In Johannesburg, a shift in emphasis on sustainable development

At the World Summit on Sustainable Development, governments reaffirm the basic agenda of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio while stressing an urgent need to fight poverty; a new partnership with civil society is forged.

JOHANNESBURG - Since the term "sustainable development" was coined in the late 1980s by the World Commission on Environment and Development, many have identified a distinct tension between the two halves of the phrase, with the need to promote development on the one hand, and the need to protect the environment on the other.
documents agreed to in 1992, stressed the importance of protecting the natural environment, by establishing a "global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem."

But the final documents agreed to by governments at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the 10-year follow-up to Rio held here 26 August-4 September 2002, are much more focused on poverty eradication and attendant concerns, such as water supply, food and agriculture, and the need to generate more energy (albeit as cleanly as possible).

"The deep fault line that divides human society between the rich and the poor and the ever-increasing gap between the developed and developing worlds pose a major threat to global prosperity, security and stability," states the Johannesburg Declaration, the Summit's final political statement.

The Declaration also states that sustainable development is built on three "interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars" - economic development, social development, and environmental protection - which must be established "at local, national, regional and global levels."

According to the United Nations, the Johannesburg Summit - as the WSSD came to be called - was the biggest ever UN conference, bringing together 104 heads of state and government. A total of 191 countries participated in the Summit, and some 21,340 accreditation passes were issued. Some 22,000 delegates also registered for the parallel Civil Society Forum of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

Much was expected from Johannesburg, especially in terms of concrete commitments from governments. On that score, however, many were disappointed. By and large, the governments represented at Johannesburg mainly reaffirmed or reiterated commitments they had previously made at the Millennium Summit in 2000 and other recent UN conferences.

To be fair, some new targets were devised in the areas of fresh water protection, biodiversity, and the promotion of sanitation. And more than US$25 billion in funding for development assistance and/or environmental projects was announced by governments around the world in connection with the Summit, according to the United Nations.

On another level, however, the Johannesburg Declaration and the Summit's Plan of Implementation show perhaps more than anything else how the global understanding of sustainable development has broadened and, in some ways, been redefined since Rio, particularly in terms of the links between poverty, environmental protection, and the use of natural resources.

"We reaffirm our pledge to place particular focus on, and give priority attention to, the fight against the worldwide conditions that pose severe threats to the sustainable development of our people," the Declaration said. "Among these conditions are: chronic hunger; malnutrition; foreign occupation; armed conflicts; illicit drug problems; organized crime; corruption; natural disasters; illicit arms trafficking; trafficking in persons; terrorism; intolerance and incitement to racial, ethnic, religious and other hatreds; xenophobia; and endemic, communicable and chronic diseases, in particular HIV/AIDS, malaria and tuberculosis."

Sylvia Karlsson, science coordinator at the International Human Dimensions Program on Global Environmental Change, said both the process and text at Johannesburg show an increased awareness of the complexity of fostering sustainable development.
so-called 'three pillars' of sustainable development, and for the vertical complexity, in terms of involvement of all governance levels, local, national, regional, and global," said Dr. Karlsson, who is also secretary of the Bahá'í-inspired International Environment Forum. "The Johannesburg Summit brings the decade of large conferences to a full circle, incorporating a greater realization of the interconnectedness of the issues facing humanity."

That sense of interconnectedness was echoed in the speeches of the heads of state and government gathered at the Summit.

"[R]ecognition has grown that, indeed, the world has grown into a global village," said Thabo Mbeki, President of South Africa, who served as the Summit's chairman. "The survival of everybody in this village demands that we develop a universal consensus to act together to ensure that there is no longer any river that divides our common habitat into poor and wealthy parts.

"This indicates that the noble concept of human solidarity has, once again, regained currency as a driving force in the reconstruction and development of our common world," said President Mbeki in his speech at the start of the Summit.

**Specific Targets**

Reaffirming the general principles laid down 10 years ago in Rio, the main outcome document of Johannesburg also contains a number of specific targets and timetables designed to spur action on a wide range of issues. In addition to the Millennium Declaration goal to halve, by the year 2015, the proportion of the world's people whose income is less than one dollar a day, the Johannesburg Plan aims to halve the proportion of people who lack access to clean water or proper sanitation by 2015, to restore depleted fisheries by 2015, to achieve a "significant reduction" in biodiversity loss by 2010, and to find means to use and produce chemicals in ways that minimize harm to human health and the environment by 2020.

The Plan also commits countries to increase the use of renewable energy "with a sense of urgency," although it does not set any target date for this. Many groups expressed disappointment that governments did not make more concrete promises on renewable energy - and many were disappointed that governments did not make firm commitments to reduce the emission of greenhouse gases.
to move with "urgency" towards renewable energy is significant. And they noted that Russia and Canada announced they would ratify the Kyoto Protocol of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, giving new life to that effort to reduce CO2 emissions. As well, the decision to replenish the Global Environment Facility, which helps developing countries fund projects and programs that protect the global environment, with some US$3 billion in funds, was seen as important.

Many noted that the decision to hold the Summit in Africa, the least-developed continent, in some ways foreshadowed the renewed emphasis on the development side of the sustainable development equation. And, certainly, the speeches of the African leaders were among the most powerful at Johannesburg.

"Agenda 21 was designed to achieve a balance between the needs of people and their environment, between the basic requirements of the living, and our inescapable, collective obligations to future generations," said Benjamin Mkapa, President of Tanzania.

"But the poor, the hungry and the diseased cannot be expected to put the preservation of their environment above their struggle to survive this very day," continued President Mkapa. "So they mine soil nutrients, cultivate steep slopes, cut trees for wood fuel, and overgraze range lands. Many of them know this is harmful to the environment. But, for them, it is not the quality of life that is at stake, it is life itself. For them, sustainability is a secondary concern; the primary one is to get the wheel of development turning, and turning faster."

Observed Halldor Thorgeirsson, senior negotiator at the WSSD for the Government of Iceland: "One of the things that happened at Johannesburg was the rift between the North and the South, between developed and developing countries, that has been growing somewhat deeper since Rio, has been turned around a little bit. I think after the Johannesburg outcome, cooperation is going to be easier."

Dr. Thorgeirsson noted that the emphasis on fighting poverty also came with an important quid pro quo - an emphasis throughout the final documents on good governance. "The document carries a direct expression of the need for developing countries to improve their governance, fight corruption, protect human rights and those things," he said. "It is maybe not a precondition for development assistance, but kind of part of the deal."

**A new kind of partnership**

Another key outcome of the Johannesburg Summit was clear acknowledgment that sustainable development cannot be achieved without widespread collaboration among all sectors of global society.
In this regard, many participants and observers hailed the creation of a set of new "Type II" partnerships between governments, business, and civil society as one of the key outcomes of the Summit.

Designed to stress practical collaboration on the front lines of environment and development, some 280 such partnerships were launched at the Summit. They include actions like those embodied in an initiative to collect bicycles in Europe to refurbish and sell in Africa, so as to reduce CO2 and alleviate poverty. Or a plan involving Asian governments and wildlife groups aimed at recognizing and protecting landing sites for migratory birds. Or the creation of a public/private network in the South Pacific to help protect coral reefs and associated fisheries.

"In terms of long term significance of the Johannesburg process, it has established these new kinds of relationships, these new forms of networks and wider partnerships, that bring together the private sector, civil society, government, and international agencies to work together on practical projects that really seek to make a difference," said Arthur Dahl, a former deputy assistant executive director for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

The term "Type II" is meant to set such agreements off from traditional "Type I" agreements that run government-to-government. The Rio Declaration and Agenda 21 are considered to be Type I agreements, as are the Johannesburg Declaration and the Plan of Implementation.

"The partnership approach is definitely a step forward," said Dr. Thorgeirsson, suggesting it offers a way around the deadlock that sometimes emerges because of the traditional emphasis at the UN on reaching consensus.

"The consensus process in many cases ends up with a sort of lowest common denominator in terms of what can be done, and in some areas the international community has been paralyzed," said Dr. Thorgeirsson, who is head of international affairs at Iceland's Office of Sustainable Development. "What has happened with these partnerships is that we are breaking out of that a
little bit, allowing those governments that agree on a certain set of actions to implement them - and also providing opportunities for the private sector and NGOs to work with them."

According to the UN, some US$235 million have been pledged in the Type II partnerships so far announced.

Beyond the new Type II partnerships, efforts were made to facilitate significant contact between so-called "major groups" of civil society - academics, local authorities, trade unions, scientists, businesses, indigenous people, women, and activist NGOs - and governments at all levels of the process.

The numbers tell part of the story. At Rio, only about 2,400 NGOs were accredited, in contrast to the some 8,000 representatives of major groups (including NGOs) accredited at Johannesburg.

As usual, the Summit featured a parallel NGO Forum, labeled the "Civil Society Forum." But at Johannesburg, the UN also created a third venue for interaction between governments and major groups at a place called the Ubuntu Village, which featured exhibits, cultural performances, and other events to help facilitate new partnerships for sustainable development.

As well, representatives of major groups were given fairly extensive time to address the Summit's main plenary sessions, and four special "Round Table" dialogues were held between heads of state, international agencies, and representatives of major groups.

"There was a lot of contact between groups who don't usually talk to each other," said Dr. Karlsson, noting that the Round Table sessions brought heads of state into direct contact with the heads of multinational corporations, top scientists, and NGO activists.

Indeed, another key difference between Rio and Johannesburg was the degree to which business leaders - and other groups, such as scientists and farmers - were present and involved. While many of the Type II partnerships are led by traditional environmental NGOs, many are led by large corporations - and, indeed, many involve extensive collaboration between both groups.

"Action starts with governments," said UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan in his speech to the Summit. "The richest countries must lead the way. They have the wealth. They have the technology. And they contribute disproportionately to global environmental problems. But governments cannot do it alone.

"Civil society groups have a critical role, as partners, advocates and watchdogs. So do commercial enterprises. Without the private sector, sustainable development will remain only a distant dream. We are not asking corporations to do something different from their normal business; we are asking them to do their normal business differently."