

Sustainable Development or the Law of Profit

*By the Italian Environmental Forum**

The United Nations' "Sustainable Development" conference starts in a few days' time in Johannesburg. This is the third stage in a process that began in Stockholm in 1972 with the "Human Environment" Conference, which then continued in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 with the "Environment and Development" Conference.

In the title of this third conference, there is no reference whatsoever to the principle according to which human beings have a right to a proper and adequate environment, nor is there a reference to the term "environment" as a set of common goods. And this, we might add, is not surprising.

At the end of the Rio de Janeiro Conference (1992), the representatives from more than 170 participating countries endorsed a global action program for "sustainable development" denominated "Agenda 21." (The complete text is available in Italian at <www.comune.venezia.it/agenda21>, and in English at <www.unep.org/unep/program/natres/biodiv/irb/docs01.htm>.)

This complex document (four thematic sections and 40 chapters) indicated the principles and methods to which development policies had to conform in order to extend economic, social and cultural well-being and protect the natural environment for all world populations and future generations.

Ten years later, it is patently evident that the Rio objectives have not been reached. All sustainability indicators have worsened (see the UN Secretary-General's report, "Implementing Agenda 21," Economic and Social Council at <www.johannesburg-summit.org>).

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Let's list the main points of the planetary environmental crisis, according to the Worldwatch Institute Report, "State of the World 2002:"

- Increase in total energy consumption, which, between 1998 and 2000, went from 260 to 370 HJ (hexaJoules) per annum, roughly equivalent to an increase from 11.5 to 15.5 TOE (tons of oil equivalent).
- Increase in carbon dioxide and other "greenhouse gas" emissions into the atmosphere, with resulting climate alterations. The 1990s were the hottest decade in the last 120 years; the first six months of 2002 were the hottest in a thousand years (Hadley Centre of Climate Prediction, Great Britain). The richest 20 percent of the world's population produces 53 percent of greenhouse gases.
- Demographic concentration in a few large metropolises: almost three billion people live in cities, often with inadequate living and health services and water supplies, and with traffic congestion and air pollution.
- Depletion of water resources and desertification: the consumption of fresh water has trebled from 1950 to 2002, and water wastage has increased by 1,500 percent; 1.4 billion people do not have access to drinking water.
- Loss of biodiversity and erosion of the more fragile ecosystems (for example, a quarter of all marine species are extinct, and a further 25 percent have reached their biological limits).
- Agricultural and food crisis (leading to one death every 24 minutes).
- Widespread air pollution (due to car traffic and production activity), with an increase in lung disease and death.
- Increase in waste products.

The Johannesburg Conference should therefore realistically and thoroughly address the reasons for such wide-scale failure. There are many answers to these questions, which can be schematically rendered in three ways:

1. The neo-liberalist school — backed by the international financial establishment (the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the World Trade Organization), by multinationals and the strong governments of the North — according to whom the benefits deriving from free market forces have not yet been able to spread to the entire world because of the restrictive and protectionist measures deployed by nation states and local political, trade union, consumer and environmental organizations, restrictions that do not foster

advantages in the allocation of financial resources. This is the conclusion of the recent Monterey Summit (Mexico) on financing development; this is what the Bush administration maintains in justifying its refusal to underwrite the original Kyoto protocol on greenhouse gas emissions, thus favoring pollution-permitting commerce and trade.

2. The mixed economy school — well-represented within European bureaucracies — according to which there has been too much government resistance to Agenda 21 principles, and not enough courage displayed in adopting and putting these principles into practice. What is needed is more participation by the population at large and more harmonious interaction between social actors in establishing shared development scenarios in order to attain better results in terms of defending non-renewable resources and solidarity towards the South (cooperation and development aid).
3. Finally, there is a more radical school of thought — sustained since the international Seattle movement, in opposition to the WTO — that questions the principle of “development” intended as the unlimited and permanent growth of economic wealth and accumulation. The alternative is to guarantee that everyone receive indispensable goods, as they represent life-sustaining essentials: food, land, water, seeds, knowledge and essential services. These common goods must be set free from market logic, and should not be part of the cycle of capitalistic accumulation.

The Environmental Forum maintains that the fundamental aims of the Johannesburg Conference should be “human environment and development” that are compatible with the natural constrictions imposed by the environment; this is currently being thwarted by economic development based on unlimited world-wide expansion of the production and consumption of material goods and monetary wealth, which privatizes and commercializes common goods and, in the process, kills life.

The concept of “sustainable development” has demonstrated too many margins of vagueness and ambiguity, and has appeared to justify the most contradictory policies, often those that create new poverty, world famine and the most serious environmental crises. A dramatic example of these policies are the structural adjustment plans imposed by the International Monetary Fund on all countries, but above all on the South. Our proposal is therefore to break away from the “sustainable development” paradigm and ban this formula from all official resolutions from now on in, including those of Johannesburg.

In other words, we think that the term “development” — in its basic meaning of “growth” — contains within itself the idea of a mode

of being and expansion that is proper to the effectively and historically existent economic model that has dominated Europe and colonized the rest of the world. Public imagination throughout the uni-polar and globalized world conceives of development as the product of the “techno-economic mega-machine” that objectively and immutably presides over and regulates all social relations between people, from production to consumption, from the economy to the services sector, and that dominates politics.

From the critique of the concept of “sustainable development” derives a critique of the formulation of Agenda 21 as well as of the ensuing plethora of manuals on “acceptable practices” that have ended up constituting a sterile marketing technique for the manipulation of consensus. The different Agenda 21’s (local, women’s, children’s, etc.) contain insuperable ambiguities that have effectively prevented them from tangibly influencing the policies of governments and the strong world powers.

The entire process of action as imagined by Agenda 21 is loaded by the idea, in and of itself enlightened, that it is possible to give rise to balanced dialogue and voluntary cooperation between the social actors, treated as if they were equal and generic (economic concerns, citizens’ associations, public institutions), all interested in assuming a shared, unified and general vision of the long term and covering a wide spectrum of questions.

In short, the illusion that this will lead to the social cohesion of different communities through harmonious practices and the professionalization of the role of the “facilitator” has turned out to be a mystifying snare that tends to conceal real and irreconcilable species, gender and class conflicts that are inevitably generated between the worlds of capital and work, between capital and nature, between globalization and “local statutes” (see the “New Municipality Charter” inspired by Alberto Magnaghi’s studies), between globalization and individuals.

We of the Environmental Forum maintain that it is high time we changed direction. We must therefore:

- Go back to the original and founding acquisitions of ecological thought, such as the observation that resources are limited and that natural ecosystems have their own specific carrying capacity.
- Improve the relationship between man and nature through a renewed interrelationship between economic sciences and life sciences. This interrelationship must lead to a “bio-economics” able to evaluate the flow of materials and energy through anthropic systems: cities, cultivated fields, factories, individual water reservoirs, individual countries.

- Define correct environmental policies that also provide for a coherent reorganization of institutional powers both from “above” (what is needed is a Peoples’ Organization able to deal with international organizations and governments), and from the “grass roots” level, through new forms of political government and self-governing of civil society which guarantee autonomy.