

Review: World Resources 2002–2004 Decisions for the Earth: Balance, Voice and Power

by Irene Eckart

Environmental failures are all too often the result of development-related decisions made without sufficient information on localities and proper consultation and support of the local population. This is the key message of the recently published report, "World Resources 2002–2004 – Decisions for the Earth: Balance, Voice and Power." The Report is the result of a joint project between the *United Nations Development Program* (<http://www.undp.org/>), the *United Nations Environment Program* (<http://www.unep.org/>), the *World Bank* (<http://www.worldbank.org/>) and the *World Resources Institute* (<http://www.wri.org/>). It examines the process of "environmental governance" and thus addresses the question of how and by whom environmental decisions are made. At the official launch date of the Report, the presentation held at the *World Resources Institute*, focused on two key elements of environmental governance: participation of all stakeholder groups and accountability of the decision-makers.

The Report includes an assessment of those two functions in nine countries, chosen for their varied economic status: Chile, Hungary, India, Indonesia, Mexico, South Africa, Thailand, Uganda and the U.S. The study shows that some progress has already been made in adopting the basic principles of good environmental decision-making that have been established and endorsed by the 178 nations that attended the *Rio Earth Summit* in 1992 and signed the "Rio Declaration on Environment and Development". These principles, which ensure open and inclusive decision-making, include:

- ❑ *making decisions at the appropriate level by assigning authority to match the scale of the natural system affected ("Subsidiarity Principle") and*
- ❑ *providing access to information, participation and redress to stakeholders.*

Although these principles are not new, they profoundly challenge our traditional government institutions and economic practices. Indeed, one of the most apparent failures over the decade since *Rio* has been the inability to mainstream environmental thinking into economic and development decision-making, which once again became apparent at the *Johannesburg Earth Summit* in 2002 (<http://www.earthsummit2002.org/Es2002.PDF>). At this conference, even after intense negotiations, the results were far away from any kind of breakthrough. The disappointing outcome is inconsistent with a growing awareness of the urgent need for change to arrest the accelerating deterioration of the world's environment. This gives reason to take a broader look at the challenges inherent in environmental governance.

First and foremost, conflicting interests between governments, private sector groups and international organizations make it difficult to work towards common goals that go beyond narrow national interests to pursue global benefits. However, it is evident that a basic consensus is critical in order to proceed with international negotiations and to encourage the various governments to take action. The second major obstacle is one that is shared by virtually all issues requiring international collaboration: a lack of enforcement mechanisms in the international arena. Enforcement and compliance will always be problematic in an international system still based on the dominance of national sovereignty.

Although the Report aims at assessing and evaluating stakeholder access and participation as a first step to a sustainable development, there is some lack of direction on how to tackle these challenges. The Report neither gives an indication of the role science can play to reach tangible results nor does it raise the question whether the environment is adequately represented by international organizations.

Science, due to its objective and reliable approach, is one of the most crucial factors in producing more effective environmental agreements. Developing scientific data and analysis to identify problems, their likely consequences and possible solutions is often argued as a way

that might offer a less tricky road to a common agreement on environmental issues than politics. Once negotiations result in multi-lateral agreements, the need for an enforcement mechanism becomes apparent and is even more obvious as far as environmental questions are concerned, than it is in other areas. Very few international environmental agreements actually contain provisions for compliance such as trade sanctions against violators. Those who do have such provisions virtually never invoke them or are challenged by the *World Trade Organization* (WTO www.wto.org). Whereas there are specialized UN agencies for health, labor, culture and education and food, the environmental issues are only endowed with a subsidiary program of coordination called the *United Nations Environment Program* (UNEP <http://www.unep.org/>). This program hardly has sufficient power and national support of its Member States.

A possible suggestion to address this problem is the upgrading of UNEP from a UN program to a fully-fledged specialized agency. But no matter whether such a transformation takes place, unless the Member States demonstrate a greater political commitment to supporting its mission, mandate and operations, UNEP will continue to be treated as a marginal player in the UN system. As far as the frequent claim for the establishment of a *World Environment Organization* (WEO) is concerned, the underlying rationale holds out considerable merit. By the majority of stakeholder groups, this option is considered the only possibility to ensure that the policy balance is shifted in favor of sustainable development, and that the WTO would therefore be counterbalanced by a sufficiently robust international environmental regime.

These questions are not raised by the World Resources Report. However, the initiative of the four major organizations concerned with environmental issues is encouraging, since joint projects are the best way to fill a gap resulting from the absence of one global environmental organization. The report also urges acknowledgment of the increasing importance of stakeholder information and involvement in the decision-making process. Especially considering the latest developments, such as globalization, democratization, the rapid growth of non-governmental organizations (NGOs), new information and communication technologies and decentralization, participation and empowerment of the civilian world are inevitable.

In this respect, the Report represents a good starting point by providing general guidelines on how to realize access and participation of stakeholders, valuable insights in the form of case studies and country evaluations giving an overview of the present situation. Nevertheless, the practical implementation of the principles for fair environmental governance in every decision-making process, ranging from large-scale decisions such as environment legislation to questions concerning our daily lives, remains a challenge and requires major changes on a global level.

The World Resources Institute is an independent environmental research and policy organization that works closely with governments, the private sector and other stakeholder groups in more than 100 countries around the world to find and implement solutions to protect the Earth's living systems and to ensure sustainable development. For more information, please visit the following website: http://pubs.wri.org/pubs_description.cfm?PubID=3764

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