

Global versus Local Pollution: What's the priority?

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The next summit meeting on the environment in Johannesburg, occurring ten years after the Rio-92 Conference, could be the stage for complaints to the governments of rich countries. Two matters in particular stand out: (a) several countries, most important among them the U.S.A., haven't confirmed the Kyoto Protocol, the most significant gesture by the international community in its attempts to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, and by extension global warming, while one third of the oil produced in the world is consumed in the U.S.A.; (b) the governments of the rich countries defend globalization as they want to sell their products in our markets, but when the issue is the flow of goods in the opposite direction, they quickly impose customs barriers or create subsidies to protect their products. This increases the difficulty for developing countries to maintain economic growth rates, create jobs and build necessary infrastructure to improve the life for the poor, an essential condition if we are to solve the pollution problems associated with poverty, e.g., lack of sanitation.

It would be a mistake if the Johannesburg Conference were to become a stage for lamentations with regard to the lack of solidarity showed by the rich countries. On the contrary, we should follow the lead given by President Fernando Henrique Cardoso, who suggested an approach focused on a few matters with a reasonable hope of success. The current situation isn't, however, exactly favorable. The governments of developing countries, along with some NGOs, are fighting to convince the governments of the rich world of the need to change their consumer habits if reductions in global pollution are to be made possible. Those governments have suggested that we make a joint effort to reduce poverty leading to, among other benefits, a decrease in local pollution.

We have reason enough to doubt the effectiveness of these good intentions. During the Rio-92 Conference the rich countries agreed to raise economic support for our sustainable development from 0.4% to 0.7% of GNP. Ten years down the road and that percentage hasn't risen, quite the opposite, it has fallen to 0.2%!

Our position in Johannesburg will be based on two concepts. First: Brazil remains firm in the defense of the agreements reached ten years ago. We can't allow the Johannesburg Conference "Rio + 10", to be transformed into "Rio - 20".

On the other hand, we must recognize that a Brazilian who drives his car in Brasilia contributes in the same way to the greenhouse effect as an American driving in Washington. All of us, the consumers, whatever country we live in, contribute to global pollution.

Second: it is possible to create a strategy of engagement against pollution and against poverty that isn't just charity from rich countries. A strategy effective enough to meet the needs of the whole world, 1.1 billion people who do not have access to drinking water, 2.4 billion who, due to the lack of a sewerage system, have to live with stinking surface drains, and 4 billion who have to live with polluted rivers.

We are initiating a consultative process to obtain the signature of a pact in Johannesburg, between rich and poor countries, and subject to ratification by their congresses or parliaments, to create a contribution of one dollar on the price of each barrel of oil produced in the world, to go to a body, that we could provisionally name the International Water Fund.

This contribution would, on a global scale, mean the application of the principle "pollutor-pays", which in Brazil is already being applied at the river basin level. Everyone who is contributing to the greenhouse effect, in any part of the world, will feel in his pocket the price paid by all living beings on this planet.

If all countries adhere to this pact, the Fund would receive something in the order of thirty billion dollars per annum, enough to meet current sanitation and water supply requirements of the world's poor in less than 20 years.

Many will argue against the effectiveness of such an initiative, saying they are afraid most of the revenue would flow into the drain of corruption. To answer this hypothetical question, the Fund would be managed in a creative manner: funds wouldn't be spent on financing the building of infrastructure or the acquisition of equipment. Experience shows that a great part of the projects in developing countries consume financial resources without ever being concluded, i.e. entering in operation. There is a lobby in favor of building infrastructure, but not operating it. In our proposal, the Fund would pay the sanitation companies for service effectively rendered to the poor. The Fund wouldn't finance promises, rather it would pay for results.

The Fund would create a new market for services. Obviously this market should be open to all, on a global basis, with no preference for local companies. This would mean new business opportunities for all companies whether in rich or poor countries. After all, the greatest challenge of the capitalist system is to bring individuals, in their search for personal gain, to contribute to the collective gain.

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