

Reportback: A Johannesburg Roundtable Debate on “Sustainable Development” and Fixing/Nixing the W\$\$D

By Patrick Bond

On the official opening day of the World Summit on Sustainable Development last August 26, an opportunity arose for a review of intellectual and practical problems on the broad Left. The phrase sustainable development has been so badly abused that divergent principles, analyses, strategies, tactics and alliances are proposed even where clarity of purpose should be most evident, amongst explicitly radical forces. From socialist, communist, autonomist, environmentalist and eco-feminist movements, representatives of key journals and many more unaffiliated scholars and local organic intellectuals addressed came together for debate at Johannesburg’s University of the Witwatersrand. The “Left Intellectuals’ Roundtable” was convened by Dennis Brutus of Jubilee South and other South African radicals partly to introduce local activists to these issues, and partly to see what commonalities exist about ways forward for anti-capitalist, anti-globalization, global justice movements.

As explained by *CNS* editors and Roundtable participants Michael Goldman and Giovanna Recoveri, the events around the WSSD unveiled profound local and international divisions on matters of red-green discourse and action. Beyond basic disagreements over ideology and beyond differing material interests, the most important challenge, in my own view, remains the identifying of appropriate *scale politics* in which to work. The dilemma was raised repeatedly across not only the various sectors — water, energy, healthcare, agriculture/land and biodiversity — that were the core subjects of debate by heads of state, but also in relation to questions that were nearly entirely censored in both the official WSSD and the parallel NGO debates: namely the mode of production and its relationship to the environment; worsening uneven and combined development; intensifying tendencies towards capitalist

crisis; rising struggles of both class and ethnic/nationalist characteristics; the heightened oppression of low-income women these past two decades, and so on.

When it comes to choosing amongst myriad geopolitical terrains within which environmental and developmental conflict unfold, naturally, there are no either/ors but instead, lots of both/ands. Still, greater familiarity with the ideas of our friends and foes, and conceptual rigor about how we/they have constructed our respective worldviews — from the scale of the household to the global institutions — are vital before taking the momentum of social-change activism into coming world or hemispheric summits where we again battle the elites, as well as back into local battles.

So let me come quickly to the point. On the matter of whether anything of merit would come from the WSSD, the overall consensus emerging from left forces gathered here in late August was more militant than our expectations here in Johannesburg. It is important not to forget that the long build-up during 2002 was characterized by a horrendous split between organized labor (allied to the ANC government) and the independent social movements, which meant that protest capacity was probably less than 10 percent of what it should have been. The strategic conclusion of the indy left forces, which gained widespread support even amidst the NGO summit-hopping crowd as cynicism grew over the WSSD's commodification agenda, was not to "fix" but rather "nix" the UN gathering as a site of potential global pollution/poverty cleanup.

Because the UN has sometimes been singled out as a potential counter-hegemonic force to Washington-Geneva neoliberalism and as a future home for tougher international regulatory mechanisms and even for a world state/parliament, this is a remarkable point to reach so quickly in the emergence of a movement's sensibility. Obviously it reflects a Left *realpolitik* associated with the present balance of forces, namely that any global reconstruction of progressive politics through institutions that are monopolized by capital, as the UN now appears quite unequivocally, is hopeless.

To some small extent, intellectual skepticism on August 26th helped build the mood of militancy and the desire to delegitimize what became known as the WSSD. Instead of joining the Thabo Mbeki-led rally "against poverty" and in favor of the WSSD on August 31st, the vast majority of local and international demonstrators marched from the ghetto of Alexandra to the Sandton Convention Centre with the stated intention that, as Soweto activist Trevor Ngwane put it, "The WSSD

must close and the delegates must go home.” Of course, state logistical support for the WSSD delegates in the form of a massive army/police presence ensured that — unlike, say, Prague in September 2000 — this was mainly a rhetorical request. But the point was taken and on the Summit’s last morning (September 4), most of the NGO-insiders had also staged, belatedly, a formal walk-out protest. Others took the opportunity of heckling Colin Powell.

What, though, of the “anti-corporate populism” which inspires some of the global justice movements, with its double trajectory towards global reforms and localist utopias? The ease of populist critique was on display over the weekend of August 24-25, also at Wits University, through a colloquium organized by the International Forum on Globalization <<http://www.ifg.org>>. Normally IFG events of this sort (parallel summits of radical intellectuals, especially from the NGO circuits) are strong on critique and weak on activism. But Johannesburg proved to be a different milieu. The local Social Movements Indaba led by Ngwane and Brutus compelled an early break half-way through the IFG program on August 24, with most of the international guests and attendees also taking to the streets where they encountered the wrath of the SA riot police. But just as importantly as getting people directly into risky activism, the IFG colloquium confronted the contradictions of petit-bourgeois critique. Halfway through, Naomi Klein put it best: “I’ve been listening to people all day, and no one has yet said the word capitalism.” By the end of the second day, that complaint fell away as South African leftists were allowed full-throated critiques of the WSSD and its local manifestations.

To be sure, speakers such as Colin Hines, Helena Norberg-Hodge and Wolfgang Sachs (editor of the impressive *Jo’burg Memo* which debunks the last decade of post-Rio flops — <<http://www.boell.de>>) were amongst those at the IFG still unwilling to break from conceptions of a smaller-scale and localized sustainable capitalism, in Sachs’ case with mildly less damaging global-scale institutions and different lifestyles for hedonistic northerners. At the Roundtable, Norberg-Hodge and Hines argued robustly that under present circumstances, the dangers of corporate-led protectionism and xenophobia are outweighed by the benefits of going local, seeking closer articulations in economy, society and culture. This line of argument did not sit well with the mainly English-language but thoroughly internationalist journals/periodicals — especially *CNS*, *Historical Materialism*, *Monthly Review*, *Socialist Register* and South Africa’s own left magazine *debate*, whose corresponding editors present at the Summit sought to put socialism more firmly on the agenda.

General consensus was reached at the Roundtable, though, on immediate tasks. Because of the banal appropriation of “sustainability,” most agreed that delegitimizing the WSSD, the New Partnership for Africa’s Development (Nepad, a chapter of the WSSD), Public-Private Partnerships and other commodifying “solutions” to eco-social problems must intensify. But areas of debate do continue amongst environmentalists, such as over the Climate Action Network’s soft line on Kyoto carbon trading, which the new Rising Tide network points out loses too much in commodifying the air compared to what it gains in tiny greenhouse gas reduction targets. And just before the big march, Greenpeace stunned many allies by entering a bizarre corporate social responsibility relationship with Sir Mark Moody-Stuart’s Business Council for Sustainable Development, after even a Sierra Club director and Roundtable participant, Michael Dorsey, labeled Moody-Stuart a “murderer” on a BBC broadcast to tens of millions of people, for his role as a Shell Oil executive in the 1995 Ken Saro-Wiwa execution. For Greenpeace’s German leader, Sachs, the organization’s gambit was an opportunity “to tie down the corporations to better slap them.” However, the tough critique by *Monthly Review*’s John Bellamy Foster of Sachs’ *Jo’burg-Memo* — in part based on the failure to name (and hence analyze) the system — left Sachs defending sustainable capitalism as tactically appropriate.

The Roundtable debates over South and Southern African contradictions were notable for attracting dozens of committed middle-layer NGO strategists — many of whom endured 48 hour bus rides through southern Africa — from a range of social movements. After an opening paper providing historical context on failures of post-colonial African nationalism by John Saul of the *Socialist Register*, they set out immediate strategic dilemmas such as:

- what reaction should progressives give to Malawi’s politically-ambitious neoliberal president Bakili Muluzi, who is trying to establish a third term by rewriting the constitution, partly by garnering sympathy (deserved) through populist bashing of the International Monetary Fund over forced grain sales aimed at repaying commercial banks, just prior to the current drought?;
- how can Zimbabwe’s quite impressive Trotskyist (International Socialist) presence within the opposition Movement for Democratic Change take forward popular campaigns ranging from rural land redistribution to macroeconomic policy, when the democratic opposition to Mugabe also leans right?;

- in South Africa, will organized labor and leftist social movements heal their rift, and (when) will the subsequent formula for red-green politics include a mass workers' party with electoral ambitions, or are prospects better in the foreseeable future for insurgent challenges to state power based in the militant sidelines of civil society?;
- will the nascent African Social Forum establish a formal ideological platform which can take forward the continent's progressive opposition to Nepad into an "African People's Consensus," particularly if eco-destructive hydropower projects and electricity privatization are the main ways that Johannesburg capital and Pretoria politicians most immediately push their subimperial agenda?; and
- given the spread of commodification through Nepad, what do others on the continent learn from the two most advanced anti-privatization movements, those of Soweto and of the extremely talented radicals in Accra, Ghana?

The Roundtable was attended, throughout the afternoon and evening, by roughly 250 people, ranging from armchair academics to large contingents from the Johannesburg townships. Predictable tensions between autonomists, Marxists and reformists were aired constructively. In the final session, Klein and Gerard Greenfield of *Socialist Register* spoke out in favor of the Marxist critique but pointed to stylistic problems in the tradition (e.g., "fundamentalism") and the semantics of "socialism" — since it is just as thorny to say "comrade" to workers in Zimbabwe and Vietnam as it is in the north, as Greenfield remarked at the end of a dazzling critique of global capitalist crisis. Kenyan activist Njoki Njehu from 50 Years is Enough in Washington added that the international social justice movement is in need of ideological toughening, in ways that can also better reach Malawian peasant women whose families face starvation this year because of a combination of untimely rains and IMF power.

Johannesburg is a long way from the main centers of activism. Just arriving at the sites of debate and protest, given the enormous eco-damage associated with air transport, involves powerful contradictions for the Left. However, Southern Africans are enriched by experiences of this sort, and the ratcheting up of pressure and rhetoric at the international scale during the WSSD has contributed to the social movements being treated as a genuine thorn in the government's neoliberal side. The radical character of local struggles could also continue to shape debates internationally, as sponsors of talk-shops such as the WSSD — and a year ago, the World Conference Against Racism — find South Africa less and less hospitable.