

Shared fate

the basis for a global social movement?

by RAVI NAIDOO

Will the WSSD help to build a global social movement?

At last, rich and poor countries have a shared fate. While they may be able to stem the flow of immigration from poor countries, rich countries cannot stop the disastrous environmental consequences of globalisation at their borders. This shared fate offers a potential basis for a global social solidarity movement. However, until hunger and grinding poverty are reduced, the billions of the world's poor are unlikely to prioritise environmental issues. In turn, addressing poverty eradication requires structural changes in the global economy – changes that will be resisted by powerful multinational corporations (MNCs).

Is such a global social movement possible, and what role can the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) play in building this movement?

Poverty

There is little doubt that 'neo-liberal' (profit-obsessed) globalisation is exacerbating poverty and environmental degradation. Central to globalisation has been the increased power of investors, essentially multinational corporations.

This increased power has been used to raise work intensity through introducing labour-saving technology. It is estimated that only 20% of the world's workforce will be needed to produce 100% of the output for which there is

sufficient aggregate demand. The other 80% of the workforce would, essentially, be surplus to the needs of the global capitalist economy. The ranks of the unemployed, underemployed and working poor will continue to grow. Human society today has more than 1,1 billion people living on less than \$1 a day. The gap between rich and poor, between and within countries, has reached unprecedented levels and continues to grow. The total number of people living in extreme poverty in the poorest regions of the world (South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa) increased by 10% between 1990 and 1998. Deadly diseases, including HIV/AIDS and many curable illnesses, are claiming an increasing share of the world's population, especially those too poor to afford life-saving treatment.

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Degradation

Moreover, the planet is nearing the limits of this kind of production – global warming through an increase of greenhouse gases resulting from under-regulated production, massive depletion of non-renewal energies, devastating pollution, habitat destruction and serious breakdown in ecosystem balances are the result.

For these reasons, 'sustainable

development' is really about 'sustainable society'. Human society, after all, has the finance, technology and skills to eradicate poverty and underdevelopment. What is required is efficient distribution and the efficient use of existing global resources.

Priorities

In its capacity as WSSD host and senior G-77 member, South Africa has put together a list of priority areas to secure a global agreement. The list represents six core areas which aim to ensure that the poor have greater access to water, energy, food security, health, education and technology transfer. The response to this priority list, which represents nothing more than a moderate list of proposed reforms, has been predictable.

The preparatory meetings running up to the WSSD have failed to get agreement on many crucial issues, mainly concerning the trade and financing provisions (the so-called 'economic platform') to resource the implementation of the WSSD agreements. Behind the disagreement is the fact that many of the Agenda 21 agreements at the 1992 Rio Earth Summit have been undermined by developments at the World Trade Organisation (WTO). Contrary to a poverty

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reduction agenda, the WTO seeks to increasingly commodify basic services such as health, education and water and, in so doing, create new profit markets for multinational corporations. Thus, whereas the World Health Organisation argues for "Health for All" the WTO demands "Health Markets for All". Not surprisingly, since Rio there have not been ten years of implementation, but rather ten years of discussion as to why implementation has not happened.

There is limited real interest among most rich country governments to address the structural issues (such as trade) behind the cycles of poverty or environmental degradation. Proof of this is the lack of commitment to real change in the Monterrey Conference on Finance for Development, or the WTO processes, or the unwillingness of the G-8 to go beyond vague rhetoric in response to the New Partnership for Africa's Development (Nepad).

Leverage

The question that therefore arises is: what is the real leverage to get rich country governments and MNCs to make concessions? A crucial pre-condition to effective and sustained leverage must surely be organisational power. We need to build global social movements that can fight for an alternative form of globalisation, one centred on a common humanity rather than common markets. The World Social Forum in Porto Alegre is one such beginning. There are other examples of social movements that are building the potential for democratic control over the development process at local and global levels.

With the global capitalist system going through crises of confidence and legitimacy following the failure of its policies in poor countries and the exposure of massive corporate corruption in

rich countries, strong and strategic global social movements may find they have more leverage than in the past. In particular, there is increased potential to do something that the Rio Summit failed to do: focus attention on the role of MNCs.

Potential outcomes

So what can we expect from the WSSD? Ideally, one hopes for agreements on changes in governance of the International Finance Institutions (IFIs), debt cancellation, the setting up of global access and development funds to facilitate a transfer of resources to poor countries and so on. However, judging by the list of unresolved issues from the preparatory meetings, there is not likely to be much beyond a minimalist outcome. Nonetheless, the following outcomes would offer some advance for social movement builders:

- Increase social consciousness among people in the North and South of the unsustainability of the process of neo-liberal globalisation.
- Strengthen poverty eradication and environmental targets against which progress can be measured.
- Introduce regulations requiring greater corporate and IFI disclosure and accountability (including democratically determined social and environmental reporting standards for corporations).
- Create mechanisms that increase civil society participation in monitoring of corporations and IFI disclosure, and the ability to hold governments accountable to targets.

Not the first prize, perhaps, but any advances that the WSSD makes towards expanding and deepening democratic spaces will assist the creation of an effective global social movement.

Sustainable development requires an expansion of the public domain at a global and local level. This increase in public and democratic space will allow for a more efficient and equitable distribution of the resources and opportunities available to human society.

However, contrary to this need to extend public space, multinational corporations (and their supporters in the international finance institutions) are leveraging more privatisation and the expansion of private markets. Thus the potential for true sustainable development is slipping further away rather than drawing closer. Reversing this trend, and ensuring more and better regulation of multinational corporations, is a critical challenge.

A further challenge is getting rich countries to adopt a different paradigm to sustainable development. This paradigm must emphasise making drastic changes to the skewed nature of global trade. Indeed, would it not make a refreshing change if the rich countries tried more to change their own development paths that are reliant on extreme exploitation of poor countries, rather than portray themselves as benevolent providers of 'aid' to these same poor countries?

Clearly we should not expect enlightened self-interest to be the driving force for global change. Rather, more Enrons and more rich-country protectionism should be expected. In reality, resisting multinational corporations and mobilising support for true sustainability requires a powerful global social movement.

*[Ravi Naidoo,
Director, NALEDI]*