

# International cooperation and environmental politics after Rio and Johannesburg: Synchronicity of realities in a post-postmodern world?

Andreas Rechkemmer\*

**Abstract:** After the end of the East-West divide, the Nineties were hoped to become the decade of multilateralism and collective action at international level. The UN Earth Summit of Rio, 1992, was the peak season for postmodern concepts of global governance, transcending the traditional notions of nationally driven politics of independent states. The international system was perceived as heterogeneous network of interdependent actors, implying civil society, states and international organizations alike. This article examines the outcomes of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the largest global conference ever to date, and draws conclusions for future perspectives of global governance oriented approaches to international relations.

**Keywords:** Vereinte Nationen, Internationale Beziehungen, Global Governance, Globale Umweltpolitik, Weltumweltpolitik, Nachhaltige Entwicklung, Johannesburg-Gipfel, Unilateralismus.

## 1. Assessing the 2002 World Summit's outcomes

Much has been written on the Rio Earth Summit (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, UNCED), analysis and evaluation has been provided throughout.<sup>1</sup> In June 1997, at the 19<sup>th</sup> Special Session of the United Nations General Assembly called *Rio +5*, thorough stocktaking of the progress made so far in the implementation of UNCED's results was done. Of course, this process was identified as insufficient. As a result, the New York based Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was entrusted with an enhanced mandate, its programmatic priorities were reset for the following five years: climate, protection of forests, enforcement of environmental institutions.

But the real Rio stocktaking took place at another occasion, decided upon by the General Assembly's 55<sup>th</sup> Session in 2000: the *Rio +10* conference called *World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)* taking place from 26 August to 4 September 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa. Preparation of the WSSD was in the hands of the CSD. Four PrepCom meetings were held in 2002. Part of this preparatory process was also the 2000 United Nations Millennium Summit bringing about the Millennium Declaration whose development goals were reinforced by the WSSD. Also the WTO ministerial conference of Doha, Katar, November 2001, and the International Conference on Financing Development in Monterrey, Mexico, March 2002, anticipated the Johannesburg meeting.<sup>2</sup>

The WSSD, the largest conference ever to date, provided an opportunity for a comprehensive review of the achievements on sustainable development since Rio. At the same time, it was expected to provide a new impetus for a breakthrough on urgent matters. Prior to the conference in Johannesburg, however, it was already clear that the record of the Rio decade left a lot to be desired in terms of effectiveness and achievements of the agreements and action plans mentioned above. This resulted in both raising expectations and doubts in equal measure. Would the world summit finally bring about the turning point in international environmental policy that many had demanded for so long? Would it be capable of providing the decisive impetus to cooperation on development issues?

When it comes to assessing the record of results from Johannesburg, the skeptics are having a field day. In their eyes, the final document points to progress on a number of issues, but the qualifications added to nearly every conclusion leave them skeptical. World fish reserves *ought to* be protected by 2015. The most dangerous toxins to the environment are to be banned, but violators have *no sanctions* to fear. Subsidies for fossil fuels should be reduced, though *no strict time frame* was agreed on. There are also a number of impressive sounding declarations of intent: free and democratic access to fresh water was established as a basic right, energy production from non-fossil fuels is to be fostered, and the necessity of debt relief for the poorest countries was recognized. But, here too, the prospect of a breakthrough is questionable given the lack of concrete plans of action and clear mechanisms for imposing sanctions. The final documents are full of lax time frames and goals, open questions regarding financing and a lack of ideas of how to implement the plethora of good intentions at the institutional and organizational level.

The German ministerial representatives Jürgen Trittin (Minister for the Environment) and Heidemarie Wiecek-Zeul (Minister for Economic Cooperation and Development) interpreted the record more positively. Above all, they noted that measures to ensure safe water and drinking water for the world's poor, one

\* Dr. rer. pol. Andreas Rechkemmer, Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (SWP), Berlin.

1 One of the many articles on the Rio process, which has not been mentioned yet, but which I would like to recommend, is Swiderska, Krystyna [2002]: Implementing the Rio Conventions: Implications for the South/ In: *ibid* Opinion.

2 Under item 7, Chapter Four, the UNCCD preparatory conference for the WSSD is documented.

of the EU's biggest goals, were achieved. According to them, another success story was the agreement by the US despite a rejection of concrete time frames and quotas to the basic goal of putting an end to species extinction and to reducing the dangerous effects of chemicals. Moreover, they described regulations for corporate liability, fisheries and a review of modes of consumption and production in industrialized states, as well as the mention of 'global public goods' such as air and the oceans, as steps in the right direction.

The German representatives viewed energy as a central issue. Providing access to the world's two billion people living without electricity with an environmentally sound form of this energy was, along with the previously mentioned issue of access to water resources, the other of the two major goals of the summit. According to Wiczorek-Zeul and Trittin, energy and water are the issues that most clearly embody the notion of sustainability and are therefore the most important. The theory goes that securing basic provisions for electricity and water helps fight poverty, improves health, increases economic opportunities and protects the environment, provided renewable energy sources are used. Yet even before the conference, the EU had lowered its sights. For example, the EU proposed increasing the share of electricity produced by renewable energy sources to 15 percent by 2010, only marginally up from the current figure of 13 percent. Nevertheless, this modest attempt by the EU was shot down by the US and OPEC member states.

UNEP Executive Director Klaus Töpfer, who had helped shape the 1992 Rio summit when he was German Minister for the Environment, drew his own conclusions as head of the UN Environment Programme. Important progress was made at Johannesburg, he says. He was initially concerned that the summit would, in the end, reveal itself as merely cosmetic. In fact, Töpfer let it be known that he considers the Plan of Implementation of the WSSD the most important final document insufficient.

Still it would be inappropriate to declare the summit a failure. First, the very fact that it took place is in itself important. This has helped put global environmental policy back on the international agenda. The identification and acknowledgement of the central issues and goals of sustainable development in the final documents is also important. This provides an updated and nearly complete frame of reference for future initiatives and negotiations, be they unilateral, bilateral or multilateral. And 190 states were able to agree on a detailed list of actions, something that could not have been assumed prior to the summit. Thus, a common vision is in place and many important issues were taken into account. The key question is whether the plan of action, which is based on an already minimal consensus, will be effectively implemented. The current established institutional framework for international cooperation and the shrinking willingness of rich states in particular to cooperate on a multilateral basis leave room for doubt.

It became one of the rituals of Johannesburg to criticize the US and denounce them for the immobility on climate change issues in particular. Upon closer examination, however, this criticism appears to be too one-sided. Japan, for example, shot down the demand for more foreign aid. Brazil refused to protect its rainforest according to international standards. And France insisted on maintaining EU agricultural subsidies. Particularistic state interests characterized the global meeting. There is a firm trend discernable among OECD member states in particular of renewed emphasis on protecting their own interests and concern with solving national problems. This is counter to the notion of global governance which would entail seeking consensus at the international level at the expense of particular interests. To this extent, revival of the wave of multilateralism of the early Nineties is currently out of sight. Explanations offered for this development include the weak economy and protectionist tendencies.

Without doubt, there is no momentum for a global collaborative effort by *all* UN member states to solve common problems at this stage, however necessary and desirable that would be. Furthermore, we cannot and should not expect the organs of multilateral cooperation, the UN institutions, to provide results that are not brought about by the member states working in concert. Inefficiency and chronic under-financing of the existing instruments simply add to the difficulties. This could be the hour of a practical middle way, along the lines pursued by the German government in Johannesburg in its and the EU's offensive on energy policy outside the official summit activities. Initiatives of individual states or groups of states and their allies of convenience in so called coalitions of the willing seems to be the only way out at the moment of the dilemma posed by the current gridlock in the implementation of important environmental and development measures. It could soon lead to first stage victories, for example in the area of climate protection, particularly after Russia's ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, and overcome the extensive inertia. German Chancellor Gerhard Schröder succeeded in Johannesburg in getting the EU and some 90 other states to sign a declaration calling for the promotion and firm establishment of renewable energy that was outside the framework of the summit and goes well beyond the conclusions of the final document.

These important moves forward which go well beyond the official conference results were arrived at parallel to the summit and are not part of the tediously negotiated final documents. The strength of these initiatives lies in the very fact that they are not orientated toward the least common denominator, rather they are manifestations of the political intentions of those who are truly interested in progress and change. That improves their chances of success. It may well be that a strategy that seeks to unite progressive states of the world would make the transition to global sustainability easier. The entry into force of the Kyoto Protocol, for example, which was roundly praised at the world summit, could set a new dynamic in motion that helps promote the use of better energy technology, not just in the rich North, but also in the poor South. The second glimmer of hope lies in the EU and other states that want to lead the way, both at national level and in cooperation with developing countries, even without concrete goals

set out at Johannesburg. The initiative announced by Chancellor Schröder can be considered an example.

World summits organized by the United Nations will still need to take place given that they alone provide a suitable platform for global communication and interaction, not the least of which with civil society. The critical question remains whether the goal of getting *all* participating countries to sign final documents, along with the corresponding compromises in formulations that entails, should be abandoned. If at future summits the international community were to free itself from the pressure for consensus, and instead used such summits as global forums for forming coalitions of the willing around decisive issues, the interests of those most affected by environmental destruction and under-development might well be better served.<sup>3</sup>

## 2. Perspectives for Global Governance

As early as in 2000, the German government put emphasis on the necessity to both strengthen and enlarge the international structures of environmental governance, which ought to be further developed.<sup>4</sup> Since then, an impressive number of reform proposals have been submitted to the global audience, for instance, the creation of a so-called Earth Council, a body of moral credibility, comprising internationally renowned eminent personalities, and in conformity with the Brundtland Commission, or the introduction of environmental taxation for the use of global public goods such as air, sea or outer space, including increased burden sharing responsibilities for the private sector. Another suggestion that has constantly been reiterated by German, French and other governments, is the empowerment of UNEP, supposed to be transformed into a specialized agency or even a world environmental organization.<sup>5</sup>

Focusing on the UN system, global environmental governance has meanwhile become a widely-stretched, dense and diversified institutional framework consisting of a multitude of agencies, structures and bodies - not mentioning the less formalized ongoing negotiation processes

and conference series. The main organs of the United Nations, the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as well as the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) are dealing with environmental issues, just like the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) of the Secretariat. Moreover, UNEP, UNDP, the Regional Commissions, and a number of funds, programmes and specialized agencies such as IFAD, FAO, Unicef, UNESCO, the WMO and others, work on the same line. Finally, we should mention the convention secretariats such as UNFCCC, UNCBD and UNCCD, the UN Forum on Forests and other administrative bodies entrusted with managing international regimes of environmental concern. Last but not least, the World Bank has, of course, constantly enlarged its environmental efforts.<sup>6</sup>

This orderly disorder of agencies, bodies and regimes working in the field of environment respective sustainable development, will require particular attention in the forthcoming years. Eleven years after Rio and one year after Johannesburg, the institutional picture of global environmental governance reveals a number of organizational pathologies, i.e. an ineffective and certainly also inefficient multiplication of efforts due to a multitude of actors and agents involved. Besides the above mentioned approach, to upgrade UNEP towards a specialized organization, a number of other proposals for reform have been submitted, amongst which are the so-called mainstreaming approach – *greening the IMF/World Bank and the WTO* – or the foundation of a completely new world organization for sustainable development, which would render UNEP and UNDP, but maybe even the existing conventions and regimes, obsolete.<sup>7</sup>

But is this the hour of multilateral approaches, even for their reform? In their article *Weltpolitik zwischen Staatenanarchie und Global Governance*<sup>8</sup>, Dirk Messner, Jeanette Schade and Christoph Weller claim that in the aftermath of 11 September 2001, security issues have once more dominated the global agenda, bringing forth a restoration of power politics based on national interests, particularly promoted and followed by the United States, and even including a doctrine of preemptive military strikes. According to the authors, this tendency not only challenges international law, but also deeply undermines all efforts undertaken and already established towards the principles of collective action and global governance.<sup>9</sup>

The authors state:

»After World War II, the U.S. triggered the process of institutionalization of global politics and catalyzed multilateral cooperation. They suc-

3 See also Rechkemmer, Andreas [2002]: Globale Umwelt- und Entwicklungspolitik in der Krise? Nach dem Gipfel von Johannesburg. SWP-Aktuell 44 (Oktober). Berlin. On the issue of world conferences, see Fues, Thomas/ Hamm, Brigitte [2001b]: Die Weltkonferenzen und ihre Folgeprozesse: Umsetzung in die deutsche Politik/ In: Fues, Thomas/ Hamm, Brigitte (eds.) [2001a]: Die Weltkonferenzen der 90er Jahre: Baustellen für Global Governance. Bonn. More on the Johannesburg Summit can be found in La Vina, Antonio/Hoff, Gretchen/DeRose, Anne Marie [2003]: The Outcomes of Johannesburg: Assessing the World Summit on Sustainable Development/ In: SAIS Review (Winter-Spring) Vol. XXIII/ 1.

4 See 'Gemeinsame Presseerklärung BMU/ BMBF' of 20.12.2000, online at <www.bmu.de/presse/2000>.

5 On questions of institutional reform, reference is made to Prittwitz, Volker von [2000b]: Institutionelle Arrangements und Zukunftsfähigkeit/ In: Prittwitz, Volker von (ed.) [2000a]: Institutionelle Arrangements in der Weltpolitik – Zukunftsfähigkeit durch innovative Verfahrenskombinationen? Opladen; Biermann, Frank [2000]: Zukunftsfähigkeit durch neue institutionelle Arrangements auf der globalen Ebene?, and Oberthür, Sebastian [2000]: Institutionelle Innovationsperspektiven in der internationalen Umweltpolitik – both in: Prittwitz, Volker von (ed.) [2000a].

6 On the UN and its organs and agencies' role within networks of global governance, see Reinicke, Wolfgang H./ Deng, Francis M. [2000]: Critical Choices. The United Nations, networks, and the future of global governance. Washington DC.

7 More on this subject can be found in Simonis, Udo E. [2000]: Architektur einer Weltorganisation für Umwelt und Entwicklung/ In: Nuscheler, Franz (ed.) [2000]: Entwicklung und Frieden im 21. Jahrhundert. Bonn, Simonis, Udo E. [1998b]: Institutionen der künftigen Weltpolitik/ In: Messner, Dirk (ed.) [1998b], and Conca, Ken [1996]: Greening the UN: Environmental Organisations and the UN System/ In: Weiss, Thomas G./ Gordenker, Leon (eds.) [1996]: NGOs, the United Nations, and global governance. Boulder, CO.

8 Messner, Dirk/ Schade, Jeanette/ Weller, Christoph [2003]: Weltpolitik zwischen Staatenanarchie und Global Governance/ In: Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (ed.) [2003]: Globale Trends 2004/2005. Fakten, Analysen, Prognosen. Frankfurt (Main).

9 See op. cit., p. 235. Translation by A.R.

*ceeded in the formation of a global system of interdependent collective action through balance of interests. This system, which naturally served U.S. aspirations, however stabilized international relations and united a multitude of states within an international order having the United Nations as its gravity center. Meanwhile, America has withdrawn from this approach.»<sup>10</sup>*

This movement of consequent, if not systematic, withdrawal from multilateral cooperation, comprises strategic policy fields such as arms control regimes – named be the so-called diversification of nuclear arsenals to tackle the problem of international terrorism, the cancellation of the bilateral US-Russian ‘ABM’ treaty, the treaty on nuclear test ban, and the verification regime for bio-logical weapons, the Kyoto protocol, the ICC and bilateral trade treaties to bypass and undermine the regulatory provisions of the WTO.<sup>11</sup>

Messner, Schade and Weller recall Jochen Hippler’s term ‘selective multilateralism’, sometimes also called ‘multilateralism à la carte’, which could serve as an adequate description of the US’ and other important states’ policy towards global issues:<sup>12</sup>

*»There was hope in the past decade toward the emergence of civil society actors, new avenues for multilateral cooperation and international law. However, after September 11, the world seems to be gliding back into the same old patterns of politics of power, interest and conflict.«<sup>13</sup>*

Are the (neo-)realists right? Do powerful states dominate an anarchical international system? Do powerful nations only use multilateral institutions to pursue their genuine interests? Is international law invalid?

*»The contemporary rule of unilateral security affairs and military power politics seems to render institutions of international cooperation somewhat irrelevant.«<sup>14</sup>*

What about the theories of institutionalism and regime building? What about the strong empirical tendency towards global treaties, legal processes, and the growth of international organizations? And what about public policy networks and the architecture of global governance? Empirically speaking, we are living in a period of growing interdependence between unilateralism, global governance, and globalization.<sup>15</sup> Despite all given hysteria about the threat of new empires or aggressive unilateralism, we should understand that the USA and their allies had to face their limits at Johannesburg – not to speak about Iraq here. At the end of the day, the most important result of the WSSD was: the crucial Rio results are maintained. And even more decisions were taken against the resistance of the so-called unilaterals:

- equality of environmental agreements with WTO standards
- corporate accountability principle accepted by the UN

- the biodiversity loss rate to be reduced until 2010

*»The strict obstinacy of the U.S. and other governments towards global environmental management has triggered certain change in international politics: since consistent multilateralism is lacking, willing states are forming new alliances of political forerunners. This phenomenon creates a new form of ‘multilateralism at different speed’.«<sup>16</sup>*

Kyoto is an interesting case in this context. The protocol was initially supposed to be a milestone for the implementation process of UNFCCC – and thus for the worldwide measures to tackle the climate problem. Its ratification and entry-into-force process after Russia’s recent ratification could contribute significantly to the efforts undertaken in this direction, but Kyoto alone is not sufficient. The USA withdrew in March 2001, or ‘unsigned’ Kyoto. What will be the approach of China and India. Kyoto features unusual and complex entry-into-force provisions. It could already fail therefore before it entered into force. Its first implementation phase is meant to last until 2012 – then the global community would take stock. But already nowadays projections foresee: instead of a yielded 20% emission reduction in 2005, we are to date some 25% over 1990.<sup>17</sup> An alternative can be seen to perceive climate change as a transatlantic challenge, while the EU-US relation is seen as its engine. Both partners are not so far away from each other. For instance, they agree in two major respects, i.e. engaging the private sector (joint industry perspectives, technological breakthrough), and engaging major developing countries.<sup>18</sup>

But is the US ready for collective responsibility sharing? The only feasible long-term alternative to Kyoto could be seen in more countries joining in a common strategy of identifying alternatives to unsustainable energy production. Such a multilateral initiative-based solution would comprise global governance aspects, e.g. market signals towards investors, research and technological development.<sup>19</sup> In any case, the US seem to be in a key position – no global approach is possible without them, China and India seem unready to join as long as the US stays out: coalitions of the willing seem insufficient here. Collective efforts must be launched, otherwise there is no hope to tackle the global climate problem. Friedemann Müller names three points for success: (a) broad consensus on the trading process of emission rights, (b) developed countries must be on board, and (c) common research and technological development efforts must be undertaken. He sees Europe hereby in an important negotiation position.<sup>20</sup>

Unilateralism is perceived as one threat. Neoliberalism as another. In this context, Achim Brunnengräber and Christian Stock write<sup>21</sup> that most of new instruments launched for the

10 Op. cit., p. 236.

11 On this latter case see Dieter, Heribert [2003]: Abschied vom Multilateralismus? Der neue Regionalismus in der Handels- und Finanzpolitik. SWP-Studie 4 (Februar). Berlin.

12 Op. cit., p. 237.

13 Op. cit., p. 238. Translation by A.R.

14 Op. cit. Translation by A.R.

15 See also op. cit., p. 242-244.

16 Op. cit., p. 247. Translation by A.R.

17 Müller, Friedemann [2003]: Kyoto-Protokoll ohne USA – wie weiter? SWP-Studie 7 (März). Berlin.

18 Ochs, Alexander [2003]: Reviving Transatlantic Cooperation towards a Global Threat. SWP conference paper (february). Berlin.

19 See Müller, Friedemann [2003], p. 6.

20 Op. cit. A different, more civil society angle is provided in Fricke, Gerald [2001]: Von Rio nach Kyoto. Verhandlungssache Weltklima. Berlin. Recommended be also Tänzler, Denis/Carius, Alexander [2003]: Perspektiven einer transatlantischen Klimapolitik/ In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B27 (30. Juni).

21 Brunnengräber, Achim/Stock, Christian [1999]: Global Governance: Ein neues Jahrhundertprojekt?/ In: PROKLA, Heft 116, 29. Jg., Nr. 3. (here p. 462-463)

sake of global environment are based on market mechanisms and would never challenge the WTO.

The authors criticize a notorious conceptual one-sidedness for neo-liberal sake. They address economic growth and environmental protection as contradicting principles, while sustainable development is just a label to camouflage ongoing neoliberalism. And according to the neo-marxist viewpoint of Ulrich Brand and Christoph Görg, the concepts of regime building and global governance simply failed since 'environment' is, as an issue, too deeply inter-woven with social, political and economic circumstances, which notoriously dominate priority setting and decision-making processes.<sup>22</sup> Despite all contradictions, empirical studies admit advanced institutionalization of global environmental governance, even as of today. Some 900 intergovernmental agreements have been decided upon. And no one would seriously neglect the growing role of private actors, scientific networks, and NGOs – seconded by new economic instruments such as certificates trading.<sup>23</sup>

### 3. Outlook

It seems to me that an adequate label for the present phase in international relations would be *synchronicity of realities*. We might as well feel tempted to speak of parallel worlds. While some empirical findings suggest us that unilateralism and coalitions of the willing are a paradigm for contemporary international order, which would remind us much of the Westphalian system, others speak openly about an age of emerging empires – implying even pre-Westphalian conditions. On the other hand, global governance, particularly in the field of environment or sustainable development, is definitely *practiced* by a multitude of factors world-wide. Analytically speaking: It's all of it in combination, postmodern, modern and pre-modern paradigms are alive. While nation-states will remain dominant actors for some time<sup>24</sup>, be it as unilateralists, multilateralists or partners, governance will in any case, in a further globalizing world, comprise new avenues and strategies for joint implementation, so-called type II outcomes or informal agreements, be they hierarchical, i.e. between states only, or horizontal, i.e. in the form of networks and partnerships.<sup>25</sup>

22 Brand, Ulrich/Görg, Christoph [2002b]: „Nachhaltige Globalisierung« - Sustainable Development als Kitt des neoliberalen Scherbenhaufens/ In: Brand, Ulrich/Görg, Christoph [2002a]: Mythen globalen Umweltmanagements. Münster.

23 See also Helm, Carsten/Simonis, Udo E./Biermann, Frank [2003]: Weltökologie und globale Umweltpolitik/ In: Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (ed.) [2003]: Globale Trends 2004/2005. Fakten, Analysen, Prognosen. Frankfurt (Main). On market based means for the public sector, reference is made to the classical Osborne, David/ Gaebler, Ted [1992]: Reinventing government: how the entrepreneurial spirit is transforming the public sector. Reading, MA.

24 On the nation-state's relevance for environmental governance see Jänicke, Martin [2003a]: Die Rolle des Nationalstaats in der globalen Umweltpolitik/ In: Aus Politik und Zeitgeschichte B27 (30. Juni).

25 Refer to Hamm, Brigitte (ed.) [2002]: Public-Private Partnership und der Global Compact der Vereinten Nationen. Duisburg.