

Earth Summit Calls for Action, Not Just Rhetoric

People, planet and prosperity were the catchwords of the World Summit on Sustainable Development which concluded in Johannesburg last week. In a nutshell, these words captured the three dimensions of sustainable development – an integration of social equity, environmental quality and economic growth for the benefit of this and future generations.

South Africa President Thabo Mbeki said in his opening address the summit was expected to adopt a practical programme to translate the dream of sustainable development into reality. Yet high expectations at the start of the summit turned into deep disappointment in the end. The 104 attending heads of state could not come to an agreement on firm targets to realise the principles set out at the 1992 Rio summit, to eliminate perverse subsidies in energy and agriculture, or to address man-made climate change.

Many are now questioning whether the results from Johannesburg represent Rio plus 10, or Rio minus 20 in regressing to the state of affairs when the One Earth conference was held in Stockholm in 1972.

While some criticisms are justified, some significant successes at the summit went barely noticed.

Public expectations of government were perhaps misplaced from the very beginning. The inter- governmental agreements tabled for negotiation at the summit were never intended to be legally binding. They merely serve as moral commitments to which the public, if properly organised, can hold governments accountable. Hence the focus should always have been on how much the Earth Summit could be used to empower civil society, galvanise public will and mobilise public action to defend the cause of sustainable development.

Events at the summit were held in six major venues, only one of which was the Sandton Convention Centre where official negotiations took place. Much more was happening outside Sandton. There was the Nasrec centre, where hundreds of non-governmental organisations put on nonstop forums and exhibits, and the Ubuntu Village, where governments and non-governmental agencies showcased success stories of sustainable development.

At a World Conservation Union centre, participants engaged in parallel debates on conservation and development. At the WaterDome, industry players, aid agencies and NGOs exchanged experiences in water and sanitation work. There were several other venues for business councils, parliamentarians and local governments to discuss the way forward.

Despite the logistical nightmare of having to rush from one venue to another, the set-up in Johannesburg was testimony to one of its achievements, that of widening the issues of

concern – from pollution, conservation and energy to poverty, equity, health and economic growth. We also succeeded in engaging a broader spectrum of stakeholders – from governments, local authorities, business and aid agencies to environment, social welfare and community groups. Only on this basis will opportunities emerge to integrate the diverse issues and to form broad partnerships for action.

The summit witnessed a gain in strength of the non-governmental movement. International NGOs are now highly organised and deeply entrenched in the United Nations process. A joint statement by Greenpeace and the World Business Council for Sustainable Development calling for government action received widespread attention.

Anti-poverty groups such as Oxfam not only lobbied for their own cause, but also provided background research and analytical support to many developing country governments in their round-the-clock negotiations during the summit.

WaterAid, an NGO, earned respect for its role in successfully lobbying for the target of halving the number of people who lack sanitation worldwide by 2015. It was one of the few concrete goals adopted at the summit.

All of these demonstrate that while governments may lack political will to change, civil society is taking the lead. It is no coincidence that what is happening at the international level is mirrored by what is developing in Hong Kong, albeit at a slower pace.

There is a long history in Hong Kong of civil society filling the leadership vacuum. For instance, the birth of two of the most important institutions safeguarding our environment today – the Environmental Protection Department and the Country Parks Scheme – can be traced back to the persistent calls by environmental groups nearly 30 years ago.

Three decades ago, only one person from the Conservancy Association represented Hong Kong in the Stockholm conference. Government seats were empty.

This year Hong Kong sent a 37-member NGO delegation. They included representatives from green groups, social service organisations and aid agencies, politicians, businessmen, academics and students. The SAR government also sent a delegation of eight officials.

Despite the failures at the inter-governmental level, the summit process will not be a loss if civil society can embark on a new path – a path of renewed confidence and a path of partnership initiatives. Many of the solutions to our problems may be unglamorous local measures, and may even be surprisingly easy to find.

In Johannesburg, delegates were able to visit a nearby nature reserve called Rietvlei. The site was an abandoned 4,000-hectare farm before the Pretoria municipal authorities acquired it for water conservation. The area is now transformed into a wetland, serving as a natural filter for some lightly treated sewage discharged upstream. Its ecological and economic functions are enhanced by re-introducing animals, including zebras, springboks,

wildebeest and cheetahs into the reserve to attract tourists.

The tourist income is not only used to maintain the reserve, but to also fund further wetland projects. Local communities are awarded small contracts in the programme. Training is provided to unemployed youth, and it is mandatory for the operating contractors to employ 60 per cent of women and two per cent of disabled.

Rietvlei is an excellent example of a local, integrated solution. Local innovation, multi-stakeholder dialogue and an open mind are what we need to create small successes.

In response to the global themes of people, planet and prosperity, perhaps what we need here are integration, partnership and action.

Now that Premier Zhu Rongji has ratified the Kyoto Protocol and fully embraced Agenda 21, a blueprint for sustainable development, it is Hong Kong's turn to set itself up as a role model of sustainable development in Asia. Used wisely, a "local" Agenda 21 and other lessons from Johannesburg may give Hong Kong a new vision, or even tools for economic revival.

In his autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela described how he spent 27 years in jail in his fight for a free and democratic South Africa. He wrote: "Rhetoric is not important. Actions are." Thirty years have passed since the Stockholm Conference. Our legacy to our children will depend on whether more companions will join the long walk to sustainability.

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