

# WSSD

WORLD SUMMIT FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

## **Time to ditch the sustainababble**



**WORLDwrite**

A CRITICAL MEMORANDUM



**Sustainability** it now seems, is a concept beyond question. Should it be? World leaders, global institutions, multi-national corporations and all the big shots are backing it: shouldn't we be questioning what's going on? Many believe we are producing and consuming too much and therefore constraint must be the order of the day, but does it need to be? The world we are told is in a terrible state, resources are running out and the environment is stretched beyond carrying capacity. Are these apocalyptic scenarios true or do the doom merchants take a dim view of humanity? Environmental protection and poverty are inextricably linked we are told. Is this really true? The UK based youth education charity and NGO WORLDwrite has drafted this critical memorandum, to challenge the anti human ethos of the WSSD World Summit on Sustainable Development taking place in Johannesburg 2002.

"A child in the developed world consumes and pollutes 30-50 times as much as a child in the developing world. Just imagine the trend as the poor countries prosper."<sup>1</sup>

If sustainability had improved the lot of the world's majority, there would be no need for criticism. It clearly has not. Sustainable development policy and practice has failed to alleviate any of the problems facing the developing world and condemns the developing world to inequality forever more. The majority of the world do not enjoy the living standards of those in the West and worse still, as the quote above illustrates, many now think that North South equality is undesirable. This memorandum is a response to the disastrous consequences of the whole sustainable mantra.

WORLDwrite is a volunteer led charity that has been facilitating exchange programmes, educational projects and schools based work for the past 10 years. WORLDwrite has a history of challenging assumptions, putting people first and inspiring global links. WORLDwrite volunteers are uncompromising in their belief in North South equality and will not except anything less than the best for the developing world. The charity will not tolerate the prescriptive policies of summiteers who think people in the developing world should not have the same opportunities as Westerners.

"You think we don't want modern development, you are rich and you must be dreaming, we want what you have. I used to think you must have become civilised a long time ago, but now I've learned you've screwed Africa and held us back. I pray that you don't keep doing this"  
*Millicent Kumeni* WORLDwrite Ghana Exchange 2002

This contribution to summit preparations has been drafted by volunteers and is demanding serious development that puts people first. For those who believe substantial improvement for the majority of the world is essential and possible, please read on, circulate its contents and respond.

## **WSSD – POVERTY AND THE DEVELOPING WORLD**

The WSSD, World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg 2002 aims to restore the momentum to the sustainable development process, ten years after the famous Earth summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The choice of an African venue it is argued is a good beginning, as Africa we're told is more in need of sustainable development than any other continent.<sup>2</sup>

Governments from around the world, NGO's and 'stake holders' are gearing up for this major event. Every participating country is involved in its own RIO + 10 audit and regional preparatory events, to consider how far sustainable development has been achieved and what needs to be done. Most agree, sustainable development must go even further.

"The world's environment is still deteriorating. Greenhouse gases are accumulating in the atmosphere. The air in our cities is more polluted. Noise levels are increasing everywhere. The oceans are polluted and over-fished. The world's forests and biodiversity are shrinking. Soil is being degraded. Deserts are spreading. Fresh water is becoming scarcer and more polluted. At the same time the pressures which humankind are placing on the world's carrying capacity is increasing. Populations are still increasing in most countries. Consumption per capita also increases steadily. Resources are used ever more intensively."<sup>3</sup>

Proponents of sustainability tell us we are heading for environmental catastrophe. But in case we think this has little to do with the developing world, the summit promises to emphasise poverty eradication, water and sanitation, energy, and public environmental health – particularly HIV-AIDS – as key concerns. In addition hopes are for new intergovernmental agreements, to 'tame the globalisation tiger' and reduce North-South inequalities. It is even argued that sustainable development can prevent the rise of terrorism.<sup>4</sup>

The Summit certainly sounds like an all embracing, grandiose affair but we only need to scratch the surface to understand what it really promises.

"The whole idea of sustainable development, reflected in the Rio Earth summit 10 years ago, is that development and environment are inextricably linked... And while sustainable development may be the new conventional wisdom, many people have still not grasped its meaning. One important task at Johannesburg is to show that it is far from being as abstract as it sounds, but rather is a life-or-death issue for millions upon millions of people, and potentially the whole human race."<sup>5</sup>

"Environmental protection, therefore, is not a contradiction to poverty elimination, but its condition. With regard to the poor there will be no equity without ecology. Given that



resource conservation is based on stronger community rights, also the reverse is true: there will be no ecology without equity.”<sup>6</sup>

### **POVERTY REDUCTION-MORE WEIGHT FOR ENVIRONMENTAL ARGUMENTS**

The summit message is, we must save the environment in order to prevent poverty and secure the lives of the poor. The poor, it is argued, experience environmental degradation more than anyone else, be it floods in Bangladesh or Mozambique, ‘global warming’ must be stopped to save the poor. The poor are more vulnerable as they are directly reliant on nature, be it wood for burning or building, forests for medicines or local water supplies for fishing, drinking and irrigation.

“Our planet’s capacity to sustain us is eroding. The problems are well-known – degrading agricultural lands, shrinking tropical forests, diminishing supplies of clean water, dwindling fisheries, and the threat of growing social and ecological vulnerability from climate change. While these threats are global, their impacts are most severe in the developing world – especially among people living in poverty. Quite simply, if we do not successfully arrest and reverse these problems, the world will not be able to meet the development targets set out in the historic UN Millennium Declaration, particularly the overarching goal of halving extreme poverty over the next 15 years.”<sup>7</sup>

The poor in the developing world eke their living directly off the land. Effective environmental management, it is argued, is therefore essential to prevent them sacrificing the resources they depend upon. Summiteers are suggesting that the way to reduce poverty is to save the environment. An impoverished community will have an impact on the natural habitat as a matter of course. This is because they are utterly dependent on it. Preserving the environment intact won’t remedy this destitution. The solution to that problem lies in development that transcends subsistence life in the developing world.

### **SO, IF THE SUMMIT IS REALLY ABOUT SOLVING POVERTY, WHY RETAIN THE FOCUS ON SUSTAINABILITY?**

Because it seems the emphasis on poverty is not about solving it. It is not about making the poor rich. It is not about everyone enjoying Western levels of wealth. Saving the environment, in order to eradicate poverty, is an absurdity. It assumes the rural poor should not build homes, highways and hospitals, move to urban centres or construct new ones, but continue to scratch a living off the land, stay in rural isolation and preserve the natural landscape. This isn’t development, it’s the status quo.

In fact the focus on poverty post Rio92 has simply been used to provide more weight for environmental arguments, to give environmental preoccupations a people friendly face and to get the developing world on board.

Proponents of ‘sustainable development’ have always emphasised the need for economic development to be compatible with the constraints set by the natural environment. This was summarised in the now famous phrase ‘development that meets the need of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.’ This famous prescription for development was always a fudge and conflict ridden. Critics suggested it involved a conflict between the needs of the present and the needs of the future, conflict between human well being and the protection of nature, between rich and poor, between different groups and so on. As one young Rwandan rightly pointed out, “Why should we trust these people to help future generations if they do nothing for us now. It’s an excuse.”<sup>8</sup> In fact it is a top-down compromise between big business and a conservative environmental lobby in the West. There was no movement for sustainability led by poverty stricken peasants in China, sub-Saharan Africa or anywhere else, although there have been plenty of efforts to construct these since Rio 92.

### **CONSTRAINING DEVELOPMENT**

Sadly, most NGO’s and development agencies have taken on the sustainability mantle and endorse its underlying assumption, the need to limit growth and a sentiment of constraint.

Social concerns such as poverty have been put to the fore due to protests by the developing world, whose needs since the Earth Summit in 92 have clearly not been met. Developing countries unable to afford environmental concerns, have pointed out that the West is prescribing without putting its own house in order, where consumption of natural resources is far higher, and are angry that promised aid has not been delivered. Since the early 1990s, the economic reality is that global inequality has increased, and for too many, poverty and unemployment remain as acute as ever.

“Agenda 21 addressed the crucial question of financing sustainable development... However, this has not been followed by an increase in financial assistance to developing countries. On the contrary, official development aid, including debt relief, (ODA), which represented 0.33% of donor’s GNP in 1992, declined to 0.22% by 1998”<sup>9</sup>

Some developing countries threatened to disregard this summit altogether. Their immediate problems are human not environmental degradation. To placate the developing world, poverty has been put high on the list of issues to consider at RIO+10, the WSSD in 2002. As Clare Short MP UK secretary of state for international development has made clear in her speeches on Rio +10:

“Protecting the environment is not an end in itself. We do not simply want to conserve the world that we have.



We want improved lives for the poor of the world and a world that is sustainable for future generations”

This new found social conscience is the reason this summit has changed its name from the ‘Earth summit’ to the ‘World Summit on Sustainable Development’

### **BLAMING THE POOR**

But, far from eradicating poverty by promising serious human development, we are now told that the poor themselves are the unwitting creators of their own and others’ poverty due to their direct dependency on the natural environment. Improving the lives of the poor now means getting the poor to be more environmentally responsible for their own good.

“So far the war on poverty has failed. This degrades and threatens us. It looms as a threat to the environment-not only that of the poor but of all of us.”<sup>10</sup>

“Paradoxically the socio-economic activities of the rural population tend to degrade environmental resources, and threaten the life support systems necessary to meet the needs and aspirations of the general population, thus aggravating poverty.”<sup>11</sup>

Worse still, tying poverty into an environmental agenda, which is precisely what sustainable development involves, not only blames the poor but promises sustained poverty.

Development and decent living standards have always involved subordinating the environment to human needs, rather than constraining human activity for the sake of the environment. Far from eradicating poverty, the contemporary focus on poverty threatens to preserve degraded livelihoods and high mortality rates for future generations. Consider some obvious examples. Due to their dependency on the natural environment, natural disasters are more likely to devastate the lives of the poor in the developing world. The obvious solution would involve more development not environmental management to prevent such vulnerability. Floods in the UK rarely kill anyone, as the UK has the infrastructure and capacity to cope. Indeed floods in the UK only happen as a result of lack of investment in decaying flood control schemes. In Mozambique the floods killed hundreds yet no one has advocated major investment in infrastructure, flood control barrages or new urban centres and cities.

When the American National Academy of Sciences published their report, International Strategy for Disaster Reduction 2001, they did not make one single reference to the need for development in order to reduce the risk of disaster. Yet the disaster statistics are overwhelmingly clear. Though major advanced countries such as the USA sustain incredible natural disasters every year, they suffer nominal casualties. Similarly we might compare the earthquake in Kobe and

earthquake in Turkey, where development differentials were the deciding factor on whether you lived or died.

Four million children per year<sup>12</sup> die from respiratory diseases due to wood burning, but where are the big new plans for electrification or gas pipelines? Three million die annually from water borne diseases. Yet there are no plans for major international investment in water purification, sewage plants and the domestic piped water, which we take for granted in the West. Sewage disposal in London was solved through an underground system over 150 years ago and even the Romans had a working sewage system and did not have to dig a hole in a field.

“We have free range toilets, you have to walk and dig a hole, it’s hard for old people. When it rains it seeps into streams where we drink and we get guinea worm”<sup>13</sup>

Instead of a decent infrastructure programme, the exemplary solution to water borne disease in the developing world, proposed by the Geneva based WSSCC (Water Supply and Sanitation Collaborative Council) together with the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, is pathetic. It seeks to replicate their campaign in South Africa, known as WASH or Water, Sanitation & Hygiene for All, in 30 other countries. WASH involves a locally made kiddies playpump, a WASH T-shirt, a ‘Working for Water’ environmental booklet on water-hungry weeds and a “cholera roadshow” forming a low cost awareness campaign to promote the simple acts of handwashing and weeding. This campaign, recently launched in KwaZulu-Natal province, is celebrated as “a landmark event, not just for this country but also for other nations which are plagued by the devastating impacts of the lack of adequate sanitation.”<sup>14</sup>

As well as death by lack of weeding and hand washing, the poor it is argued have over exploited the land leading to desertification. Yet there are no plans to invest in saline tolerant crops, hydro efficient fertilisers or large dams and irrigation schemes. The possibility is not even raised for peasant farmers to live in urban centres as producers in modern industry rather than subsisting on the land. Rather, it is argued, the poor need Western eco-education to manage their environment more responsibly, to prevent deforestation, to safeguard freshwater streams and fish stocks, to re-build mud homes on flood planes, to manage disasters better, to prevent desertification. Where does this leave people if not dependent on the land?

### **LIVING ON THE LAND-FOREVER**

Aspiring to levels of development that would ensure real North-South equality and not leave people vulnerable and dependent on nature are, we are told, unrealistic, undesirable and inappropriate in the modern world. But why should the developing world have to accept less than the best? Subsistence agriculture, simply growing enough to survive,



died out for the majority in Western society nearly 200 years ago. It is now being given a new lease of life in the developing world, under the banner of sustainability.

Indeed the WSSD wants to protect subsistence life (estimates suggest 70%-95% of people in the developing world are engaged in subsistence farming), arduous toil and barely surviving off the land. Poverty is not only being used to advance an environmental agenda, it is being put on a pedestal and poverty kills.

In the West sustainability means buying organic goods off supermarket shelves, increasing renewable energy supplies and working out how to manage traffic congestion and pollution. For the majority of people who after all live in the developing world, sustainability means trying to stay alive. Is that good enough?

"You have cookers and food in minutes, you don't even grow it. It takes us all day to find food, fetch water from a stream, build a fire and cook, we don't have the thing you call free time and we've never owned a book. You have pets in the UK, in Ghana we put them in a pot and cook them. How long have you had these fantastic flyovers, sky scrapers, glass buildings, tunnels underground and bus shelters. We don't have paved roads. In the UK you can know people who live at the other end of your country".<sup>15</sup>

The shift since Rio ten years ago is in fact a change for the worse as sustainability has become entrenched and its parameters extended. The true meaning of the concept should be rephrased to read 'development that guarantees poverty and inequality for the present generation and promises even worse for future generations.'

Summit participants conclude otherwise.

"...the choice before today's political leaders is historic, even revolutionary in nature: whether to move forward rapidly to build a sustainable economy, or to risk allowing the expansion of human numbers, the increase in greenhouse gas emissions and the loss of natural systems to undermine the economy."<sup>16</sup>

They are convinced the facts prove the need for sustainable development to go even further. But this is sustainable development and these facts suggest going further down the 'sustainability' dirt track will be disastrous for the developing world.

### **RIO 92-JOHANNESBOURG 2002-TEN YEARS OF HOLDING PEOPLE BACK**

Ironically, AID agencies and NGO's have helped put poverty on a pedestal and are advocating a disastrous path. That might seem paradoxical since their avowed mission is one of assisting the developing world, but it's true. However well meaning

they may be, the vast majority of NGO's and AID agencies are overtly suspicious of new industrial investment and economic growth in the developing world, the only means of transforming the status quo. Disillusionment with economic growth and industrial development in the West have led many to question the desirability of 'Western forms of development' in the developing world.

"To make sustainable development work there needs to be trade-off between the developed and the developing worlds. The North followed a growth path, from Industrial Revolution times until today, which was probably the worst case growth path you could follow – with massive dislocation and environmental degradation."<sup>17</sup>

When young people from the Brazilian Amazon visited the UK on an exchange visit, they asked what these terrible problems caused by industrial development are and was it the second world war people were referring to. When we explained it was the amount of roads, construction, industry and technology that people were objecting to they were astonished.

"You can see the miles and miles of farm land in England because you have motorways and you can see the miles of forest in the Amazon because you build aeroplanes. You don't have pollution you have purification plants and toilets in your house, what is wrong with you? You think organic food is better. We only have organic food because we can't afford fertilisers, pest control, fridges and supermarkets. We can't export without increasing productivity, developing transport and refrigeration so why would we want to be organic? It means growing your own food, suffering blight, pests and dioreah, being worse off and cut off from the world."<sup>18</sup>

Sustainable development is the antithesis of human progress. Its advocates would find the idea of industrial development in the Brazilian Amazon particularly appalling, regardless of what Brazilians want and think.

"One of the fallacies of development economics that the sustainable thesis still retains is the belief that, by maximising economic growth, poverty can be eliminated. And doing that in an 'environmentally prudent' way would supposedly give us sustainable development. As Herman Daly persuasively argues, 'it is precisely the non-sustainability of growth that gives urgency to the concept of sustainable development'."<sup>19</sup>

Where industrial models of agricultural production have taken root in the developing world they are, it is argued, wreaking havoc.



“The industrial model of agricultural production is contributing, dramatically, to ecological disruption and the destruction of rural communities. Increasingly the globalized food system is the root cause of the social and environmental crisis in agriculture. This kind of energy-intensive and chemical-dependent agriculture degrades the fertility of soils, intensifies the effects of droughts, pollutes water, causes salinization and compaction, destroys genetic resources, wastes fossil fuel energy, contaminates the food supply, and contributes to climate change”<sup>20</sup>

Yet industrial models of production and economic growth are precisely the forms of development that have given Western society such high standards of living and superior quality of life. The alternatives being prescribed for the developing world would never be acceptable in the West. No one in the West would accept subsistence living, appropriate technology, basic education, basic skills and only the most basic needs being met. No one in the West would accept the poor in the developing world dictating what we can and cannot have either.

#### **DENYING THE DEVELOPING WORLD MODERNITY**

So who provides these prescriptions for the developing world? Who decides what is appropriate for the developing world? It certainly isn't the poor themselves. People in China want mobile phones, fridges, rubber tappers in the heart of the Amazonian rain forest want roads, Indians on designated reserves want electrification, mechanisation, cars, swimming pools and a right to sell their land. Young people in Ghana want TVs, microwaves and dishwashers, farmers want tractors, fertilisers and access to surgery if they need it and the right to travel to the West when it suits them. None of these fit the 'sustainability' agenda, yet they are all phenomena we take for granted in the West and they are aspirations regularly expressed in the developing world.

Logically, one would think, to end poverty, that the most advanced western technology would be the best for developing countries. Yet as the Western model of development is said to be the worst one for the developing world to imitate, people are being actively dissuaded from aspiring to anything which might mean copying Western development and emulating Western standards of living. In Northern Ghana, Oxfam began a programme to re-introduce the bullock plough as tractors are 'unsustainable'. Rather than winning investment for tractor production and repair, Oxfam felt it more appropriate to teach people not to want them. Dragging a plough behind a bullock all day might sound like a good idea to a community service volunteer in their university holidays but advocating such slave like toil as a way of life is beyond contempt.

The anti-growth, anti-modernity sentiment leads some to question material development altogether. Colonialists and missionaries used to comment on how 'happy the natives are', not having to worry about running the world and great wealth.

Now we have a worse version: you have to be poor to be happy.

“...many types of human need are best met in ways that are only tenuously connected with material consumption. Examples include our need for tranquillity, love, community, spiritual development, learning and excitement. Indeed, material consumption sometimes inhibits us from addressing these needs by absorbing our time in a 'work and spend' cycle. It may even encourage us to look in the wrong direction in our efforts for fulfilment. Few of us really believe, as implied in many TV commercials, that driving a particular brand of car will bring us peace or a loving relationship, but the culture of the market encourages us to look for material solutions to existential problems.”<sup>21</sup>

#### **KEEPING THE MONOPOLY OF THE BEST IN THE HANDS OF THE WEST**

This kind of spiritual speculation is itself one of the luxuries afforded people with free time, thanks to modern technology. Poverty is hardly an existential problem. Worse still, denying the developing world Western development levels ensures the West retains its monopoly over the best techniques. According to former West German premier Willy Brandt, whose commission authored the Brandt report on Appropriate Technology in 1980, technology suitable for the third world 'can include cheaper sources of energy, simpler farm equipment, and techniques in building, services and manufacturing which save capital; smaller plants and scales of operations which can permit dispersal of activity'<sup>22</sup>

The developing world is expected to accept less than the best, such as 'simple', 'small scale' technologies or second-rate hand-me-downs and cast-offs to 'make do' or 'mend'.

In the perverted creed of sustainability, "developing countries are already the leaders in some energy technologies, such as modern uses of biomass".<sup>23</sup> In a bitter twist, the renewable technologies of recycling faeces, dung powered gas plants, and advanced cooking stoves are exalted at the expense of conventional energy sources prevalent in developed countries.

Indeed, economist E. F. Schumacher (author of the influential book 'Small is Beautiful' written in the early 1970s) argued that "minority world" advanced technology was rarely appropriate to the situation of people in the majority world, and that an alternative technology was needed. A classic example is that of tractors provided for agriculture in Africa, where the necessary infrastructure and specialized skills to keep the tractors maintained were largely lacking, so that after a short period they became heaps of rusting metal. Cases like these led Schumacher to formulate the concept of intermediate technology, something, as he said, "between the sickle and the combine harvester" rather than argue for the



development of infrastructure necessary to maintain modern technologies. Schumacher also argued that the model of development that the minority world practises is environmentally unsustainable. He said that “the Earth cannot afford the ‘Modern World’. It requires too much and accomplishes too little”.<sup>24</sup>

Not only are Schumacher’s ideas now part of the gospel according to sustainability but aid workers and agencies even complain that these minimalist efforts are ruined by ungrateful and corrupt outfits who fail the Western sustainable development test of ‘good governance’.

“Africa is torn by tribalism, a dictatorial mindset, short-term opportunism and corrupt practices. To blame the West is to hide the problems. We have sent second-hand bicycles to Malawi to provide the start-up for a small business, but they have not been released because of red tape and the need for payments to get officials to release the goods. In Uganda we helped to set up a carpentry workshop and the director ran off with the funds. This has been our experience throughout Africa.”<sup>25</sup>

#### **PEOPLE IN THE DEVELOPING WORLD ARE APPARENTLY A DIFFERENT SPECIES – HOMO PRIMITIVUS**

‘Second hand bikes’ and ‘carpentry workshops’, demonstrate depressingly low expectations of people’s needs. (In any event most bicycle manufacture now takes place in developing countries.) Referring always to ‘basic needs’, ‘basic education’ and ‘basic skills’ – Western NGO’s eschew aspirations, fail to think of the developing world populous as perhaps not so dissimilar from themselves and advocate technologies which they would never for a moment accept as adequate in their own homelands.

Who decided that people in the developing world need so little? Take for example the TV appeals to sponsor a child, all suggest that children in the developing world need very little. The US Save the Children website for example invites you to sponsor Rojie, a 9-year old boy from the Philippines for \$24 a month. The website also informs us that more than 600 million children live in families that have to survive on less than \$1 a day. This is intended to pull the heart strings and show us that the \$24, which Save the Children expects, is not very much to ask for. It is not actually very much for the Rojie’s of the developing world either. It would not get them into a decent hospital, college, on-line, on the phone to mates or a bag of books never mind a flight to the Johannesburg summit.

A brief glimpse at the detail of the goals, on the agenda at the World Summit, confirms the miserly and mean-spirited ambitions of this blinkered emphasis on universal basic needs. Targets focus on extreme poverty (less than \$1 a day), gender equality, mortality rates of mothers and infants, and access to primary education and safe water. In the spirit of sustainability, measures capable of significant improvements are dismissed

as frivolous. The small matter that half the world’s population lives on less than \$2 a day, two-fifths do not have access to limited sanitation, and almost a third remain without electricity is apparently tolerable to Summiteers. Where targets are tabled, they are worse than useless. By keeping the focus on the extreme poverty of a small minority, the grinding poverty of the greater mass of the developing world is minimised.

Water Vision 21 judiciously devalues both wastewater treatment and water services for industry and agriculture in developing countries, and unashamedly proposes a spartan target of residential water use insufficient to either shower in the morning, flush a toilet at night or bathe once a week. The G8 Renewable Energy Taskforce indicate a basic power supply of 30 Watts constitutes access to electricity in rural areas: enough to “listen to the radio a few hours per day, read at night, consume a minimal amount of clean water”, not at the same time mind you. Simple demands like refrigeration, home heating and boiling water are postponed indefinitely, whilst modern necessities, such as air conditioning, washing machines, dishwashers, PCs and TVs, are abandoned. In fact, this is as good as it gets for those outside the loop. Most projects promote superficial improvements to primitive technologies like solid fuel stoves, pit latrines and dry sanitation – burning dung, shitting in a pit and then recycling it – in preference to the necessity of forging modern infrastructure plans. It is intriguing that educated Westerners dedicate so much thought to Third World shit and dirt.

#### **USING POVERTY TO STOP DEVELOPMENT**

The basic, small scale, local, and ‘appropriate technology’ advocated as ‘sustainable’ cannot begin to address the problems people face in terms of energy, water and health provision. Paradoxically and all too often, the prevalence of poverty itself, is used as an argument against major development programmes. Howls of rage by NGO supporters followed the Tony Blair’s approved deal with the Tanzania government to sell it a modern air-traffic control system for example.

“It is absolutely crazy for Britain to approve such a deal when children are being taught in Tanzania sitting in front of blackboards under trees. The Tanzania decision underlines why we need to have sustainable development in the [Export Control] bill as it would prevent such a deal being signed.”<sup>26</sup>

Similarly in Ghana in 1999, the IMF suggested that Ghana should close its universities in order to fund universal primary education. In a country where basic needs are not being met, many cannot read or get fresh water, why have universities, so the argument ran. A suggestion to close Harvard in the US or Oxford or Cambridge in the UK because there is homelessness would cause uproar amongst all but the most backward. The assumption is you don’t need air-traffic control systems





or universities in poor countries. How you might develop with a majority educated to the age of 12 only and cut off from airspace is never considered, as sustainable development does not mean development as in the West.

The sustainable development agenda is littered with proposals for small scale, low level changes: reduction in poverty, never its elimination; reduction in disease, never its eradication; never the all embracing transformation that people in the developing so forcefully demonstrate that they would like to see.

'Estimates suggest that indoor not outdoor air pollution kills up to four million children a year due to breathing in the soot from stoves burning wood based fuels. This can be reduced by simple solutions such as improved ventilation and stoves'.<sup>27</sup> UK Secretary of State for International Development Clare Short MP calls for 'reduced' deaths from wood-fired stoves rather than their elimination, which is perfectly feasible with universal access to electricity.

Thousands of people in the developing world vote with their feet on a daily basis – moving, migrating and attempting to flee rural underdevelopment. This forcefully demonstrates their genuine desire for much more than the inferior changes permitted by the sustainable development lobby.

### **NO ESCAPE FROM FORTRESS POVERTY**

The tens of thousands, who bid to escape to the West and are refused entry each year, do so for one simple and sensible reason, to find a better life. The most 'well meaning' and concerned aid agencies and NGO's refuse to contemplate such a movement of people. Not only do they believe Western style development is undesirable and impossible in the developing world, they also want to stop people moving into the West. If they were serious about poverty reduction and participation why not advocate Western levels of development or remove all immigration controls and let people in the developing world decide where they'd like to live and what they prefer? If Westerners want to keep the developing world as it is, to fit their romantic notion of a simple natural life, why don't they swap with people who would like to live longer and enjoy the amenities in the West. Whilst imprisoning animals in the confines of a zoo is unacceptable today, confining humans to a life of backbreaking toil is not.

Bo Kjellern, Chair of the INCD, the Convention to Combat Drought and Desertification, believes that the new social orientation of sustainability should not just be limited to alleviating poverty. For him, it also means keeping people where they live now:

"or we will have destabilising effects of migratory movements of people which will not be controllable. Then there will be a direct impact on people in the North."<sup>28</sup>

The stark message here is evidently stay as you are so we can stay as we are.

### **REDUCING POVERTY BY CUTTING BACK ON PEOPLE**

The sustainability lobby of course will not contemplate an open door policy, they fear migration and they fear population expansion. They play the un-scientific and racist Malthusian 'numbers game' blaming overpopulation for environmental degradation and lack of resources. Of course they always mean the developing world, never the rich most densely populated cities in the West. It may be trendy to dress it up these days and call population control, reproductive health, but there are many summiteers who do not worry about being politically correct, they just want to stop the world's population expanding. In fact the Earth Summit in Rio helped popularise the idea of 'over population' as a key problem and the sustainable development concept encompassed a concern to limit the number of people.

Fears are not consigned to panics about population. Sustainable development discussions are awash with panics and apocalyptic doom. Deforestation, desertification, global warming, biodiversity loss, the collapse of ecosystems, anyone would think "the end is nigh". All these inflated problems are apparently caused by too much development rather than problematic due to the lack of it.

For environmentalists, the fact that people are not even as poor as they used to be and consumption per capita is actually increasing, is particularly scary.

"Populations are still increasing in most countries.

Consumption per capita also increases steadily. Resources are used ever more intensively."<sup>29</sup>

### **PRODUCE AND CONSUME LESS**

Charles DeGaulle once said we all have to tighten our belts so the standard of living can rise. Now, to save the planet, we are told to tighten our belts, breed less, produce less and consume less.

In 1993 Canadian artist Ted Dave founded 'Buy Nothing Day' for every 24 November. He says 'The West's desire for luxury goods drains not only the already impoverished developing countries, but also harms the environment, with the destruction of wildlife and the dumping of waste products'.<sup>30</sup>

But how can poor countries develop if Western consumers abstain from buying exports from the third world? Anthony Sampson has claimed that 'many diamonds in rings and necklaces have played a part in financing massacres'<sup>31</sup> but will the people of Sierra Leone or Angola really be better off if we refuse to buy these so-called 'blood diamonds'?

### **GRIM REAPERS OF THE WEST**

Everywhere you look NGO's and AID agencies now see people as the gravediggers of the world and serious development their greatest folly. People apparently cause global warming, through over consumption, rampant deforestation and unsustainable practices and then die as a result of the





consequent floods that ensue. Humanity has apparently become suicidal in its quest to better itself. In truth, NGO's and AID agencies have a dim view of humanity in general.

In fact human activity provides the only means of survival and the so called human effect or ecological footprint is in fact too little, not too great. Today's fascination with 'ecological footprints' is not intended to gauge the extent to which humanity has transformed the world. Instead, human activity is recorded as a toxic pathogen colonising the planet – in the same way that 'viral load' measures the spread of HIV in the human body. Whilst this media-friendly illustration suits the environmentalists, it actually makes no sense. Human industry and the natural world are neither separate nor unchanging entities. In presenting humanity and nature as discrete and conflicting, sustainable development distorts this relationship to prioritise the environment over people. The ideology of sustainable development shuns industrial development and material living standards, and assumes that such improvements must be weighed up against their likely environmental impact. We must not allow the mystical mantra of 'ecological footprints' to stand in the way of African and Asian ambitions to make their mark on planet Earth.

Scientifically much of the doom mongering rests on impoverished science and grandiose prejudice including Malthusian population panics. Meanwhile, the measures we take for granted in the West – from dams to prevent floods, irrigate or to generate power, and fertilisers to improve soils and increase yields – are forbidden as they impact too greatly on the environment. Desertification for example is only a problem if living on the land indefinitely is presumed and irrigation and fertilisation schemes are written off. Desertification is also wildly exaggerated. In Uganda for example, the British Red Cross is funding its Ugandan partners to run a tree planting scheme apparently to prevent drought and thus desertification in an area known as Mukono. Yet this is an area on the edge of Lake Victoria which experiences remarkably high levels of rainfall. Donors clearly call the shots here, regardless of science or local circumstances.

*"Desertification has a devastating effect on human populations and the physical environment. It threatens the livelihood of over one billion people, including 35 million who are forced to abandon their homelands as farming becomes unsustainable and regional conflicts spread. International migration results from environmental degradation and unsustainable development practices...Some 35 million 'environmental refugees' fleeing the effects of desertification will likely become a major problem of the next century."*<sup>32</sup>

When the appalling lack of infrastructure in Africa and the rest of the developing world brings about tragic disasters like floods and famines, summiteers hasten to claim that, far from

being exacerbated by low levels of development, these calamities are caused by modernisation, not solved by it. Incomprehensibly, for them natural disasters prove that people are not amenable for life in the modern world. In every case, they privilege pristine nature over the interests of human beings.

### **INVITING DISASTER**

In February 2001, the World Bank and 'an international coalition of governments' launched the Provention Consortium 'to equip developing countries with the means to better cope with natural disasters such as earthquakes, hurricanes and floods, and reduce the loss of life and destruction they cause'. But one principle adopted by this consortium seems to undermine these good intentions:

*"Environmental protection is key. The consortium will work to protect natural resources such as forests, coastal mangroves, and coral reefs that can protect human settlements from the impact of cyclones and other weather-related disasters."*<sup>33</sup>

This World Bank report fails to point out, that the world has had forests, coastal mangroves and coral reefs for millennia, but only relatively recently, with the advance of modernisation, has humanity secured the ability to steadily reduce natural disaster losses and, most vitally, injuries and fatalities. But development is the one prescription that the World Bank consortium refuses to endorse as a remedy for disaster victims. Indeed, by struggling to preserve the forests and coastal mangrove swamps, the chances are that the advanced development that is required to manage the impact of natural disasters will be thwarted.

In every case, nature it seems is more important than human beings. Conservation projects and animal sanctuaries are eulogised; schemes such as hydroelectric projects with their reservoirs, generators and electricity pylons are damned.

### **DAMNED IF YOU DO AND DAMNED IF YOU DON'T**

Flooding by the river Yangtze in China, for example, regularly causes great destruction of life and property: devastating floods caused 1,200 deaths in July 1995; just three years later, the death toll from flooding was over 3,000 people. Beijing's decision to design and construct a series of dams and canals – commonly known as the Three Gorges Project has, despite these catastrophes, been greeted with howls of outrage by the environmental press. According to Simon Retallack in the Ecologist, the Three Gorges is 'the world's most environmentally and socially destructive infrastructure project', where the Chinese project 'will forcibly displace two million people and inundate precious arable land and archaeological sites'.<sup>34</sup> A somewhat bizarre description of efforts to channel flood water, from the Yangtze to the parched Mongolian



desert, for use as safe drinking water, agricultural irrigation and electricity (a whopping 10 percent of China's needs). The emphasis on historical heritage here is strange too, but cultural relics seem to acquire extra importance for the critics of development whenever the alternative is saving lives. Hence Times' correspondent Oliver August is concerned to tell us that the Yangtze basin played a key role in the formation of Chinese civilisation. The ancient Ba people are believed to have lived in the area 3000 years ago. Furthermore;

*"The White Crane Ridge [in the Yangtze valley] carries 18 fish figurines...and more than 30 000 characters of poetry, which were carved 1200 years ago. After the completion of the Three Gorges project in 2009, the White Crane Ridge will be under 40 metres of water."<sup>35</sup>*

Oliver August could of course raise the money to save these cultural relics, dig them out and move them (as happened in Egypt) but for August of course they are just an excuse to hold back the needs of the Chinese for the sake of the environment.

Far from China, disaster hit Mozambique in February and March 2000 when catastrophic flooding occurred, following torrential rains and cyclones. The floods, the worst in Mozambique's history, killed tens of thousands of livestock and ruined vital crops. An estimated 500 people perished, and over a million were affected, left homeless, and at severe risk of malnutrition and disease. Flooding again brought disaster at the start of 2001, when the river Zambezi burst its banks. While not as devastating as in 2000, the flooding still caused the displacement of thousands of people and many deaths, in both Mozambique and neighbouring Malawi.<sup>36</sup>

In respect to the floods that devastated Mozambique in 2000, Frances Christie and Joseph Hanlon have written:

*"Human activity made the floods worse. The existence of dams did not ameliorate the floods, and probably made them worse by reducing the small floods that clean river beds. Changing land use patterns reduced the upstream absorptive capacity and blocked the release of water downstream....floods this serious are much more likely in future."<sup>37</sup>*

If only Christie and Hanlon would look up from their narrow focus upon Mozambique and take in the bigger picture. Where is the risk of flooding worse: in Mozambique or in the West? In Mozambique obviously, and yet Western countries are far more developed and have many times more dams than Mozambique. It is not dams and irrigation schemes, but too few dams and too little irrigation that are the cause of Mozambique's problems. If it had more means to manage the flood waters, they could even be put to good use, perhaps generating electricity.

Unlike Mozambique, China can afford to go its own way and

ignore the busy-bodies who seem to care more about antique calligraphy than about saving human lives in the present. By building the world's biggest dam project, the Chinese will soon have cleaner water and electricity as well as saving thousands of lives every year. But there is little chance that the NGO industry will permit a country like Mozambique to build its own canals and dams to prevent flooding from taking its regular toll of African lives every year. It's not development, but 'sustainable' development, that is allowing nature to continue to wreck peoples' lives.

Where there are no cultural artefacts or sites of interest to counter the case for large dams, environmental campaigners have resorted to all and sundry in order to resist these ambitious civil engineering projects. In the latest incident of muck-raking, the successful completion of the Lesotho Highlands Water Project has been jeopardised by blowing up the bribery scandals that have sullied the project; good governance substituting heritage as and when fitting.

#### **INTERFERING WITH NATURE IS FORBIDDEN-THE STATUS QUO MUST BE PRESERVED**

Mega projects such as dams, sewage systems, electrification and major technological progress are all seen as mistakes developed by misguided Western society. For the sustainable development lobby the status quo must be preserved. Developments in biotechnology such as GM crops, which could provide new solutions to disease, vitamin deficiencies and low productivity, are written off as ecological genocide.

*"The dawning realisation that GM crops could further undermine the sustainability of agriculture needs to be reflected in practical policy. There is a need for more measures to build up public confidence in the precautionary assessment of GM technologies; to tighten the management of trials; to examine the implications of genetic engineering for intellectual property rights."<sup>38</sup>*

Even the place that they graciously reserve for humanity in their ecologically sustainable Utopia is bounded by a virulent antipathy towards a vision of dynamic mankind. Any attempt to lift our eyes above the earth's horizon and observe how well other people around the world live is demonised as 'evil globalisation'. Indeed environmental journalist George Monbiot whimsically hopes that the anti-globalisation protests might engender widespread disenchantment among the 'wretched of the earth' with the seductiveness of Western riches and prosperity:

*"If the poor of the earth see the images of disturbances in European and American cities, it is likely to encourage them to wonder at the nature of the wealth, lifestyle and conspicuous consumption of the societies held up as a model of emulation and aspiration. If the young people of*



these countries experience such high levels of satisfaction that they are prepared to risk injury and even death in resisting these benefits, this must increasingly call into question the advantages of the global model"<sup>39</sup>

For Monbiot, primitive survival is romanticised as an end in itself and wild beasts regarded as role models. Like animals, human beings are consigned to continue to scratch a bare living off the land.

### **MIND THE GAP**

Though summiteers claim their intention is to relieve people's poverty, celebrating grinding privation as 'sustainability' reinforces the immense chasm that continues to persist between the rich North and the impoverished South. Demanding that everyone must be poor reinforces that loathsome difference because it counsels the vast mass of ordinary people to be content to stay as they are...and where they are.

The difference between the rich and the poor is the only difference that counts in the real world. The flagging up of cultural difference, ethnic or tribal divisions only serves as an apology for the real differences between people, that is their material circumstances. The notion that people living in developing countries are weighed down by tradition and are as a result different from Westerners used to be called racism. While imperialists exploited racism and Apartheid to divide and rule, the sustainable development industry today urges their audiences to respect the multifarious ethnic divisions that are the repulsive legacy of the colonial regimes.

Ethnic and cultural differences are venerated and provide a convenient excuse for differential treatment and inequality. Not only does the obsession with cultural difference mask inequality there is a greater danger in the way it is used to undermine autonomy and national government, interfere in the affairs of sovereign states and prescribe what is appropriate for the developing world.

"Future development strategies need to recognise that, far from impeding development, many indigenous African values and institutions can support it. For instance the persistence of primary group values, although often deplored by outsiders, has been a significance force for development. Communal culture, the participation of women in the economy, respect for nature – all these can be used in constructive ways."<sup>40</sup>

In 1994, Mandela's government passed the Restitution of Land Rights Act. In 1999, the black majority government of South Africa handed over 100, 000 acres of land in the Kgalagadi Transfrontier Park to the Xhmani bushmen. When they began their land claim, it was thought that there were only 450 Xhmani left. Western anthropologists managed to trace another 550, but only 15 were able to speak their language.

Even so, they soon expect to be granted commercial, tracking and hunting licenses. However, only five percent of all Bushmen still practice hunting.<sup>41</sup>

Meanwhile, on a patch of land near Johannesburg airport, an estimated 10 000 squatters from the township of Alexandra had their crude huts bull-dozed after the ruling ANC had won a court order quashing their attempt to set up homes there in July 2001 as 'illegal'. It is not known what the tribal affiliations of the squatters are.<sup>42</sup>

Encouraging people to rediscover nomadic subsistence life as their culture and bury themselves in remote rural areas is regularly proclaimed as the height of sustainability. Yet squatters attempts to create urban settlements is criminalised. Interestingly, we should note here that this approach keeps needy people out of the cities where they may be a problem for the urban elites. Nurturing subsistence living as the ideal lifestyle for saving the poor also conveniently entices eager migrants from heading for the prosperous West too.

### **CELEBRATING SUBSISTENCE LIFE**

Elmar Altwater, German Green economist: suggests the poor should oppose unlimited economic development and favour sustainable development because it gives them work:

"The substitution of fossil energy consumption by living labour and the increase in employment would reduce the consumption of resources and emissions and reconcile policies of full employment and of ecological sustainability."<sup>43</sup>

What sort of work is this? Perhaps Altavar thinks unemployed workers in the West should not expect to develop new IT skills and jobs but move onto waste ground, use hand tools to till it all day for food then go home and recycle enough waste to heat hand built huts. Development has always involved a division of labour, increased productivity and technological progress to ensure our whole lives are not taken up with the arduous tasks of basic survival. Why should the developing world except anything less?

There is nothing virtuous about subsistence life. The wretched obligations of staying alive in developing countries devour 2.5 hours each day gathering about 6 kg of wood and dung for cooking and heating.<sup>44</sup> In Africa and Asia, women ordinarily walk 6km to collect water weighing the equivalent of your airport luggage allowance (20kg). Added to the back-breaking toil of ploughing, weeding and hoeing, mostly by hand, and hazardous effects of cooking over an open fire, life in the developing world is intolerable.

Sustainable development is a Western programme with nothing to offer but more of the same to people in the developing world. The World Summit cost thousands of Rands to organise; its delegations will be jetted in, to think and relax in luxurious hotels and remote ivory towers, they are to be



served by unpaid volunteers and amply protected by police from the poor in South Africa. Many representatives themselves belong to undemocratic organisations, not accountable to anyone but themselves. They will, nevertheless, use the platform provided by the conference to question democratically elected governments they don't like, and pontificate from on high what sustainable lifestyles are appropriate for the majority in the developing world.

Meanwhile, billions of rural dwellers will continue to vote with their feet and flee the countryside, even if it means enduring the transient indignities of shantytown life, just to avoid the sustainable life endorsed by this summit. For the majority, subsistence life is a miserable hell far worse than any Western existential angst instigated by alienation from modern urban life.

Curing the blight of rural poverty cannot be achieved by proposing that the world's poor worship at the shrine of nature. It entails harnessing the environment until people are relieved of their crippling dependence upon it.

Tony Blair:

"I am committed to personally going to the Rio+10 Conference in South Africa. Of course it is about the environment....But it is not just about the environment. It is about sustainable development as a whole. It is about the reduction of poverty, relief from debt, widening educational opportunity, tackling disease and linking these goals to those of conserving the natural resources upon which the poorest depend for clean water, food, fresh air and their living"<sup>45</sup>

UK Prime Minister, Tony Blair admits the summit is about the environment and poverty is a good justification for conservation. To allow the majority of people in the world to play a part in human development, global creativity and decision making, the developing world needs far more than clean water, food, fresh air and Blair's degraded and diminished vision of development. Blair can trot around the globe but does not believe in equal opportunity. He cannot conceive of the rural poor enjoying Western living standards and thus contributing to world politics, the arts, science and technological innovation.

#### **DROP THE SUSTAINABABBLE**

If we are serious about our intention of helping the world's poor to have decent living standards, we must ditch the absurd notion of sustainable development and put serious development on the agenda instead. Serious development means industry, infrastructure and the best possible environment to live in – just as the West itself enjoys. It's an irony of history that, to overcome third world poverty, it is necessary to advocate the adoption of the best Western techniques while criticising its ludicrous ecological propositions. Challenging the inane Western concept of sustainability doesn't mean knocking Western living standards. These are something people should have the choice of enjoying everywhere. You solve poverty by making people wealthy, not by forcing humanity back into the primeval wilderness. ■



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