitigate poverty will have to be centred on a reinforcement of rights and opportunities. This is in particular true for women, who are often legally marginalized. In many places, they have no access to tenure, income and influence, despite the fact that they carry most of the burden of everyday life and often have to sustain families by themselves.

For women or men, a basic rights strategy, rather than a basic needs strategy, may help to overcome the constraints to self-organization. In the countryside, conflicts will often turn around rights to land, access to water, forests, and undestroyed habitats, confronting land owners and state administrations. In the city, conflicts will focus on rights to housing, to unpolluted water, to running a business, or to self-administration, confronting city officials, health departments, police or power cliques. Unless there are shifts in power patterns, subtle ones or sweeping ones, the poor will almost always lack the security and the resources needed for a decent existence.

It is therefore important to promote sustainable livelihoods. Sustainable in both senses of the word: first, an activity that provides a decent income or sustenance and provides some status in society along with a meaningful life; and second, an activity which conserves and, if possible, regenerates the environment. Productive ecosystems are

core assets for sustainable livelihoods, since grasslands, forests, fields and rivers can be valuable sources of sustenance. This is the main reason why livelihood-centred strategies of poverty removal coincide with the interest in environmental protection. Ecology is thus essential for ensuring decent livelihoods in society. Securing community rights to natural resources is therefore a hallmark of livelihood politics. However, strengthening the rights of local communities means weakening the claims of distant income earners and consumers. Thus the direct or indirect demand of the corporate-driven middle classes for easily available and cheap resources will have to be checked since the interest of middle classes in expanding consumption and of corporations in profit expansion often collides with the interest of communities in securing their livelihoods. These resource conflicts will not be resolved unless the economically well-off on the globe make the transition towards resource-light patterns of production and consumption.

Leapfrog into the solar age

At the time of Rio, sustainable development was mainly about protecting nature, but now, in the wake of Johannesburg, it is first and foremost about protecting people. For nobody can close his or her eyes in front of what can be called the 21st century challenge, namely how best to extend hospitality to twice the number of people on the globe, in light of a rapidly deteriorating biosphere. Indeed, the historical pattern of scarcity, which had left its imprint on economic development and continues to shape it, today is outdated. The satisfaction of needs and wants is not constrained so much by the paucity of hands and brains, but by the scarcity of resources and living systems. Nature is now more of a limiting factor than money, given that development is more and more restricted not by the number of fishing boats, but by the decreasing numbers of fish; not by the power of pumps, but by the depletion of aquifers; not by the number of chainsaws, but by the disappearance of primary forests. In particular for southern countries, the relevant question will be: how many problems can be simultaneously solved or avoided? How can both the abundance of people

and the scarcity of nature be addressed by making the right initial choices?

The answer, we suggest, is to quickly move out of an industrial economy wasteful of both nature and population, and head for a regenerative economy mindful of resources and in need of people. An economy that is based on the assumption that there are 'free goods' in the world – pure water, clean air, hydrocarbon combustion, virgin forests, veins of minerals – will favour large-scale, energy- and material-intensive production methods, and labour will remain marginalized. In contrast, if an economy discourages profligate resource use and privileges non-fossil resources, a decentralized and smaller-scale production pattern requiring more labour and intelligence is likely to prosper. In both North and South, the potential for higher resource productivity presents business and governments with an alternative scenario: making radical reductions in resource use, while at the same time raising rates of employment.

Rather than laying off people, greater gains can come from laying off wasted kilowatt-hours, barrels of oil, and pulp from old-growth forests. People will in part have to substitute for natural resources; such an economy, evolving with a minimum input of nature, will have to rely much more on the strength, the skill and the knowledge of people. Indeed, it will be post-industrial in the true sense of the word: finding new balances between hardware, biological productivity and human intelligence.

This is even more true when it comes to changing the resource base altogether, from fossil-based to solar-based energies and materials. Most countries and localities, finding themselves at the downstream end of the chain, are strangled by the high cost of fuel and resources imported from abroad. They pay, but most gains and jobs arise elsewhere. However, a change in resource base would turn this logic around. Reliance on photo-voltaic energy, wind, small hydro power, and bio-mass of all sorts implies much shorter supply chains, not just for the resource, but often also for the conversion technology involved. As a result, income and jobs would largely stay at the local/regional level, recycling money in local economies. Furthermore, as sunshine and bio-mass are geographically diffused,

they lend themselves to decentralized structures of production and use, unlike fossil resources which are concentrated in a few places, giving rise to centralized large-scale structures. The industrial pattern of squandering nature instead of cherishing people would be reversed; a solar economy holds the prospect of both including people and saving resources.

Southern countries have the opportunity to leapfrog into a solar economy, much before and much more solidly than northern economies. In fact, it would be self-defeating for them, in terms of livelihoods and in terms of the environment, to go through the same stages of industrial evolution as the northern countries did. For instance, southern countries face important decisions about introducing infrastructures such as energy, transport, sewage and communication systems, the introduction and maintenance of which, in industrial

countries, have caused the earth's resources to dwindle. Today, many southern countries are still in a position to avoid this unsustainable course, opting without further delay for infrastructures which would allow them to embark on a low emission and resource-light trajectory. This is equally the case for 'transition' countries, where it is often preferable to build new infrastructure systems rather than upgrading the aging ones. Investment in infrastructure such as light rail systems, decentralized energy production, public transport, grey-water sewage, locally adapted housing, regionalized food systems, transport-light urban settings, etc., could set a country on the road towards cleaner, less costly, and more equitable development patterns. Such a decision represents a unique chance for achieving greater economic independence, decades after political independence has been accomplished.

Note

- 1 Taken from part 2 of *The Johannesburg Memo: Fairness in a Fragile World*, Memorandum for the World Summit on Sustainable Development published by the Heinrich Böll Foundation and reproduced with the permission of Wolfgang Sachs and the Heinrich Böll Foundation. Please see

<www.joburgmemo.org> for the full text.

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