

Sustainable Development, Inequality and Structural Violence

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The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) held at Johannesburg in August and September 2002 can be viewed as a struggle between groups that seek comprehensive, adequate solutions to global problems for all the people, and those with more short-term, narrow objectives.

A very large proportion of the 8,046 registered participants at WSSD from non-governmental groups - which were mainly public-interest research and advocacy groups, but included private corporations, trade unions, women's groups, youth and faith-based groups - demanded commitments to goals that would serve the needs of the poor and the need for sustainable development.

In contrast, the most influential of the 196 governmental delegations at WSSD sought damage limitation, to avoid making commitments that would curtail their free use of the world's environmental resources or oblige them to pay to address a range of global problems.

Nonetheless it was clear to almost everyone at WSSD that without much greater equality than now, sustainability would not be possible. It was clear that both the wasteful behavior of the rich and the desperate practices of the very poor place uncorrected strains upon the ecosystem. Consider for example the emissions from large SUVs, or the impact on crops and soil erosion when land is stripped of growth for firewood.

The problem was recognized in the Summit's negotiated Plan of Implementation, especially in section II, "Poverty eradication" and in section III, "Changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production." The text of section II calls for action to "Establish a world solidarity fund to eradicate poverty and to promote social and human development in the developing countries. . ."

At the same time, the proposed fund is to be conditional on:

- Methods to be set by the UN GA
- Receiving voluntary funds
- Not duplicating other UN funds
- Encouraging private sector support

One aspect of the confrontation between those who wanted global commitments and those who did not concerned whether governments and intergovernmental organizations would do something or almost nothing. Many critics of the outcomes of WSSD say that the official commitments amount to almost nothing, and that new efforts to engage the private sector were mainly part of an effort to avoid effective action.

The trend toward the privatization or commodification of clean water was a sore point for many. It seemed clear that asking private firms to arrange access to water was not an effective way to get it to poor people. The water-supply problems in the township of Alexandra, a few miles from the Conference location, were seen as confirming the idea that private water would increase inequality.

The weak measures to limit fossil fuel emissions were also seen as exacerbating inequality, the poor being in the most polluted parts of cities and on marginal land to be most affected by expected future climate change in likely

future upland deserts, flood plains and submerged deltas. The oil exporters and the US proponents of fossil fuel use won the debate on wording, for while the text calls for increased reliance on renewable energy, it sets no specific targets. Consequently, some 30 countries announced plans to join a "coalition of the willing" that will meet in Bonn, Germany to set higher standards to limit emissions and to promote renewable energy.

The representative of St. Lucia who spoke for the small island states said his country had set a high standard to replace fossil fuel with renewable energy, but that "the World Bank is pressing us to privatize our water, electricity, telephone services. On one hand we have to privatize, but when we attempt to put our policy of renewable energy in action, the multinationals frustrate every effort we make as they are only interested in the rate of return."

In spite of the duty of corporations to put shareholders first and the proclivity to focus on short-term profitability, many of the estimated 1,000 business representatives at WSSD had broader interests; they came to create networkships to find mutually beneficial solutions. Nonetheless the corporate sector of the civil society non-governmental contingent at WSSD was met with mixed reactions.

Some saw the private sector presence as a sign that there would be new resources to implement plans. Others saw it as a part of the form of globalization that they did not want. Not only was privatizing water supplies seen as harmful to the poor and to the global environment; that was also the view of most delegates regarding trade policies. Countries with agricultural exports said the lack of access to markets for their goods and the flow of cheap produce into their home markets both undermined long-nourished efforts to develop sustainable agriculture.

In so far as the results of WSSD led to missed opportunities to provide access to clean water or renewable energy, poor people will be harmed and their desperate responses will add to the even greater burden from the rich in harming global ecology. Both rich and poor can and will contribute to the damage, but the poor will suffer most, exacerbating inequality.

Geoff Harris, an economist at the University of Natal who wrote the facing-page article, has compiled estimates of democide, murder of civilians by their own government, and structural violence to the vulnerable through social, political and economic systems:

Number of Deaths Worldwide in Excess of Natural Life Expectancy (1945 - 1990)	
<i>Cause of Death</i>	<i>Millions</i>
Military deaths in war	8
Civilian deaths in war	14
Civilians killed by own governments	48
Civilian deaths from structural violence	798

Each failure to adequately address the challenges of environmental degradation will exacerbate global inequalities, which will in turn constrict options for sustainable development. Resulting structural violence will tend to increase conflict, terrorism and war.

Lucy Webster represented ECAAR-US at WSSD.

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