

Saving the Earth - From the Summit to the real world

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The “save the earth” hype was in full swing in August and September as the World Summit on Sustainable Development took place in Johannesburg. Among the 20,000 delegates that converged on the South African city were 45 Hong Kong people, including 37 members of Hong Kong’s delegation of non-governmental organisations, headed by Albert Lai, Chairman of the Conservancy Association and HKU Convocation member.

The Summit was an eye opener for the eight officials from the Hong Kong government who attend the United-Nations event for the first time, under the delegation the People’s Republic of China. By contrast, the Conservancy Association’s participation dated back to the original “One Earth” conference held in Stockholm in 1972, which started the whole sustainable development movement. Ten years ago, at the Earth Summit at Rio de Janeiro, the Association’s eight-member delegation was the only Hong Kong presence.

While sustainable development started off as one of those terms which means anything to anybody, over the years a clearer focus gradually emerged. The original concern over environmental problems such as energy supply, clean air and water, and biodiversity conservation remains in the mainstream, but there is now a consensus that these cannot be detached from economic progress and social development. The survival of the world is threatened not just by ecological disasters but also by abject poverty and unfair trade. The somewhat nebulous concept of sustainable development is now given substance in the form of a three-legged stool of economic, social and environmental progress. The host government simplified it further into a three P slogan – People, Planet and Prosperity. The agenda was clear, and it was left to the 104 government leaders to deliver.

But they did not. The aim of the Johannesburg Summit was to flesh out a “Plan of Implementation”; the days of talking principles were over, or so we thought. In the end, the agreement they reached contained so many compromises that it looked like an elaboration of principles, or worse, a set of “Palliatives for Inaction” rather than a Plan of Implementation. Instead of the advertised “Rio plus ten”, the WSSD was in danger of becoming a kind of “Rio minus 20” as the world had to resort to the very early principles established in 1972 in Stockholm, in lieu of concrete action to move forward.

The problem boils down to commitment and money. Twenty years of globalisation since the Tokyo Round of the GATT have not rid the world of absolute poverty – one quarter of humanity (1.2 billion people) are still living on less than US\$1 per day. One of the most important principles of sustainable development agreed in Rio is that our responsibility towards the world should be both equal and differential – we all share the same Earth, and our effort in sustaining it should be commensurate with our resources and level of development. Put simply, advanced countries should commit more. But advanced countries, especially the United States, failed us.

The WSSD thus turned into a venue for the world's coalition of anti-American voices, or more accurately, anti-Bush voices, since many Americans are themselves critical of their own government. Apparently too busy planning war on Iraq, President Bush did not attend the Summit but send his Secretary of State Colin Powell to face the booing.

Amongst other things, the US' refusal to sign the Kyoto Protocol of the Framework Convention on Climatic Change (a treaty to combat global warming) came, deservedly, into the spotlight. The contrast was especially telling as Chinese Premier Zhu announced China's ratification of the Protocol during the WSSD – a commitment from a developing country, or a slight of the world's wealthiest nation and biggest polluter?

For the people from the grassroots, the resounding message of the World Summit is that one cannot rely on the government for sustainable development; instead civil society should take the lead. Not that the SAR government did not take the matter seriously; in fact sustainable development was important enough for the SAR government to have announced the formation of the Sustainable Development Council. Except that the announcement was made 24 months ago and nothing has yet happened. Perhaps there would be no need, as the Hong Kong NGO delegation to Johannesburg had become, in its own way, something of a sustainable development council for Hong Kong already, being made up of people from a wide cross section of the community – green groups, business people, social workers, teachers, legislators, students, even primary school children.

A campaign is now under way to formulate a “Local Agenda 21 for Hong Kong”, using the principles of “Agenda 21” developed by the 1992 Earth Summit. Sustainable development involves a wide range of issues, from pollution to conservation to poverty to equity to energy to economic growth, and Agenda 21 provides the focus for a convergence of efforts from different sectors. Since Rio, while Hong Kong has looked on, many other cities have developed their own Local Agenda 21. For Hong Kong's NGO representatives to Johannesburg, it is high time to engage all sectors in a partnership to formulate an actionable Sustainable Development Strategy through the Local Agenda 21 process. A concerted effort with Mainland China is needed, for instance, to find sustainable solutions on energy and water, two of the main themes addressed by the WSSD. Now that China has signed up to the Kyoto Protocol on climatic change, Hong Kong must also play its part. As the wealthiest city of China, it should strive to meet the standard that befits that of a developed city.

Indeed, Hong Kong cannot convincingly be Asia's World City without at the same time having a progressive community with a good-quality environment. While there is no doubting Hong Kong's economic positioning, the SAR must have the same self-confidence about its social development and environmental quality. It can become a model of sustainable development for other cities, and it should aim to do so.

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