

Lars-Göran Engfeldt

*Towards a World Summit on Sustainable Development 2012  
“Uniting for Sustainability”, European Economic and Social Committee and Stakeholder  
Forum*

*Brussels, 1 October 2009*

*Overview of state of the implementation of the sustainable development commitments already  
taken in 1992 and 2002*

This is an important conference that takes place at a critical time. Only in the few years after the Johannesburg Summit, several sustainable development related problems, including climate change, hunger and biodiversity destruction have reached crisis proportions. There are serious scientific warnings that our generation faces the real risks of ecological tipping points as planetary boundaries are rapidly approaching because of humanity's continuing mismanagement of its ecological capital.

In these and other crisis areas there are already numerous agreed commitments in 1992 and 2002 in place. This is the dilemma.

To this must be added the burden of the stresses in the financial systems, which are related to the sustainability crisis.

However, let me begin my overview of implementation with its positive aspects. There have been important, particularly normative, achievements. There has been a significant growth in public awareness and an unprecedented increase in scientific understanding of the sustainable development issues. There has also been impressive institution building at all levels. In parts of the world, particularly western Europe, many of the dangerous pollution problems identified after World War II have now been brought under control.

A fully negotiated multilateral blueprint, although with imperfections, for needed changes to achieve sustainable development is in place since Rio – Agenda 21. Agenda 21 was not renegotiated in Johannesburg and remains the key undisputed international reference point. In contrast to the Stockholm Action Plan from 1972, Agenda 21 also encompasses actions at the national level. One bright spot is the follow-up at the crucial local level through local Agenda 21 activities that took place in 103 countries in the decade after Rio.

As an event in itself, the Johannesburg Summit was more successful than what it has been given credit for. An important step was taken there to integrate the three components of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – as mutually supporting and reinforcing pillars. Also, many time bound commitments were agreed. All this is testimony to a much deeper understanding of the development process than 40 years ago.

The achievements at the end of the process also signified an important phase in an evolving paradigm shift which has been strongly influenced by developments in science and international environmental law. The main effect is that the artificial, destructive conceptual split between man and nature has started to give way to a broader concept that focuses on the health and security of the planet itself, where humans interact in a sustainable way with other

species and complex ecosystems. This is a necessary underpinning for a vastly improved implementation on the ground that now urgently needs to take place. The increasing influence of the NGO sector and the movement towards increased Corporate Social Responsibility have also made important contributions.

Without the myriad of multilateral efforts since the end of the 1960's, the world would now be in a much worse situation. But we can see all too clearly that this has not kept up with the accelerating problems. Why is that so?

In short, after the Rio Conference political focus shifted from agenda development to actual implementation. This required bringing national priorities into sharper focus. In spite of the many commitments to bring about such change, including by most world leaders in Rio and Johannesburg, the process as a whole failed to influence these national priorities in any tangible way. The reasons are to be found in strong political and institutional constraints that favour shortsighted political action to protect perceived immediate, often economic, national interests. These factors have to a very large extent prevented the practical application on the ground of the normative achievements. As a result a huge implementation – and accountability – gap has been building up over the past decades, covering most of the substance agreed in Agenda 21. The explicit warning in Agenda 21 that inaction would narrow the choices for future generations has so far gone largely unheeded.

Looking at this more closely, we need to apply a Stockholm+40 focus because the key lessons stem from determining factors very early in the process. All have had a severe constraining impact on implementation of commitments taken in 1992 and 2002 up to the present day. I will draw attention to seven such lessons and will permit myself some generalizations in order to emphasize my points.

*1. There has been a continuous focus on symptoms rather than causes – repair rather than prevention*

Environment was established after Stockholm as an add-on policy area of limited political weight and not integrated in overall economic policy-making or in relevant policy areas. The report of the World Commission on Environment and Development in 1987 was instrumental in giving the concept of sustainable development international legitimacy, but the UN membership was not – and is still not - ready to embrace it operationally. Donors in the North feared increasing financial demands from the South and key actors in the South feared a green conditionality in development projects. At their core, these arguments reflected a reluctance, which persists today, in most countries to change established political and economic practices.

As a result, the post World War II sectorial governance structures at the national and international levels could never be challenged. They were already obsolete in the 1960's at the onset of the present era of rapidly increasing interdependence and globalization.

There has during all these years been a prevailing perception in capitals, contrary to political rhetoric, that the UN process in reality has not engaged national interests and priorities in any fundamental way. There are some signs that this may start to change. I am thinking of the climate negotiations and the on-going initiatives to calculate the true value of the environment and of ecosystem services, which could be an important step towards a modernized GNP.

*2. There is a general failure of national coordination*

From Stockholm onwards, agreed recommendations about the key significance of national coordination of policies that are relevant to sustainable development, nationally and internationally, have generally not been heeded.

*3. Insufficient attention has been paid to national policies of industrialized countries.*

Since Stockholm, the substantive focus has been on developing countries. Yet, a change to more sustainable production and consumption patterns must be driven by the richer countries who use a disproportionate part of the world's resources and who still continue to be global role models. This is in line with the principle of common but differentiated responsibility agreed in Rio and remains valid even with the later rise of several emerging economies.

The reasons that such a major flaw in agenda setting developed can be partly ascribed to political design of some leading industrialized countries such as the activities of the secret Brussels group in the early, crucial, agenda setting stage before the Stockholm Conference. Later, the South's dependence on financial assistance from the North has also been a major factor.

*4. No serious effort has been made to reconcile fundamental differences in North/South perspectives.*

The North, which was driving the agenda, has given priority to transboundary cooperation to deal with pollution problems. The South has given priority to its own desperately needed economic development, but its hopes to benefit financially from North's interest in the environment started to wane already in the 1980's. This situation bred a serious confidence problem, which increased gradually and has poisoned all international sustainable development negotiations since Rio. It has been further aggravated by good governance issues in the South. This overall confidence crisis remains the main obstacle on the road to more effective processes of international sustainable development governance.

The problem is characterized by a double polarization – the North-South schism that resulted both from the South's reluctance to give high priority to the environmental dimension and the OECD countries' lack of real political will to reduce their own pressure on the environment.

*5. The mandates of the institutional follow-up mechanisms of Stockholm and Rio have not been effectively implemented and there has also been a general failure of implementation on the ground of Multilateral Environment Agreements (MEA's) which derive from this process.*

Severe political limitations were placed in Stockholm and afterwards on UNEP, which made it impossible for it to carry out its UN system-wide policy guidance role – in spite of which UNEP nevertheless has made commendable contributions. Similarly problems have severely reduced the possibilities of CSD to effectively discharge its role to monitor the implementation of Agenda 21.

Persistent lack of accountability of governments and international organizations, as well as of enforcement capabilities, stand at the root of the implementation failure in the MEA structure.

*6. Serious issue fragmentation has run counter to the overall integrative vision of both Rio and Johannesburg.*

A serious issue fragmentation problem developed over time as a result of the efforts to reduce complex ecological problems to manageable levels by negotiating a multitude of MEA's (300 in all after 1972). Initial successes through rapid institution building with a single issue focus led to fragmentation, overlaps, loss of policy coherence and an increasing implementation deficit. This process also fed strong special national interests, leading to an increasing geographic dispersal of secretariats, which further obscured overall vision and leadership. Already by the time of Rio, governments could not maintain policy control over this vast structure and this problem has worsened since then.

*7. The US leadership abdication has weakened the follow-up of both Rio and Johannesburg.*

The United States, as the world's leading political and economic power, abdicated from its leadership role at Stockholm just as the global environment agenda grew in earnest in the beginning of the 1980's. By the time of Rio it took blocking positions in many key issues and did not substantively change its positions until very recently.

As I approach the final part of my presentation, let me draw attention to a few specific examples in the post-Rio period to illustrate some of the points that I have made.

*Implementation of Agenda 21*

The follow-up of Agenda 21 demonstrated the great political danger of making key commitments without guarantees that they can actually be met. It was completely clear in Rio that Agenda 21's implementation was seen by developing countries as directly related to industrialized countries' fulfilment of their financial and other commitments, particularly the 0,7% target of GNP for development assistance. The falling ODA levels in the 1990's slowly undermined the vision in Rio of a global partnership and, as I mentioned, it has not been possible to bridge the North-South divide since then.

*CSD*

It was clear from the beginning that the CSD, as a UN body without formal authority, could not overcome the fundamental North-South divide and its severe institutional limitations on its own. Given these major constraints, CSD managed to lay the basis for an honourable overall record up to Johannesburg. Its role to promote dialogue with NGO's and other major groups recognized in Rio proved to be particularly successful.

The CSD was also politically weakened because it mainly attracted environment ministers who generally had limited influence in their governments, yet it was highly dependent in its isolated position in the UN structure on high-level support from capitals. This complicated the implementation of the sustainable development concept and created ambiguity in the relationship between CSD and UNEP. There was also a lack of capacity for active follow-up of the CSD discussions. This was related to the continuing failure of governments to integrate sectorial issues into overall policy-making at the national level.

Another major weakness was that the highly relevant results of Rio were not linked to the ongoing reform process in the economic and social fields of the UN. In fact, through the

Agenda for Development report of the Secretary-General in 1994, a step in the opposite direction was taken. Thus, there was no movement to use Rio, in spite of its unprecedented high-level participation, as an inspiration or vehicle for the much-needed overall reforms that could lead to a merging of UN development agendas and programmes.

### *Counter forces to Agenda 21*

The globalizing economic trends accelerated sharply in the transformed geopolitical landscape after the Cold War. They created strong counter forces to the hard-fought broad and long-term insights that finally had been achieved through Agenda 21. Agenda 21 did not prevail over the short-term policies that the globalization process stimulated in the 1990's. This paradigm was characterized by a belief in free markets with a minimum of regulation and in increasing consumption as a desirable objective in itself. It also supported increased trade liberalization in the expectation that the market would solve all problems and that, through wealth generation, resources would be available for environmental protection.

These policies seemed to offer quick and easy solutions to the problems of development. Importantly, the short-term policies did not threaten accustomed lifestyles in industrialized countries. This meant that they would not require political leaders to make potentially unpopular choices. This also conserved the traditional power distribution within governments of major industrialized countries, where finance and foreign trade ministries exercised much greater influence than environment and development assistance ministries. However, globalization proved volatile and has not proved to be the answer to sustainable development.

### *The coherence – coordination paradox*

The substantive strength of the sustainable development agenda made itself strongly felt even in the generally disappointing post-Rio picture. An important development was that Rio stimulated the convening of a series of high-level global UN conferences in the 1990's that dealt with different development issues that cut across sectorial and institutional borders. As a result, by the turn of the millennium, the UN overall development agenda showed increasing process coherence in spite of the continued institutional fragmentation. With its adoption of the Millennium Development Goals, the MDG's, in 2000, the international community committed for the first time to achieving time-bound, measurable goals in a wider developmental context, which, at least in theory, embraced the sustainable development concept.

This landmark event generated a momentum which was strongly felt in several international negotiations that unfolded over the next two years. Several of these became substantively and politically linked to the Johannesburg process such as the Monterrey process on financing and the Doha trade negotiations. These had higher status in the capitals than the Johannesburg process.

The paradox is that improved coherence at the UN level was not matched by any improvement in national coordination. Each process brought together its own circle of negotiators and national interest groups with instructions from capitals only rarely harmonized with those given to the negotiators in other processes. This did not improve the overall national and international policy coherence that was the key to the success of the implementation focus of the Johannesburg Summit. In the end, in order to save the Johannesburg Summit from breakdown, it was decided to safeguard the integrity of

Monterrey and Doha. In a similar development, the G77 made progress in the International Environment Governance process before Johannesburg dependent on proportionate progress with regard to the economic and social pillars of sustainable development. All this signalled that the Johannesburg follow-up would confront great challenges.

The last example illustrate the challenges posed by the increasing complexity of the broad sustainable development agenda in place since Rio and Johannesburg. The North-South differences are played out in different fora dealing with finances, trade and the environment. This has led to a situation where different components of the international system often hold themselves in constraining, hostage-like relationships. There are no easy answers to this problem as long as the lack of integration and the blatant coordination shortcomings at the national level persist.

#### *Dilemmas of the Johannesburg follow-up*

The first General Assembly session after the Summit had a striking similarity with the first post-Rio General Assembly session. Just as in the case of Rio in 1992, the Johannesburg Summit was treated as a stand-alone event. The endorsing resolution in itself was very clear in adopting sustainable development as a key element of the overarching framework for the UN. All concerned were urged to follow-up and implement the agreements reached. The Chapter dealing with the institutional framework for sustainable development was specially emphasized. This laid the basis for more far-reaching reform that better reflected the linkages among different policy areas as well as an integrated perspective.

However, even if the Summit had been a success in itself, the lack of clarity continued as to whether it would have the level of real governmental commitment to carry out the new agenda. There was no consideration to take holistic linkages between the Johannesburg follow-up, the Monterrey and the Doha process more specifically into account. As before these processes continued to be pursued separately. The same was true with the work of UNEP, where the impasse with regard to International Environment Governance continued. The difference between 1992 and 2002 was that this time the consequences of this situation for the planet could be major – and destructive. As the years have gone by, these concerns have unfortunately proven to be well founded, even if there has finally been a much-needed high-level focus on the accelerating climate crisis.

Let me conclude. As I have tried to demonstrate, the reasons for the failures in implementation are of a fundamental, systemic nature. They can only be overcome by corresponding policy and attitude changes with the North in the lead.

The escalating post-Johannesburg sustainability crisis in all its gravity offers an unprecedented political opportunity to trigger such systemic responses.