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Globalisation, Risk, and International Environmental Policy

Viriato Soromenho-Marques[1]

The outbreak of a war waged in a wide scale in Iraq is a sad and strong evidence that globalisation is a complex process driven by a wide and multiple combination of forces, among which risk appears as a much strong trend.

Ulrich Beck's contribution helped us to understand how our understanding of modernity is deeply affected by a peculiar type of risk. It shows itself in a particular location, in the relationship between nature and culture. The "*end of the antithesis between nature and society*" opens the path to the rightful interpretation of environmental problems, which aren't "problems of our surroundings but – in their origins and through their consequences – [but] are thoroughly *social* problems, *problems of people*…"[2]

§1. The nature and task of international environmental policy

Environmental problems arising in the planetary sphere become global ones. That shift implies much more than a simple spatial or quantitative perspective. It takes within the need to review the modes of thinking both *politics* and *polities*, both the way we manage social and economic business on a daily basis and the wider angle of the deeper foundations of human communities. The *locus* of international environmental policy is precisely that connection: the need to reform old ways of thinking as well the

[1] Professor at the University of Lisbon, member of the Portuguese National Council for the Environment and Sustainable Development (CNADS), Vice-chair of the European Environmental Advisory Councils (EEAC).

[2] Ulrich Beck, *Risk Society. Towards a New Modernity* [1986], London-New Delhi, SAGE Publications, 2002, pp. 80-81.

urgent task of framing new institutions and a more covenantal approach to public policies and international relations.

In spite of the clearer evidence that we share as humans a common and perilous destiny, also true is the fact that "we do not currently possess institutions which allow us to monitor technological change [and the serious environmental risks involved], nationally or globally". International environmental policy, captured namely in the huge world conferences as the one that took place in Johannesburg in the summer of 2002 (WSSD), is an effort to tackle those crucial tasks humankind is facing as a whole. However, In the words of Anthony Giddens we have to understand the positive meaning of the concept of risk: "after all, one root of the term 'risk' in the original Portuguese means 'to dare'".[3] Therefore, most urgent is the task of fighting against prejudice and against the ugly consequences of a false sense of priorities. If we need to show an alarming example of that double challenge we need just to look towards the extremely dangerous way the current American administration is dealing with international matters in general and environmental ones in particular.

In the aftermath of the Johannesburg Summit on Sustainable Development public opinion around the world was (and is) deeply divided in its judgment of the Johannesburg outcomes[4]. I believe that this is the right moment to think with analytical precision, avoiding any kind of misleading perceptions. If we want to speak with clarity about the WSSD results we need to propose some transparent and unequivocal criteria, which may allow us to draw an objective and accurate assessment of its final output. Therefore I suggest a model containing four different types of criteria against which we may evaluate all the major Environmental International Conferences in terms of their final outcomes.

§2. A four categories Model

[3] Anthony Giddens, *Runaway World. How Gloablisation is Reshaping Our Lives*, London, Profile Books, 2002, p.35.

[4] A vivid picture of the WSSD complexity is given by the excellent paper of James Gustave Speth: "Perspectives on the Joahnnesburg Summit", Environment, January/February 2003, Volume 45, nº 1, pp.24-29.

According to that model, the various results of such political gatherings may be classified under the following categories:

> Declaratory: Results expressed in statements with ethical content, and potential political and juridical impact.

> Regimes: Results translated into international legislation of binding character, likely to result in lasting effects in both international and domestic policies.

> Institutions: Results driving towards the creation of new organisational tools aimed at the production of political consensus, law enforcement and scientific monitoring, enhancing the capacity of international system to stabilize and secure positive environmental trends.

>Actions: Results of great practical content, which should reflect agreement in *praxis*, translating the will to co-operate in environmental problem solving on a large scale, while choosing a local focus as the unit of implementation. This includes economic co-operation.

§3. A comparative approach to the three major international environmental conferences

We may now apply the above mentioned model to the three major international environmental conferences promoted by the United Nations since 1972, in order to assess their different sets of results in the framework of a meaningful comparative approach (see Table nº 1).

Table nº 1: The WSSD Performance in Comparative Perspective

Events	Results: Declaratory	Results: Regimes	Results : Institutions	Results: Actions
United Nation Conference on Human Environment (UNCHE)	The Stockholm Declaration (26 Principles)	None	United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)	Action Plan for the Human Environment (109 recommendations)

Stockholm (1972)				
United Nation Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) Rio (1992)	The Rio Declaration (27 Principles) (instead of the *Earth Charter*)	>Biodiversity >Climate Change (FCCC) > Seeds for the 1994 Desertification Convention	>Commission on Sustainable Development (CDS) >Consolidation of the Global Environment Facility (GEF)	Agenda 21 40 chapters ($ 625 billion annually needed for implementation)
World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) Johannesburg (2002)	Near to Nothing (Innocuous 37 points Declaration[5])	None	None	>Plan of Implementation (153 §§) >Loose partnerships

This comparison gives us a striking feeling of the tremendous degree of failure inherent to the sparse final product of the WSSD. Even at the level of the only fragile anchor for those who sustain a doubtful status of success for the Johannesburg Summit, I mean the positive agreements achieved within the Plan of Implementation, the fact is that there is a world of difference when we compare the careful calculation of the financial resources needed to give life to good ideas, showed by the proponents of the 1992 Agenda 21, with the careless and rather fragmentary manner of dealing with the famous WSSD Plan of Implementation.

This strong statement doesn't mean, however, that the WSSD was in itself useless. On the contrary, even failures and bitter experiences may be tools for better learning and political reform. The best way to explore the narrow Johannesburg results imply,

[5] While the previous declarations (from Stockholm and Rio) were submitted to a hard diplomatic and political discussion, given their clear declaratory high profile, the final version of the Johannesburg Summit was reached after a brief discussion in the last hours of the event, when the major actors were already in their way back home. The Johannesburg Declaration was only a ritual element of a larger process. I guess it will be seldom quoted in any serious political discussion in the years to come.

therefore, the acknowledgment of its intrinsic flaws and shortcomings, many of which were already visible at the preparatory stages of the Summit.

§4. Are we within a period of environmental policy decline?

We can envisage many possible several and complex sets of reasons why the final output from the WSSD can be evaluated as a major failure. However, a strict analysis of causes and effects is unlikely, in this case, to be helpful. Therefore, I suggest we will try to combine explanation with understanding.

In this way, our efforts to understand the wider picture, against which the WSSD setbacks make more sense, lead us to the admission that we are currently suffering from the negative impact of a declining period in the process of environment policy-making, everywhere in the planet. The concrete results of that are visible in the lower capacity of environmental to gain attention and priority in public agendas, both in domestic and international policies (see Table nº2).

Table nº 2: Major periods in global environmental policy

Periods	Beginning year(s)	Meaningful event(s)	Changing year(s)	Meaningful event(s)
First growing period	1962	Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring*	1973	Yom Kippur War
First declining period	1973 1974	First Oil Crisis	1983	Die *Grünen* in German *Bundestag*
Second growing period	1984 1985	Bhopal accident and Vienna Convention on ozone layer	1997	Kyoto Protocol
Second declining	1998	Environmental deadlock in	??	??

period		the US Congress		

This trend was already apparent in 1998 and notably so when the Clinton Presidency was unable to overcome the environmental deadlock in the US Congress in the area of environmental justice and on the further development of the 'Superfund'[6]. What is happening now with the George W. Bush's administration is more than the mere downsizing of environmental policies and instruments. It looks more like a true environmental disgrace, with consequent secondary impacts at global level.

§ 5. Lessons from the WSSD to the coming years

We may summarize as follows the three most significant lessons from the WSSD:

1. Exhaustion of the 'soft law' and 'soft institutions' approach: the Rio lessons weren't understood in the decade between 1992 and 2002.

2. Deep asymmetry between two different understandings of the role of science as a part of the policy-making process. One, that looks to the unavoidable uncertainties, inherent to the scientific research of complex systems, as an argument opening the path to a globalisation process driven by trade and economic profit. The other, interpreting uncertainty as a sound invitation to the wise self-containment, as it is apparent in the content of the precautionary principle. The best example of the collision between these two perspectives is well present in the current debate on the climate change.

[6] Michael Kraft and Denise Scheberle, "Environmental federalism at decade's end: new approaches and strategies", *Publius*, vol. 28, nº 1 (Winter 1998), pp. 131-146; Evan J. Ringquist and David H. Clark, "Local risks, states' rights, and federal mandates: remedying environmental inequities in the US federal system", *Publius*, vol. 29, nº 2 (Spring 1999), pp. 73-93.

3. Break of the 'Northern Alliance': Growing political tensions between the US and the EU allies, given the explosive Washington's blend of environmental isolationism with military interventionism. This is a core critical element, which we shouldn't expect to be corrected before a major shift in the American federal administration.

Therefore, the years ahead of us seem to project a dense and gloomy shade, increased by the bloody prospect of the endless war announced by George W. Bush. However, the harsh strength of reality will, sooner or later, put an end to this vain endeavour to dismiss the priority of the environmental crisis in the contemporary political agenda. Nevertheless, this fact only increases our duty to be in the right spot when the tide turns, ushering in a new and stronger period of growth in global public attention to the need for sound and effective environmental policies[7].

[7] I wish to thank Peter Hinchcliffe for his useful editing comments on this paper.