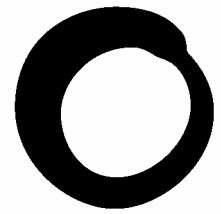


Media Briefing



**Friends of
the Earth**

August 2002

THE EARTH SUMMIT – WILL WORLD LEADERS SAVE THE PLANET?

The first ever World Summit on Sustainable Development (the Earth Summit) starts in Johannesburg, South Africa on 26th August – and will probably be the largest ever UN conference held. But will world leaders succeed in tackling the crucial issues of sustainable development – namely poverty, development and environmental degradation? The Summit represents a once-in-a-decade opportunity to address these issues – but will the politicians bite the bullet or will narrow self-interest win the day?

Background

The Earth Summit is crucial. As things stand, the world is facing growing inequalities between the global north and south, and between rich and poor within the north and south. This in turn poses a growing threat to international security and economic stability.

Ten years ago in Rio, world leaders signed up to important agreements on development and the environment. But governments have failed to implement the action plan agreed in Rio and our environment is still at risk. Friends of the Earth believes that one reason for this failure is an over-reliance on voluntary arrangements with business – who have not delivered.

Will the 2002 Earth Summit succeed? Not if the USA gets its way. The Bush administration has made it clear that it does not want any new global agreements at the Summit. It is even trying to unravel some of the progress made over the last decade. There are concerns that the sustainable development agenda for the Earth Summit is being replaced by a trade-based agenda. Friends of the Earth is particularly concerned by the emphasis on “partnerships” – which rely on governments working with business for development (see below).

EU Environment Commissioner Margot Wallstrom has already warned that the developed world had let down poorer countries in the decade since Rio by failing to work for sustainable development.

ISSUES

Development and the Environment

Development and environmental issues are closely related, and Friends of the Earth (FOE) believes that environmental problems cannot be solved if issues of global debt and poverty are not also addressed. Successful and lasting development cannot be achieved in southern countries we deal with major environmental issues as well.

The poor currently bear the brunt of environmental problems. Indeed poverty has been recognized by UNEP as the most important cause of vulnerability to environmental threats (GEO3, UNEP 2002) – such

as climate change and pollution. Friends of the Earth believes fundamental changes in policy are needed, particularly regarding food security, with environmental management a key factor in preventing famine.

Ending world hunger is a matter of political will and distribution. There is enough food to feed everyone in the world, but not everyone who needs food gets access to it. Current trade and agriculture methods are damaging to the environment, and also put food supply firmly in the hands of large corporations. This means that the poorest communities cannot afford to feed themselves. Small-scale traditional farming methods can handover control to local communities – as Ethiopia has proved.

Friends of the Earth's Call for Corporate Accountability

Most governments at the Summit are keen to recognise the role of business in promoting a sustainable development agenda. Friends of the Earth recognises that business has a role to play – indeed given the power of business in the modern global economy, it is impossible to move towards a more sustainable approach without the involvement of corporations. But Friends of the Earth believes that it is naïve to expect corporations to deliver on sustainable development voluntarily. It is only through regulation that real change can be achieved.

Friends of the Earth, and other environment, development and labour groups, want the Summit to secure an international agreement on legally binding corporate accountability. Governments made an explicit commitment on this agenda at Rio (Principle 13 of the Rio Declarations).

An agreement on corporate accountability would :

- guarantee communities a legal right of redress for activities that adversely affect them, as well as rights to prior consultation, against displacement and for compensation or reparation;
- guarantee individuals and communities rights over the resources they need to enjoy a healthy and sustainable life, including common property resources such as forests;
- place a duty on directors of corporations to take account of social and environmental factors when taking business decisions;
- require corporations to meet best environmental, social, labour and human rights practices wherever they operate.

The USA and EU oppose a legally binding framework on corporate accountability, preferring the kinds of voluntary measures that have failed to deliver since Rio. In May the United Nations Environment Programme produced 22 industry reports which showed that although a small minority of corporations is moving on sustainable development the vast majority is not.

The G77 group of developing countries and some other governments - such as Norway – have proved to be much more progressive on this issue than other blocks. The G77 have pushed for a 'framework' to secure corporate accountability and argued that voluntary mechanisms weren't enough.

Corporate Accountability and Partnerships

The UN indicated early on that it did not anticipate traditional Summit outcomes in Johannesburg. Under pressure from the US it has indicated that "partnerships" will be a major outcome of the Summit - as an explicit alternative to multi-lateral agreements.

The US sees these as private-sector led initiatives within a loose commitment; the EU sees them as needing more accountability. Friends of the Earth believes that if business is not obliged by a corporate accountability treaty to meet certain standards, partnerships will fail the communities they are designed to help. Without such standards, governments will effectively be abdicating their responsibility for global problems to corporations. They are also being used as a distraction from the failure of Governments to agree the major commitments necessary to tackle the global environmental crisis and ensure sustainable development.

The UN has not yet published a list of proposed partnerships as promised. It is not clear why.

Also on the Agenda:

Globalisation and Trade

Trade is a major issue at the Earth Summit, with Northern Governments in particular promoting the World Trade Organisation's (WTO's) liberalising agenda.

Evidence illustrates that the world's current dominant economic model is unsustainable. Developing countries need to increase their economic diversity, while ensuring that states retain necessary powers over their domestic economies. They should reject the strait-jacket of export-led development. The impact of trade liberalisation on inequality, inequitable consumption levels, food security and safety, environmental protection and the status of multilateral environmental agreements should be priority concerns.

This issue is one which divides Governments and civil society. The trade issue which causes the greatest disagreement is agriculture. Trade liberalisation for agriculture threatens the livelihoods of subsistence farmers in developing countries but also the livelihoods of small farmers in the UK and other developed countries.

Ecological debt versus Northern over-consumption

Developing countries and more enlightened developed countries (e.g. Sweden) recognize the "environmental debt" that is owed to developing countries by the industrialized countries. The "debt" is owed because industrialised countries are responsible for the bulk of the environmental and developmental problems from which developing countries suffer most.

A recognition at the Earth Summit of this ecological debt, with resulting financed action plans to tackle this problem, seems unlikely at present - especially given that the USA and others are trying to backtrack on earlier agreements that the bulk of the responsibility for tackling these issues lies with the developed world.

Without agreement on this issue - which would require agreements on environmental system limits and equitable sharing of access to resources (known as environmental space) - it is difficult to see how the underlying causes of environmental and social problems can be addressed.

Energy

Oil producing nations – especially Saudi Arabia – do not want energy to become a major issue at the Summit. They are supported in this by the USA, which seems intent on deleting any mention of the Kyoto Treaty. The EU and others are keen to see progress in developing renewable energy, especially in delivering energy to communities who do not have access to electricity. Friends of the Earth wants targets and timetables for the rapid deployment of renewable energy and the phasing out of international and domestic fossil fuel subsidies. Action on climate change and a shift from fossil fuels to renewables will be one of the key tests of whether the Earth Summit has been a success or a failure.

Water

An estimated 14,000-30,000 people die each day from water-related diseases and more than a billion people lack adequate clean water, more than double the number using computers. Nearly three billion do not have access to adequate sanitation.

Current water management represents the most immediate challenge for sustainable and equitable use. Water resources are increasingly being privatised across the world, and water companies have globalised since Rio, becoming giant international service providers. Water companies have consistently demonstrated that they are not fit to run the world's water delivery. They are amongst the worst polluters; corruption has been widespread with senior officials receiving fines and sentences for bribery; developing countries have experienced price increases when water resources are handed to companies.

Access to water needs to be explicitly recognised as a human right throughout the UN system. The UN Convention on the Rights of the Child refers to the rights of children to water and this must be extended to adults. International co-operation on fresh water needs to be strengthened. People must be given a

sovereign right and responsibility to oversee water resources in their territory and to determine collectively how they are managed and shared. Intensive agriculture is a main threat to sustainable water management and large scale irrigation should be replaced by agricultural techniques adapted to local conditions. Redistribution of food so as to make allocation more equal both between and within populations is needed.

Is There Any Good News?

Key issues remain on the Johannesburg agenda. But the US in particular has stood in the way of tough commitments, so instead the draft implementation plan is extremely short on timetables, compliance mechanisms and finance to ensure progress is made. However, it is worth noting that this Summit is the first to tackle sustainable development. The problem is not the Summit, but the lack of political will from governments to address the real issues.

Key Documents

The state of the environment: past, present, future? The key United Nations report.

<http://www.unep.org/GEO/press.htm>

The draft Earth Summit implementation plan being taken forwards to Johannesburg.

http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/prepcom4docs/bali_documents/draft_plan_1206.pdf

The United Nations view on how business is failing to deliver sustainable development.

<http://www.unep.org/Documents/Default.asp?DocumentID=248&ArticleID=3049>

8 page briefing on progress since the Rio Earth Summit

http://www.foe.co.uk/resource/briefings/earth_summit.pdf

Draft political statement for the Earth Summit

http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/summit_docs/political_declaration_final.pdf

Friends of the Earth's web-sites:

Radio Earth Summit with free down-loadable broadcast quality interviews from victims of corporate abuses and celebrity advocates <http://www.radioearthsummit.org>

Friends of the Earth's website for policy papers and news reports <http://www.rio-plus-10.org/>

Friends of the Earth International's press releases on the Earth Summit

<http://www.foei.org/media/wssd.html>

Briefing on corporate accountability

<http://www.foei.org/publications/corporates/accountability.html>

United Nations website

<http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/>