
DEVELOPING COUNTRIES AND THE PLOT TO SAVE THE EARTH:

Towards A Post-Johannesburg Agenda for the South

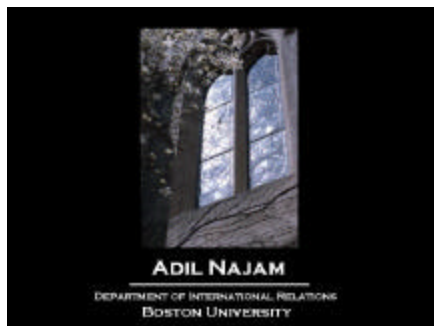


MANAGING INTERDEPENDENCE IN A
COMPLEX WORLD

Bellagio, April 2002

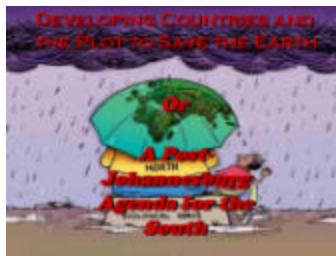


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The 1992 Earth Summit, held at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, was supposed to usher in a realignment of global priorities so that ecological and developmental priorities would be tackled simultaneously. This alleged shift in global priorities was especially important for the developing countries of the South who have long demanded a shift in global priorities with a greater focus on equitable development and were quite willing to make the bargain that eventually got labeled ‘sustainable development.’

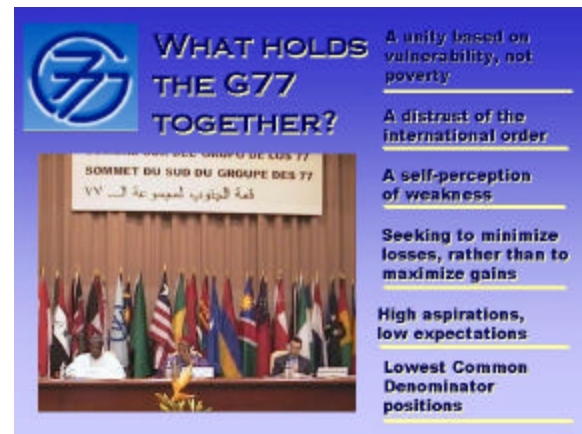
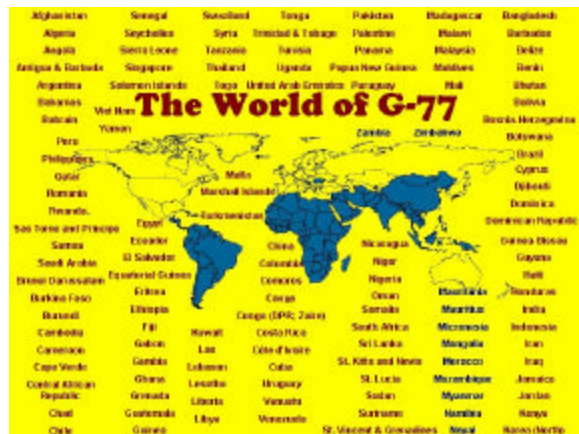
Later this year, in August 2002, world leaders will meet once again to assess the progress on the ‘Rio Promise’ and evaluate how well we have done on this count. This presentation seeks to do exactly the same from the perspective of the developing countries. How does the South evaluate the progress since Rio? Why is it so cynical about the prospects since Johannesburg? And what should it do in the post-Johannesburg phase of global environmental policy and politics? This presentation will tackle each of these three questions.



First, however, a few words about what the ‘South’ is. Building on the author’s earlier works, this presentation begins with the contention that there is, in fact, a ‘South’; that the South is best understood as the political collective of countries that consider themselves marginalized

from the international system because they are placed at its periphery rather than an economic collective of the poorest countries, and that the Group of 77 (G77;

now with 133 members) is the best institutional expression of this unity. Moreover, the G77 remains a highly diverse, perpetually weak, but remarkably resilient collective of the South that has survived for over 30 years because its developing country members perceive a real felt-need for it.



In particular, it is a unity that stems from a strongly shared sense of vulnerability rather than of poverty. It is a unity rooted in mutual distrust of the existing world order and a mutual self-perception of weakness, which leads to the urge to stand together as a means to enhance individual power through collective bargaining. As a result, the developing countries of the South tend to seek the minimization of losses rather than the maximization of gains. As one might expect, they tend to be risk-averse negotiators and hiding behind their high aspirations for systemic change are rather modest and low expectations of this ever happening. Moreover, given their high diversity and strong desire to remain united, the G77 tends to habitually fall into the ‘lowest common denominator’ trap where they have to sacrifice their high collective aspirations to keep up (or ‘down’) with those in the collective who are unwilling or unable to pay the cost of serious change.

Within the context of global environmental policy all of the above has meant that the South has sought to achieve its erstwhile goals of a New International Economic Order (NIEO) within the now emerging



New International Environmental Order – in both cases what interests the South is the possibility of a real global agenda change. It is in this context that the South signed on to the quest for Sustainable Development, within which it saw the possibility of change and, more importantly, of more just and fair global development. While the South has generally not had a tremendous impact on this new politics, it should be noted that the South has exerted a type of ‘negative’ power – while it does not exert the power to gain that which it demands it has been generally successful in using its unity to stall that which it does *not* want. However, this has further pushed it towards a reactive strategy in global environmental policy rather than trying to proactively influence the global environmental agenda.



What, then, did the South make of the Rio Earth Summit? Two things need to be remembered in this regard that are all too easy to forget. First, even though few people recall it now it should be stressed that the developing countries of the South had come to Rio reluctantly. They had not

wanted the conference in the first place and came to it with many apprehensions and fears about how the environment would become one more barrier and excuse



to keep the South from realizing its development potential. Second, even though they eventually became champions of the concept, sustainable development was NOT the South's term of choice. Indeed, it was a term that the North propagated as a way of saying that environment and development could, in fact, coexist and mutually

reinforce each other.



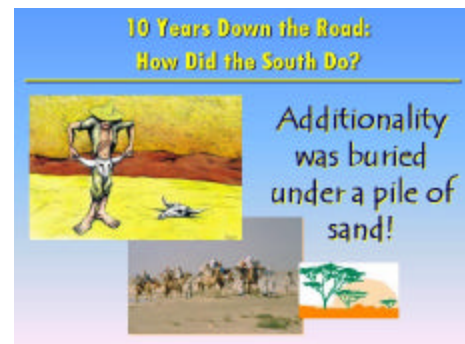
One should, note, therefore that the memories that the North and South have of the Rio Earth Summit are very different ones. For most in the North, it was a coming



together of the world – much like Noah's Ark – to save the planet from its ecological doom. For most in the South, it was a call for some (i.e. the developing countries) to sacrifice their development aspirations to save the planet from the sins of over consumption and waste – much like Jesus's cross.

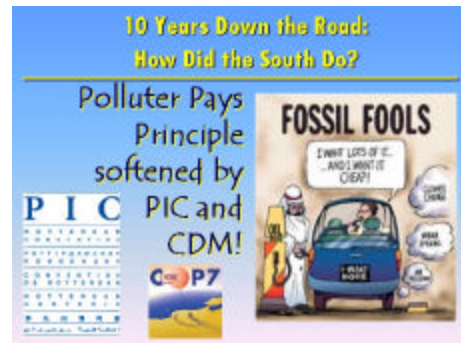
Yet, there was an explicit policy bargain made at Rio. For the South this bargain was based on some pretty explicit policy and legal edicts; most notably the concepts of additionality, common but differentiated responsibility and of the polluter pays principle. How does this bargain stack up today, ten years down the road from Rio. Looking at it from the South's perspective, the picture is rather bleak.

- The concept of additionality was the first and bloodiest casualty. The Desertification Convention – called the first Sustainable Development Convention by some – essentially threw it out of the door by refusing to put in any financial arrangement and, instead, inventing the idea of a 'mechanism' that would assist through a clearinghouse that would better utilize existing funds for desertification related activities.
- Recent debates on climate change have now brought into question the idea of common but differentiated responsibility with the US government and many

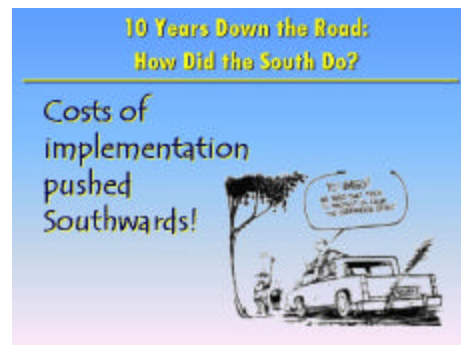


Northern NGOs insisting that developing countries must take on targets within the Kyoto regime despite the fact that their per capita emissions remain miniscule in comparison to those in the North.

- The ideas imbedded in the Clean Development Mechanism of the Kyoto protocol as well as the Prior Informed Consent regime bring into question the idea of Polluter Pays Principle by now imposing the final responsibility for real action not on the polluter but on the non-polluters in the South; all in the name of market efficiency.



- In these and many other cases the real costs of implementing global environmental action have been steadily pushed Southwards and it is there that the real action has taken place over the last ten years; and most often with Southern money itself.



- In addition to all of the above, there has been a treaty proliferation in the last ten years that is imposing significant costs in terms of negotiation fatigue on the South. Ever

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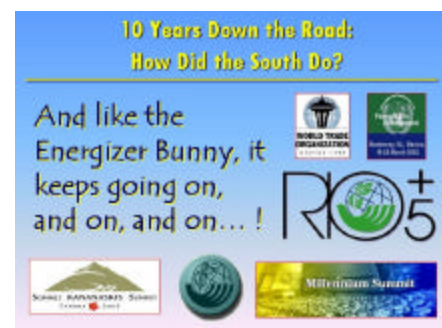
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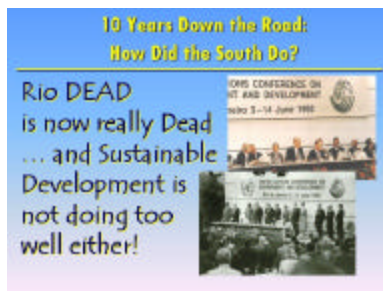
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are placing unreasonable burdens of the stretched capacities of the South, effectively leaving them immobile and incapacitated in these negotiations.



The result of all of this is that from the South's perspective, the legacy of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development (Rio DEAD) looks very bleak. This feeling of post-Rio helplessness is only compounded by the fact that not only does every other actor in the international system think that the South is without influence on the international environmental system but the South itself has a rather low opinion of its own prospects and potentials in these negotiations. This, in combination with the South's perceived lack of progress since Rio, leads to the expectation that we will again see a defensive negotiation strategy from the developing countries at Johannesburg. It is not that everything has gone wrong for the South since Rio; but enough has that the developing countries will approach Johannesburg less than enthusiastically.



However, there are at least two critical differences in terms of how the South at Johannesburg will be very different from the South at Rio. First, unlike at Rio, the South *has* now accepted and internalized sustainable development as its own agenda. This means that this idea has no longer to be 'sold' to the South; developing countries are now beginning to demand it themselves. Second, and again unlike at Rio, this time it is the South that wants this conference to succeed even more than the North. This means that the dynamics at Johannesburg are significantly different from those at Rio – while the legacy of inaction suggests

that the South will be lukewarm about the agenda the new change in Southern perceptions of sustainable development means that the developing countries might well push for a proactive agenda on this issue if they get any support from others.

How, then, could the South move to a more proactive strategy for Johannesburg that builds on its new desire for Sustainable Development? Elements of a seven-step process for the South are suggested here.

- #1. **Define a Proactive Strategy.** This has to be done by the South itself and cannot be done by academics or environmental groups in the North. The South is the demandeur of change and it must also has to be responsible for defining the elements of change.
- #2. **Clean Up Your Own Act.** In order to retain its moral high position, the developing countries have to themselves first clean up tehri own environment. There is plenty that the South needs to do at home for totally domestic reasons. This must not be delayed.
- #3. **Halt Negotiation Proliferation.** The South should demand a moratorium on expanding the global environmental negotiation agenda. The priority should be on implementing that which has been agreed first. Moreover, there should be an effort toward better

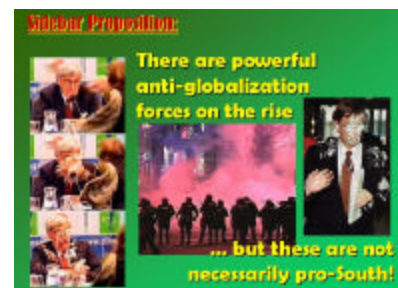


coordination between existing regimes and instruments and toward harmonizing the myriad regimes. This could possibly be done by moving towards a General Agreement on Environment and Development (GAED).

- #4. **Expand Forums for Pursuing Agendas.** However, even as the South seeks to limit new negotiations it should seek to expand the forums in which it can advance its interests. Including, for example, the World Trade Organization (WTO) as a place where sustainable development issues are pursued.



- #5. **Make Friends and Influence People.** The South needs all the help it can get in advancing its sustainable development agenda. Its best ally in this is civil society. Both within the South and outside. Instead of resisting the new influence of civil society actors, the South should embrace these new actors since it has a natural convergence of interests with them – in terms of sustainable development as well as in terms of realigning the global system. However, the South needs to realize that not all anti-system voices need necessarily be pro-South; just as not all environmental voices need necessarily be pro-sustainable development.



- #6. **Redefine Power.** The South's perception of its own weakness may be amongst its most telling weaknesses. This is not to say that the South should deny its weaknesses in the system. However, an assumption of

powerlessness can lead to that reality.

The goal of the South should be to
redefine and enhance its power.

Through alliances; through preparation;
through moral persuasion; through
defining alternatives; etc.

- #7. **Organize Yourself.** Ultimately, the single most important prerogative for the South is to invest in its own organization. That is the ultimate strength and that will be most important to becoming a proactive, rather than a reactive, player in global environmental politics.

