
The road to Johannesburg

The last preparatory conference for the World Summit on Sustainable Development is now taking place in Bali, Indonesia and people around the world are increasingly concerned about the process and asking themselves questions about the relevance of the upcoming Johannesburg Summit to address the problems being faced by humanity.

Those questions are the result of what has (not) happened during the past ten years after the 1992 Summit, when governments agreed on implementing a large number of actions to address the Earth's environmental problems. Sadly enough, the fact is that, apart from holding numerous international meetings and signing a number of agreements, very little has been done. "Sustainable development" appears to have simply become a meaningless catchword tossed around by governments and corporations in their intent to fool the public.

However, reality cannot be hidden so easily. The articles included in this and every single WRM bulletin show a pattern of forest loss --and of local peoples' resistance-- resulting from the socially unfair and environmentally destructive economic model that has been imposed by the North on the South. This does not mean that southern governments hold no responsibility over the problem --which they certainly do-- but it does imply that this responsibility is to a large extent shared by northern governments and their transnational corporations which --assisted by multilateral financial institutions-- benefit the most from the prevailing situation.

Within that context, the World Summit on Sustainable Development is in danger of becoming more akin with virtual than with on-the-ground reality. For instance, none else than Shell and Rio Tinto --both notorious for global and local destruction-- are now sponsoring a "Virtual Exhibition" that will "bring the world to Johannesburg - and take Johannesburg to the world." In the website (<http://www.virtualexhibit.net>), they modestly state that "if you want to be a part of the Johannesburg summit, you have found the perfect vehicle" --run with Shell's petrol and build with materials from Rio Tinto's mines?

The next thing we know, they will be talking of virtual sustainable development!

But in spite of corporate efforts, the fact is that reality is very real at the ground level, where countless peoples are struggling very hard to protect their forests against the greed of those and other corporations. These are the examples that need to be brought to Johannesburg. Corporate fairy tales about voluntary codes of conduct need to be exposed. For Johannesburg to be a useful starting point, the road leading to it must not be allowed to be paved with virtual reality. If you want to be a part of the Johannesburg summit, then please take a different vehicle!