



The Johannesburg Impasse: Searching For A Glimmer Of Hope At The World Summit

– James Bernard Quilligan

Johannesburg – This bustling international crossroads – commercial and financial gateway to Southern Africa – sits unevenly atop a series of abandoned gold mines. Lacking a familiar grid of right-angled blocks, foreigners easily lose their way on the hodge-podge of streets and superhighways in this wending metropolis, but eager citizens are everywhere on hand to redirect travelers with animated verbal maps, friendly though often misinformed: 90% of the population does not own cars, and with no public bus or train service available, people seldom leave their neighborhoods and explore the city.

There is still a heady whiff of political emancipation in the air, even a smile on the faces of the poor. The area's 6 million trees and dark red soil belie the fact that this sprawling place, larger in area than New York or London, was a desolate wilderness not so long ago. Founded in the 1880s during the fabled South African gold rush, this former mining camp has boomed into a gleaming tapestry of cultures, lifestyles, customs, and activities. Now an ultramodern city of over a million people, it stands as a model for the rest of South Africa and, many hope, for all of Africa.

Look just beyond the towering bank and commerce buildings, past the billboards that profile light-skinned black women with shampoo products for mainstream consumers, and there indications of a city riddled with the profound contradictions of its history. Outside the fancy stores and thriving restaurants, the jobless are peddling cheap Zulu figurines and colorful foil-wrapped sweets to drivers at each stoplight, in defiance of signs posted everywhere that ban hocking. There are boys in tattered green trousers and red Nike ballcaps slipping stealthily up a back alley at sundown, prying open the window of a flat to grab no more than a mango fruit, perhaps, or a chicken leg. How do locals feel about the Vegas-style gambling casinos near the airport, those fast-food franchises that are popping up on every other corner of this City of Gold, or these AIDS clinics filled with orphaned children living out their last painful days? A visitor can't help but wonder who will benefit more from the continent's latest economic plan, NEPAD – New Partnership for Africa's Development – the local poor or the overseas investors.

The skyline appears mountainous, until one gets a close-up look. The land along the highways is scarred with the flat-topped mounds of mining dumps, and flanked by deep ravines. This ravaged landscape is a poignant reminder of the brutal Afrikaner social hierarchy that employed cheap labor from tribal villages to extract gold from these mines, segregated the workers and their families into dismal shacks in outlying townships, and enforced that violent racial division through a long and bloody century, until the end of apartheid in 1990 and the democratic election of Nelson Mandela in 1994 to the Presidency of his beloved 'rainbow nation'.

An inspired location for the \$51 million World Summit on Sustainable Development, without question. South Africa, like all of Africa and much of the world, is struggling to find a balance between the challenges of racial diversity, sustainable development, and social, political, and economic development. It's all here in microcosm. The deeply impoverished and polluted neighborhood of Alexandra is just a stone's throw from the World Summit's official conference venue in the beautiful suburb of Sandton, with its smart clothing and furniture shops, its elegant jewelry stores, and air-conditioned dining places of glass, marble, and granite. And Soweto – the notorious ghetto at the center of the anti-apartheid struggle – is just down the road from WSSD's parallel event, the Global People's Forum, a large conclave for international representatives from civil society. At this summit, blind ignorance is no excuse: delegates will not have to travel far to witness the extremes of green and blighted ecologies, unsustainable lifestyles and social inequalities.

Rio + 10: World Summit On Sustainable Development

The 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro galvanized fresh hope that the money and effort wasted in the Cold War might be channeled instead into saving the planet. The Earth Summit launched many constructive programs – the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21, the UN Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Statement of First Principles, the Commission on Sustainable Development, and the Global Environmental Facility. The goals for sustainable development – economic well-being, social equity, and environmental security – have become a driving force, influencing millions of citizens and social activists, as well as many businesses and governments.

But most of the objectives that nations set for themselves were not met during the ten years since the big conference in Brazil. The North-South 'agreement' crafted at Rio – the pledge of development aid in return for environmentally sound policies – was never fulfilled. A spectacular

increase in world trade, along with a dearth of international programs to ensure that government commitments to development and environment were carried out, marked the post-modern 90s as an era of financial irony and political ambiguity. Rather than watch the peace dividend trickle down to poor countries, aid flows actually shrank without the competitive political friction generated by the Cold War, while donor countries refused to take responsibility for their unsustainable patterns of production and consumption.

But there were reasons for optimism going into JoBurg. The Millennium Summit in 2000 in New York had established ambitious goals and timetables for reducing by half the number of people living in absolute poverty before 2015, and also for slashing illiteracy rates and child mortality by that date. The global trade negotiations in Doha, Qatar, in 2001, sought to dismantle unfair trade and remove protectionist barriers that thwart the export of goods from the developing world. The Financing for Development Summit at Monterrey, Mexico, had also pledged significant amounts of private and government monies earlier this year to help break the cycle of poverty in developing nations. Expectations were high that the Johannesburg Summit – Rio+10, as it was called during the planning stage – would commit governments to concrete targets for the financial pledges they'd made during the Rio Decade.

The largest conference ever convened by the United Nations, the World Summit on Sustainable Development was a landmark opportunity to refocus the international attention on access to water and sanitation, renewable energy resources, fair trade, financing for development, corporate responsibility, and equitable globalization. From every part of the world, delegates descended on Johannesburg: 22,000 representatives in all, including 109 heads of state and 9,000 government officials from 195 nations; 8,000 representatives from non-governmental organizations, labor, women's and human rights groups, and indigenous peoples; 4,000 journalists; and nearly 1000 members of the business community.

In ten days of tumultuous negotiations, including round-table talks, plenary sessions, ministerial conferences, and informal discussions, representatives of countries negotiated the sustainability of the planet. And? When the smoke clears and a new generation emerges from the shambles of these bewildering times, history will record that little of significance happened at this giant jamboree. Unable to pin rich nations down on firm, time-bound targets, there were few glittering breakthroughs, no shining moments. The text of the 70-page Plan of Implementation failed to bridge the widening schism between poor and developed nations over issues of poverty and environmental protection, leaving the future uncertain.

The Millennium Summit had already established that by 2015, the number of people – estimated at 1.2 billion – without access to safe water in developing nations would be cut in half. The most significant new commitment made at Johannesburg was to add access to decent sanitation – which affects 2.4 billion people – to that earlier goal. Contaminated water, poor sanitation facilities, unhygienic surroundings, and dirty energy use such as the burning of cow-dung, now result in the deaths of more than 2 million people every year. Of course, faster economic growth would help poor countries solve these problems on their own, but disease itself thwarts that growth. Diarrhea, jaundice, cholera, and other water-borne diseases prevent the rural poor from working to their fullest potential, and even those who avoid getting sick spend countless hours a week fetching polluted water from far-off locations.

In spite of the new commitment on sanitation at the World Summit, the pledge is not legally binding, no money is available at the moment to meet the target, nor is there an action plan on how to carry it out. Global water usage has increased 600% since 1900, and over two billion people currently face water shortages. To meet the new goals for clean water and sanitation by 2015, the UN estimates that the world will have to increase its yearly investment in water-related infrastructure from \$16 to \$23 bn (US). Civil society groups worry that with rapid globalization and competing claims on the world's water resources by private investors, universal access to water as a public good will be in jeopardy. Even if business makes clean water and toilets widely available in developing nations, many NGOs wonder how poor people will be able to pay for those vital public services. In spite of these weaknesses, the commitment to world sanitation was the major achievement at the summit.

Energy Targets: Inching Forward Where Giant Steps Are Needed

It is commonly assumed that, on most global issues, the 'North-South divide' pits the rich G-8 nations – which control more than 80% of the world's gross national product, world trade, domestic investment, and research and development – against the poor developing nations, which hold over 80% of the world's population. But the World Summit exposed other dominant fault lines and strategic coalitions newly surfacing in the 21st century. In several key areas – including energy, sanitation, climate change, agricultural subsidies, bio-tech foods, and globalization – the European Union repeatedly broke ranks with the United States, and many developing nations were found wrangling among themselves as well. By far, the biggest geopolitical disagreement at the summit was over the setting of targets and timetables for increasing the proportion of the world's energy supplied by renewable sources.

At the heart of this debate, of course, is the controversy over global warming. Many scientists say that the 1990s were the hottest decade since measurements began in the 19th Century, and that without a slowing of fossil fuel usage, earth's average temperature may well rise 6° Celsius by the year 2100. Climate change is already causing sea levels to rise and producing drought in portions of Asia and Africa.

The irony is striking: while the excessive energy consumption of the industrialized North contributes heavily to climate change and ozone layer depletion, nearly 2 billion people in the South have no access at all to modern energy supplies like electricity. As a result, people in poor nations spend a good deal of time collecting dirty and unhealthy fuels like animal mass and wood, and burning them in poorly ventilated houses. The lack of access to clean energy resources has a negative impact on health and adds significantly to ecological degradation in the developing world. The International Energy Agency estimates that, given the current rate of development in energy programs, there will still be 1.4 billion people without electricity by 2030.

Supporters of sustainable development point out that the world economy is resource-intensive, driven by fossil fuels, and geared primarily towards economic growth, with little focus on the needs of the poor. One way to help such people, most of whom live in remote rural areas, is to shift from massive electrical grids to decentralized micropower generators that draw energy from environmental sources such as wind and sunlight. Proponents say the best solution is cleaner fossil fuel technologies, improved energy efficiency, and a greater use of renewable energy sources. Green energy, they believe, would be reliable, affordable, and would increase production with far less pollution than carbon-based fuels.

Heading into the summit, the European Union proposed increasing the amount of renewable energy in the world's total energy supply from 2% at present to 15% by 2010. Another group of countries, led by Brazil and backed by Latin American, Caribbean, and other small island nations, would also like the world to obtain 10% of its energy from renewable sources by 2010. But government delegations from industrialized nations, allied with members of the Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries, blocked all moves to set targets on renewable energy. In a reversal of the geopolitics of the energy crisis of the 1970s, Iraq, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other Arab states, along with OPEC nations such as Venezuela, sided with the so-called JUSCANZ alliance – Japan, the United States, Canada, Australia, and New Zealand – to oppose binding targets for world energy production from renewable sources, and the gradual replacement of dirty fuels such as coal and oil in developing nations.

In this tactical convergence of North-South interests, wealthy oil-producing and oil-consuming nations staunchly opposed all international regulation of their domestic energy policies, a position supported by many poor nations, who fret that the added costs of renewable energy and environmental regulation would only delay their own goals of industrializing as rapidly as possible to eliminate poverty and spur local economic growth. When it became clear that the global targets for renewable energy were facing implacable opposition, the European Union, which already has 10% of its energy sources in renewable energy, joined with Brazil in announcing a 'coalition of the willing' – a campaign to promote voluntary national and international targets on renewable energy beyond the summit.

To satisfy the many supporters of green energy, the summit declared an 'urgent' commitment to the development and adoption of renewables in global energy production, along with a ten-year program to promote sustainable production and consumption, though neither proposal spelled out concrete measures for implementation or enforcement. The summit failed to set specific ecological goals in other areas as well. There was no hard target for halting and reversing the loss of natural environmental resources. Delegates failed to reach firm agreement on the phasing out of \$250-350 bn (US) in subsidies that world taxpayers currently provide for technologies which inhibit sustainable development, such as coal and nuclear power. An attempt to set up a new UN agency for renewable energy and energy efficiency – a World Environmental Organization – was rejected out of hand. And efforts to link human rights with ecology were also undermined by the United States, Saudi Arabia, China, and other developing nations.

Yet, the energy ministers of China and Estonia drew cheers from many summit delegates by announcing that their governments had ratified the Kyoto treaty, aimed at sharply reducing pollutants which trap heat in the atmosphere. Russia and Canada dropped diplomatic hints that they, too, may soon ratify the agreement. This would mean that the protocol would come into force, in spite of opposition from the United States. America's President Bush, supported by the oil, coal, and logging industries, has been widely criticized for refusing to sign the Kyoto pact on greenhouse emissions. US Secretary of State Colin Powell, Bush's representative in Johannesburg, was heckled as he spoke to a plenary session on the final day, underscoring the bad feelings that lingered when the summit failed to adopt a clear target on renewable energy.

Private-Public Partnerships: What Is Good For Business Is Good For Everyone

In recent years, the United Nations has been encouraging multinational corporations and non-governmental organizations to supplement government aid for developing nations through greater cooperation in program financing. As a result, many cross-sectoral alliances have been forming, both among businesses, and between business, non-governmental, and local community groups. The UN proudly unveiled plans for 230 of these so-called 'type-two' partnerships at the summit – cooperative arrangements that do not involve governments (governments are included in 'type-one' alliances). In the absence of firm government commitments to targets and regulatory frameworks, some observers viewed the creation of these unique corporate/non-profit partnerships as the crowning success of the summit.

The United Nations believes that such collaborations demonstrate how governments, business, and civil society are increasingly willing to cooperate, pooling their resources and expertise to make the developing world a place where private investment can help in fighting poverty and preserving natural resources, while making a decent profit. International business groups maintain they are not opposed to government oversight of these activities, but that corporations are ultimately their own best regulators, in conjunction with local communities.

The private-public partnerships announced at the World Summit, representing \$235 m (US) in resources, run the gamut from promising to dubious. Many NGOs, for example, hailed the partnership of the trailblazing environmental group, Greenpeace, with the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, to create an international regulatory framework to combat global warming, using the Kyoto protocol as the basis for a new set of common rules. In another alliance of note, a group of researchers led by the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization, announced plans for a Global Conservation Trust to establish new gene banks for seeds, aimed at reversing the dwindling genetic diversity of the world's crops.

On the other hand, partnerships set up to introduce genetically modified organisms (GMOs) through official aid and credits to poor nations in southern Africa – where famine is rampant – were viewed as taking advantage of the region's hunger crisis to push these bio-engineered foods, the safety of which is a matter of considerable dispute. Likewise, a partnership between the UN children's agency UNICEF and the transnational hamburger chain, McDonald's, to distribute collection boxes at fast-food outlets this Halloween during McDonald's World Day for Children, was jeered as a cynical affront to the health and welfare of children. There is a perception abroad that the United Nations may be losing its independence as a public institution: eyebrows were raised when it allowed numerous corporate booths and ad displays into the summit venues, and especially when the UN permitted its good offices to be used like a brand name for the endorsement of commercial products involved in many of these new partnerships.

This point was driven home by the structure of the summit itself. Some NGOs noted that by promoting private-sector partnerships, the UN might be losing its objectivity as a global watchdog, allowing big business to manipulate not just the outcome of the summit, but the very negotiating process. Civic groups fear that, as people's trust in government erodes and greater political space is opened for corporations, those corporations will move into the power vacuum left by indecisive heads of state and solidify their claims to global governance. The major difference between Rio and Johannesburg, say many NGOs, is that corporations are now driving the summit agenda.

For its part, the United States steadfastly opposes one of the main principles that emerged from the Rio Summit in 1992, known as common but differentiated responsibilities. The concept is that even though all countries have a role to play in resolving the world's environmental crisis – and, by extension, the global poverty crisis – some nations are more capable of shouldering a bigger financial burden than others. The US disavows any claims of historical or ecological debt to developing nations, which may involve the extraction of resources such as petroleum, minerals, forests, or marine and genetic materials, through processes that deposit toxic wastes, add to greenhouse gases, destroy ecosystems, undermine the bases for local sustenance, or contribute to poverty. Sooner or later, say a growing number of governments and civil society groups, the United States – the largest per capita user of many world resources, especially energy – will have to take a major leadership role in addressing these issues.

Rather than defend itself, or even acknowledge such standards of responsibility, the United States has gone on the offensive with a campaign to promote voluntary partnerships between business and civil society, claiming that initiatives for fighting poverty and cleaning up the environment are best left to the free market – not government commitments. "The problems are so immense," said John Turner, head of the US delegation in Johannesburg, "that governments cannot do it alone."

Though the concept of 'partnership' has obvious mass appeal, evoking feelings of group trust and social cooperation, not everyone shares the deterministic, 'less-government' approach advocated by the US. The European Union supports the Rio principles, and says that partnerships should "compliment commitments, not be a substitute for them." Some developing nations also view the new partnerships as a tactical way for rich nations to decrease the amount of official development assistance and technical help they are willing to extend.

Many NGOs believe that such collaborations, based on 'voluntary responsibility', provide a clever loophole for governments to shirk their responsibility and shift emphasis away from hard targets on poverty and ecology. This, in turn, gives big business new opportunities to profit from the privatization of basic services, such as water, housing, electricity, health care, and education, which, as recent history shows, leads to higher prices, which hit poor nations hardest. NGOs fear that, though the private sector may nominally agree to take responsibility for its social and environmental actions in developing countries, there are no global regulatory standards for transnational corporations – and virtually no monitoring at community levels – to hold foreign investors or cross-border business partners to account for their local activities in poor nations.

Whether or not this new era of cross-sectoral partnership is going to work depends on the motives of its various actors, say many NGOs, but one thing is clear. After the JoBurg Summit, they predict, there will be unrelenting public insistence for new standards of social responsibility on the part of all stakeholders doing business in developing nations – from private/non-profit partners and

shareholders, to employees and members of the community. The world will settle for nothing less, these civic groups say.

Crisis Of Ungovernable Markets: Would Making The Rich Poorer Make The Poor Richer?

Intended or not, the presence at the summit of dozens of trade ministers, more than 800 company representatives, and nearly 100 chief executives – from automakers to chemical firms to oil companies – had a chilling effect on summit negotiations, sending dire political signals through the NGO community. Because WTO rules trumped multilateral environmental agreements at every turn during the official discussions, many people claimed that the summit had been ‘hijacked’ by the World Trade Organization – that the interests of the poor and the environment were forced to take second place to free trade.

Frustration was evident in every hallway. Delegates were already unhappy with the UN’s veils of procedural red tape, its double registration processes, and the long queues they had to fend, ever-so-slowly, through layers of weapons-screening devices and South African security checkpoints. Stymied, as well, by the physical distance between conference venues, transportation delays, and a lack of broad civil access to high-level negotiations, some NGO representatives staged walkouts and held splinter-group meetings. After mounting cynicism, angry complaints, and flurries of press conferences, ten thousand delegates marched from the slums of Alexandra to summit headquarters in wealthy Sandton, protesting WTO subordination of the World Summit.

The WTO – established in 1994 – has been widely credited with stimulating global commerce through trade liberalization, but is also blamed for perpetuating imbalances in economic relations between rich and poor nations, indirectly contributing to poverty and environmental degradation. Many analysts complain of a double standard: that developed nations use the WTO to force poor countries to open their markets for rich-country products, but set high tariff barriers to keep poor nations from selling their own goods back to developed nations. Prices for sugar, coffee, cotton, and other commodities that farmers in poor countries can grow cheaply are skewed in the global marketplace by subsidies that G-8 consumers and taxpayers dole out to local farmers to drive their own agricultural prices even lower. The \$360 bn (US) spent annually by industrialized countries to subsidize domestic farm-producers costs the developing world at least \$100 billion a year in lost revenue.

Sustainable agriculture was also a point of contention in Johannesburg. Trade imbalances which favor the global agri-industry have led to the disruption of eco-systems, unsustainable farming practices, food scarcity, forced migrations, and the damaging effects of climate change. The use of chemicals in farming over decades has left poisonous residues in the ground and destroyed agricultural diversity. Dams, modern irrigation methods, and human encroachment on forests, grasslands, and wetlands, have also contributed to water scarcity, the loss of arable lands, and eco-system depletion. Nearly 2/3 of the world’s agricultural lands are affected by degradation.

Despite all this, trade considerations dominated the negotiations on ecological sustainability at Johannesburg. Far from promoting bio-diversity, said civil society groups, the JoBurg plan of implementation was saddled with compromises that left big business free to savage the environment. While the door was left open for the creation of binding international rules to require multinationals to improve their environmental practices, there was no commitment by governments to any regulatory mechanism. Governments refused to affirm the authority or autonomy of multilateral environmental agreements, acknowledging merely that environmental measures would continue to be explored at WTO. After a weak promise to phase out trade-distorting agricultural subsidies, officials cautioned that such negotiations are best left to the Doha ‘development’ round of trade talks. In spite of this politically-correct language, many NGOs noted, the current trade regime is geared rather towards the ‘development’ of rich country self-interest and corporate profit, and will simply perpetuate the present pattern of globalization, leading to further commercialization of natural resources, community-based knowledge, and public services.

Another of the basic concepts to emerge from the Rio Summit was the precautionary principle: that economic activity should be halted if there is evidence of it causing harm to the ecosystem or to human health, even if that damage is not yet scientifically conclusive. In its opposition to measures for reducing carbon emissions suspected to cause climate change, as well as its defense of the export of genetically modified food products, the United States has rejected the idea that precaution should be taken if something is not yet scientifically proved – particularly when it interferes with unfettered trade and market interests. Besides, says the US, it has no means of enforcing corporate accountability, nor would America want to inhibit corporate research and development, or its commercial application.

Instead of promoting new standards for corporate responsibility, or a plan of action for a global regulatory framework, the United States continued to insist at the summit that the financing of development must be contingent on ‘good governance’. Misguided policies and weak governance have been the real causes of poverty and environmental degradation, the US maintains, and future aid should go only to nations that are fairly governed, have stable economic policies, and are resolved to helping their citizens. Although this commitment to democracy is laudable, a nation can be refused trade opportunities or financing simply on the grounds – legitimate or not – that it does not abide by certain ‘acceptable’ standards of governance. With bilateral aid for development now politicized by such arbitrary government ideology, analysts say, developing nations have no choice but to turn to the free market for help. This, say many NGOs, paves the way for corporations to

privatize public assets under the guise of 'respectable' partnerships for development in poor nations.

Global Public Goods: Because You Can't Buy Another Planet

The World Summit – convening at a time of global recession and heightened security fears, when political leaders were preoccupied with their own domestic agendas – may not have been the optimum strategic moment to consider the future of the planet. Whatever the reason for their languor, governments of developed nations were especially reluctant to make real sacrifices in addressing the global problems of poverty and environmental degradation at Johannesburg. Almost every target or decision mentioned in the final text was a rehashing of goals already agreed to at previous summits or in existing declarations, including pledges to cut farm subsidies, increase aid, reduce infant deaths, lessen HIV infection, halve the number of people living on less than \$1 a day, improve access to sanitation and electricity, shrink Third World debt, slow biodiversity loss, and stem climate change.

With firm targets set for the next decade and beyond, agencies such as the World Bank, the UNDP, WHO, and donor countries could begin to orient themselves to concrete tasks, and a clear signal would be given to the private sector for research and development, as well as the investment community. With targets against which to measure progress, the world could also begin a new valuation of its global public goods – the public resources, services, and rights we all take for granted. Instead of focusing on the earth's long-term security (as the Brundtland Commission had challenged in 1987, to "meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs"), the summit degenerated into a desperate struggle to prevent governments from watering-down existing agreements on sustainable development.

Toxic and hazardous materials – often considered necessary elements of development – contribute to illness in millions. One billion people breathe unhealthy air, and three million people, mostly women, children, and the poor, die every year from the effects of air pollution. Developing nations like South Africa, where one in nine people have HIV/AIDS, need inexpensive, generic drugs to combat preventable and deadly diseases. Access to health education and basic primary health services is also lacking for millions. Given all these problems, the strongest commitment made in the area of public health at WSSD was to minimize the harmful effects of chemicals production by 2020.

Over 1.1 billion people live in abject poverty in Asia, Africa, and Latin America. The world's population is expected to be 8.3 billion by 2030, an increase of over 2 billion from today's levels. Most of the anticipated population growth is expected in developing countries. While millions of people die each year from starvation, food is stockpiled, dumped, and wasted in enormous quantities in many parts of the world to maintain profits and price levels. In thirty years, according to the UNFAO's food security study, *World Agriculture: Towards 2015/2030*, around 440 million people will still be chronically malnourished. 183 million people living in sub-Saharan Africa will account for nearly half of those going hungry in 2030. Famine is spreading in many parts of Africa today. Although a number of food-related partnerships were announced in Johannesburg, no major multilateral commitments on food assistance were initiated.

The push for rapid economic development is also destroying natural habitats and threatening biodiversity. Land degradation and desertification presently cost the world \$42 bn (US) a year in damage and lost income. About half of the world's tropical rainforests and mangroves have been destroyed, more than 11,000 species of animals and plants are threatened with extinction, 70% of coral reefs are in jeopardy, and 75% of marine fisheries have been fished to capacity. Despite these destructive trends, the strongest commitments the Summit was able to generate were a non-binding pledge to reduce the loss of biodiversity by 2010; the establishment of an international network of marine reserves by 2012 to safeguard endangered fish and wildlife; and new measures to curb illegal fishing and restore fish stocks by redoubling efforts to guard ocean areas before 2015.

As we look to the future, it is clear that not every human being will be able to live like the average European or North American does today. Developed nations have staked their prosperity on unsustainable energy use and environmental upheaval. India and China are now headed down the same resource-intensive road to development, and other poor nations are clamoring to follow on this well-worn path of industrialization and mass consumerism. The consumption of forests, energy, animals, crops and other bio-matter that humans extract from the earth each year is now 20% greater than the rate at which these resources can replenish themselves. According to a report by the US Natural Academy of Sciences, it now takes the earth 14.4 months to regenerate what people remove in 12 months, and the rate is increasing.

On top of this, if the scientific predictions of climate change come true, a century from now large areas of agricultural land will be converted into deserts, leading to an immense increase of poverty, migration, overpopulation, and ethnic conflicts in many parts of the world. This would result in the denial of basic human rights by dictatorial governments bent on squandering food and resources. Millions would be affected by grinding poverty and famine, by oppression and exploitation, by violence and crime, and the ravages of unjust wars.

Ending Global Apartheid: Legacy Of The Rainbow Nation

It's drizzling but the sun is poking through the clouds on the day after the conference. An exodus of summiteers – dejected by ten days of tough work with meager results – leaves the hotels and lodging areas. Along highway M-1 from Sandton to the airport, the billboard of a local financial services company screams 'IT'S A JUNGLE OUT THERE!' A passenger in the backseat of a taxi laughs, musing about how this swashbuckling shantytown had ever come to play host to a world summit. As a radio announcer recites a news wrap-up of the conference, the South African cab driver is wondering aloud if there is a difference between commercialization and development.

Suddenly, a band of colorful light appears through the windshield ahead, arching across the expanse of Johannesburg skyline, east to west, from horizon to horizon. This has to be, cries the awestruck traveler, the largest rainbow he's ever seen. After a good kilometer or two of quietude, both riders absorbed in the wondrous spectacle before them, the cabbie remarks that they could drive a long, long way and never reach the pot of gold at the other end. "It's worth the price," his passenger replies.

How will Johannesburg be remembered?

At its close, grim-faced officials from the European Union announced that JoBurg might be the last example of a giant summit that tries to solve global problems. Members of the business community observed that the outcome was the best that could be expected during a recession. Civil society groups lamented that few areas of consensus were found, pointing to many controversies, particularly over the role of commercial interests in environment and development policy. Said Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary-General, "We have to be careful not to expect conferences like this to produce miracles."

It would be a mistake to conclude that Johannesburg was a step backward. No meeting in world history has addressed so many global issues with so many global representatives from so many different social sectors. That, in itself, is a breakthrough. The World Summit will be remembered, not for its decisive action, but for its inclusiveness, for having widened the participation of actors beyond the Rio summit, giving more people access to the UN process than ever before.

Thousands of members of civil society met with government delegates and corporate representatives, and many met among themselves, providing them an opportunity to restate their messages to the world, to network, create new alliances, exchange fresh ideas, and plan new strategies. Their voices have been heard, and the echoes will ripple far into the future.

In 1992, there were about 6,000 non-governmental organizations operating across international borders. Today, there are at least 24,000 NGOs, spreading the cause of democracy around the planet. In another ten years, there may be 60,000 NGOs, offering a measure of representation for people involved in every kind of activity, cause, and issue on earth. Reverberations from the JoBurg summit will further amplify their concerns, reaching into local communities across the world. In coming years, there will be an even stronger push for progress on unmet commitments to global warming, water shortages, deforestation, loss of species, consumption of natural resources, public health, human rights, and the growing gap between rich and poor nations.

Though by no means equitable, the World Summit was representative. Involving government officials, business, and civil society in the negotiations – however imperfectly – was a significant step toward consensual decision-making, directly empowering those affected by global decisions as partners in the process of global governance. The Johannesburg Summit was a milestone on a journey that may lead, ultimately, to global representative democracy – a world people's assembly – and the UN is to be congratulated for nurturing this brave experiment, however inconclusive the results. Failure or not, it is a rich legacy that Johannesburg leaves to those preparing for the next world summit in 2012: to save humanity from poverty and save nature from humanity.