

Commentary

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The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg has an ambitious goal. The delegates are trying to attack environmental problems and poverty by development. Bruce Pardy thinks it sounds like a hopeless task. He teaches environmental law at Queens University in Kingston.

Ten years after the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, national leaders and delegations have come together in Johannesburg to try to make progress on environmental problems and world poverty.

Don't hold your breath. Or perhaps you should hold it for as long as you can because nothing that happens in Johannesburg will have any effect on the quality of your air, or water, or food, or any other real environmental problem. Even if there is an agreement the summit is doomed to fail because its central concept is fundamentally flawed.

"Sustainable development" is an oxymoron—a contradiction that makes no sense. To sustain means to continue,

to last indefinitely. To develop means to grow and change. It is the perfect term for international diplomacy: it sounds great and can mean anything you want, which is the primary reason for its immense popularity. Interests and organizations with vastly different objectives, including proponents of unrestrained economic growth, can endorse the concept because it does not commit them to any particular course of action.

Sustainable development attempts to encourage three things simultaneously: environmental protection, economic development, and social equity, particularly in the sense of alleviating poverty. This sounds good, but what it does not do is identify a priority. Where environmental, social, and economic interests conflict, it is not clear which interest should prevail.

If harvesting an area of forest creates jobs but destroys the forest, is that sustainable? If replanting trees will replenish the supply but forever change the forest, is that sustainable?

If the only choices are to cut down the forest or shut down the company, which of those choices does "sustainable development" require?

And then there is the sustainable development catch-22 in the Third World. The developed world causes a far greater environmental impact than the undeveloped. But one of the mandates of sustainable development is to develop the Third World as fast as possible, which will, in turn, make our global environmental problems worse, not better. Sustainable development does not explain how to solve the dilemma.

But do not think that holding the Johannesburg summit on the topic of sustainable development is merely a waste of time. In fact, it is worse than that. Sustainable development gives the world's population the impression that its leaders are getting to the bottom of social and environmental problems. Nothing could be further from the truth.