



# After the Summit? Thoughts on the implementation of sustainable development

*Yvonne Rydin*

Yvonne Rydin is professor of Environmental Planning in the Department of Geography and Environment at the London School of Economics (LSE). She has written widely on planning for sustainable development, including *Conflict, Consensus and Rationality in Environmental Planning*, her latest book published by Oxford University Press.

Address: Yvonne Rydin, Department of Geography and Environment, LSE, Houghton Street, London WC2A 2AE; tel: 00 44 207 955 7605; fax: 00 44 207 955 7412; e-mail: Y.Rydin@lse.ac.uk

1. Annan, Kofi (2002), "From Doha to Johannesburg by way of Monterrey: how to achieve, and sustain, development in the twenty-first century", Centre for Global Governance Lecture at the LSE, 25 February.

2. Wallström, Margot (2002), "A wake-up call for global sustainability", speech to European Policy Centre Dialogue in Brussels, 26 February.

**SUMMARY:** *This paper highlights the scope for making progress towards sustainable development through changes in current practices and decision-making processes that do not need international agreements. It outlines seven key areas for improving implementation, including: using monitoring and evaluation (and the information these produce) to change attitudes and behaviour; participation that involves the public constructively; better use of "soft" instruments of persuasion and communication; and ensuring that funding flows are structured to achieve the desired changes.*

IN THE RUN up to the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg, South Africa during August–September 2002, there was no shortage of calls to action. Kofi Annan asked that attention be shifted away from defining what exactly is meant by the concept of sustainable development towards seeing sustainability as "...the urgent call to action that it should be."<sup>(1)</sup> At about the same time, Margot Wallström, European Environment Commissioner, described her role as pressing "...for concrete and deliverable actions" and identified the key issue facing governments now as closing the implementation deficit where sustainable development was concerned.<sup>(2)</sup> Many national governments have followed this line.

These calls for action can be interpreted in two ways. In one obvious sense, they were looking towards the negotiations in Johannesburg and adding to the pressure on governments to make multinational agreements that are detailed and precise enough to carry some weight after the Summit ends. The assumption is that the key problem is the ability to muster sufficient political will around the banner of sustainable development in order to achieve such agreements. It is further assumed that any such agreements would carry with them a certain moral authority. If an action plan is agreed upon as part of those statements, then governments will be expected to abide by it. If it is also precisely expressed, then governments will not be able to wriggle out of implementation by exploiting ambiguities in the agreements and redefining their commitments on their return from South Africa.

However, there is another way in which these calls can be interpreted, one that places more emphasis on the actual implementation process. From this perspective, the politics of achieving international agreements is important but not the only concern we should have. There are two reasons for this. First, even if international agreements are achieved and even if these are tightly specified, there is still subsequent work to be done

in terms of putting them into practice. International agreements can rarely stand alone as the basis for changed decision making. They have to be translated into other regulatory and incentive systems so that they can affect that decision making within governments, agencies, communities and industries. Second, and more positively, even if international agreements are not achieved, there is still much scope for progress towards sustainable development. The Kyoto agreement was widely considered to be dead after the unwillingness of the USA and other key actors to ratify it. Yet, many other countries are continuing to act on the basis of that agreement. Even more interesting, some states and actors within the USA are still using Kyoto as a benchmark, and yet others are working towards reducing their greenhouse gas emissions regardless of their stated commitment to the Kyoto protocol.

So, from this perspective, how can we think about the implementation of sustainable development? The starting point should be the recognition that sustainable development is not just the focus of a limited range of international agreements, but is implicated, every day, in all aspects of our production and consumption processes. This means that there are a huge number of current practices and decision-making processes that are currently unsustainable. But it also means that there are many individual sites of action where change can happen. Many of these, in turn, are currently subject to government influence, through regulation, investment, procurement, subsidy and/or taxation. Where such government influence exists, there is the potential for using this influence to steer change. Identifying this potential does not mean that it is an easy task. These sites of action involve many different actors, in business and community organizations, in individual firms and households. And there are multiple government actors involved too – many, indeed most of them, outside the national state. These include sub-national states, local authorities at multiple levels, government agencies and regional/local offices of central government.

So the question of implementing sustainable development becomes a question of how this dispersed range of sites and actors can be influenced. Drawing on the range of work being undertaken at the LSE,<sup>3</sup> I want to propose seven headings that can help to answer this question.

**Making monitoring, evaluation and assessment more effective.** There is now a veritable growth industry in monitoring, evaluation and assessment, including the proliferation of sustainability indicators at many levels. The key assumption behind this is the idea that publicizing policy performance in this way will *of itself* change behaviour. This is a highly questionable assumption. It is clear that requiring monitoring, etc. will lead to behavioural change in as much as actors will become engaged in developing indicators, collecting data, undertaking audits and assessments, etc. However, it is much less clear how this then connects to changed behaviour in order to improve performance. Divisions of responsibilities, bureaucratic inertia and higher priorities can all help to confound this hope. Therefore, a key task is to understand how to provide incentives for behaviour in order that these monitoring and other procedures do connect to action for sustainable development.

**Creating new institutional arrangements.** The issue of providing incentives for sustainable behaviour is closely related to the task of creating new institutional arrangements. Institutions are understood here to comprise not just organizational structures – as revealed by an organogram of the hierarchy of departments, divisions, authorities and

3. The environment colleagues in question are Giles Atkinson, Tim Forsyth, Andrew Gouldson, Michael Mason and Eric Neumayer.

agencies – but also the norms and routines of practice of actors within those organizations. This tells us not only about which actors are doing what and where but also why they are behaving as they do. Understanding the motivation of actors is central to being able to steer them towards sustainable behaviour. This is as true of actors within business and community sectors as of those within governmental organizations. One interesting aspect also is the attempt to create new institutional arrangements that bridge business, government and community, as in cities where considerable thought is being given to generating institutions for urban sustainability.

**Creating new relationships across divides between actors.** One feature of sustainable development as a concept that is, perhaps, less often featured today is its holistic character. It was recognized early on that organizational divisions could often militate against achieving a holistic perspective. These can be between departments within an organization, between organizations, across levels or tiers and between sectors such as government, business and civil society. One answer is to try and produce new organizational structures, but this often only puts the divides in new places. Therefore, the emphasis has fallen on generating networks that extend across divides and link actors together in new configurations. But such networks need to be activated, that is, the relationships need to be used to achieve some effect. A distribution list and occasional forum have too often proved ineffectual. So, a further key aspect of implementing the holistic concept of sustainable development is creating networks *and* making them work in terms of generating bilateral and multilateral exchanges among the actors involved, and joint working between actors.

**Using public participation to achieve not hinder change.** Another key feature of sustainable development is its emphasis on community involvement, even empowerment. As a result, all Agenda 21, and particularly Local Agenda 21 activities, have had public participation at their core. However, public participation is not always easy to achieve or sustain and its impact can be unpredictable. Public involvement does not always lead to decisions which are straightforwardly sustainable in environmental terms. In many policy areas, the way that participation opportunities are constructed means that public involvement can be equated with NIMBYism. Environmental education is often the fallback answer to these kinds of problems but this then raises questions about how and when this particular form of involvement with the public should occur. More generally, despite decades of experience with participation exercises, much more needs to be known about how to involve the public constructively in this policy area.

**Using the right combination of tools to lever changes in behaviour.** Whilst, in the past, the main emphasis of environmental policy was on so-called “command and control” strategies, a much greater range of policy tools are now considered in the pursuit of policy goals. These extend beyond regulation and enforcement to market-based instruments (such as taxes, charges and subsidies) and through to the “softer” instruments of persuasion, communication and information provision, often resulting in voluntary agreements and action. Consideration is also being given to exactly how these different tools can be made to work together, reinforcing rather than undermining each other. One area of recent attention is the use of blame-and-shame tactics and other forms of soft sanctions within networks, to enhance cooperation between actors and prevent free riding. The renewed interest in the social capital concept has also high-

lighted the potential of soft as well as hard sanctions, to keep people working together toward common goals. In an area such as sustainable development, where the opportunities for free riding are considerable, this potential is well worth exploring further.

**Structuring the flow of finance to achieve change.** However important the relationships between actors and the “soft infrastructure” of these relationships, captured in concepts such as social capital, the continued significance of flows of finance cannot be denied. The pursuit of financial resources remains an important incentive, even imperative, driving behaviour. It therefore remains central to understanding how the flow of finance between actors can be steered towards achieving sustainable development goals. However, this is not just a matter of how finance flows to business, for financial flows into civil society to support community capacity building, and between different parts of the state to provide incentives for bureaucratic decision making in support of sustainable development, are also important. And above these essentially sub-national questions, the question of flows of finance across nation state borders remains perennially important.

**Handling the flow of knowledge and technological innovation to achieve change.** Finally, it is important to raise the issue of how knowledge, and particularly knowledge about technological innovations, flows from actor to actor, from government to business, from business to community and all the other combinations. While some behavioural changes towards sustainable development could happen now, and many are low-tech in their application, there are other areas where the contribution of new technological knowledge could be centrally significant. The important issue is not really how this knowledge is generated but how it flows around society and around the globe generation after generation. This puts the spotlight back onto institutional arrangements, in this case the arrangements for dissemination and application of new knowledge and technology.

These headings provide an agenda for research and practice on the path towards sustainable development. They can also provide a starting point for a more focused debate on how that implementation process can happen. In this spirit, I offer this brief comment to readers of *Environment & Urbanization* and encourage some feedback.