



The corruption of sustainable development

The 2002 UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg was a golden—but tragically missed—opportunity, thanks in large part to the European Commission. Officials from around the world gathered ostensibly to begin remedying the global environment and social development crisis. Instead, they redefined the concept of ‘sustainable development’ to serve the trade and investment agenda of Northern governments and their corporations.

The Commission’s trade arm DG Trade, under the leadership of EU Trade Commissioner Pascal Lamy, effectively hijacked the EU’s agenda for the WSSD. It ignored civil society demands for a critical assessment of a decade of corporate globalisation and in contrast with its proclaimed wish to ‘harness globalisation’, the Commission rejected even a mention of the problems caused by the current global economic model in the summit conclusions. Instead, DG Trade demanded the summit’s endorsement of the new World Trade Organization (WTO) round of negotiations, including its own controversial proposal to allow corporations sweeping new rights through a WTO investment agreement. The Commission claimed that such a WTO agreement will benefit the world’s poorest and thereby contribute to ‘sustainable development’.

Numerous southern governments and civil society groups fought the Commission’s efforts to incorporate WTO-style policies into the summit’s agenda. They stressed that neoliberal trade and investment policies have actually accelerated, certainly not diminished, poverty and environmental degradation around the world. The question at the debate’s core was whether or not these policies can be reconciled with or are fundamentally at odds with sustainable development. EU and US pressure won the day, with the summit

not only endorsing the WTO's corporations-come-first policies, but actually declaring them a precondition for 'sustainable development'.

The Commission's true agenda was exposed in dramatic fashion when, in the final 24 hours of the summit, the United States and EU, led by the Commission, attempted to stitch together a spectacular deal whereby WTO 'free trade' rules would become elevated over international agreements for protecting people and the environment. The EU was looking for a backdoor way to avoid critical language on its deeply unsustainable Common Agriculture Policy (CAP) in the summit's final report. The deal, which was eventually defeated, completely contradicted earlier Commission reassurances that it would defend international environment, labour, and development agreements from WTO strictures.¹

Miraculously, the EU emerged from the Johannesburg summit with its 'green' image intact, thanks to its sophisticated rhetoric and the Bush Administration, which made the EU seem enlightened in comparison. DG Trade scored a victory, but at the expense of the UN's credibility on social and environmental issues.

For background reading on the WSSD, see:

- “Rio+10 and the corporate co-optation of sustainable development”, *Corporate Europe Observer*, Issue 9, June 2001.
- “Rio +10: Banking on feel good rhetoric”, *Corporate Europe Observer*, Issue 10, December 2001.
- “Rio+10 and the privatisation of 'sustainable development'”, *Corporate Europe Observer*, Issue 11, May 2001.
- “Countdown to Rio +10: 'sustainable development' and the public-private pantomime”, *Corporate Europe Observer*, Issue 12, August 2002.
- “WSSD: a little more conversation, a little less action”, Corporate Europe Observatory special release, November 2002.

Notes:

- 1 See “Joyless in Johannesburg”, *World Development Movement (WDM) in Action*, Winter 2002 issue. Also, personal communication with WDM, August 2003.

For links to the referred documents, see: <<http://www.wtocancun.com/rio.html>>

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