

2 Mega United Nations Conferences: Help or Hindrance?

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2.1 Approach

The approach of this chapter is, first, to assess the effectiveness of the policy of the international community that currently places great reliance on the staging of large-scale broad-scope conference under the auspices of the United Nations to address critical issues of global concern such as those related to development, poverty, energy, environment, water, etc. Two United Nations conferences are examined as case studies with regard to both process and substance: the recent Millennium Development Conference and the 1981 United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy. Second, the focus is placed on identifying the type of institutional obstacles that need to be surmounted if the objectives of these conferences are to be attained and on why the traditional mega United Nations conference is more likely to be a hindrance rather than a help in overcoming these obstacles. The third part is devoted to drawing lessons and putting forward proposals that could get around these obstacles with the United Nations playing a different more focused role to enhance the possibility and probability of achieving the desirable and ambitious goals of the United Nations megaconferences.

2.2 Introduction

Words! Words! Words! I'm so sick of words!
I get words all day through, first from him, now from you!
Is that all you blighters can do?...
Sing me no song! Read me no rhyme!
Don't waste my time, show me!
Make me no undying vow. Show me now!
—Alan Jay Lerner's lyrics from *My Fair Lady*

Today, more than half a century after President Roosevelt and Prime Minister Churchill articulated in the Atlantic Charter the challenging goal of a post-war world free of fear and free of want, there are still more than 2 billion people or one-third of humankind mired in dire poverty with all that implies in terms of deprivation not only of material goods and services, but also of hope. One of the principal means that the international community has adopted to address this challenge is to stage a series of conferences under United Nations auspices. The list of

conferences over the last four decades is long but 1970 might usefully be cited as the beginning of a cycle related to energy, water and other natural resources and all of them to development and to the environment (see Box 1).

Box 1

The list of the relevant large-scale broad-scope conferences launched under the auspices of the United Nation since 1970 is as follows: United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1972), United Nations Conference on Science and Technology (1980), United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy (1981), World Summit for Children (1990), World Conference on Education for All (1990), 2nd United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (1990), United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (1992), International Conference on the Least Developed Countries (1992), International Conference on Nutrition (1992), World Conference on Human Rights (1993), International Conference on Population and Development (1994), Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (1994), World Conference on Natural Disaster Reduction (1994), World Summit for Social Development (1995), 4th World Conference on Women (1995), 2nd World Conference on Human Settlements (1996), World Food Summit (1996), Millennium Summit (2000), 3rd United Nations Conference on the Least Developed Countries (2002), International Conference on Financing for Development (2002), World Food Summit: Five Years Later (2002), World Summit on Sustainable Development (2002). A summit of world leaders convening in Monterrey in 2002 pledged financial support for the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

In addition there have been international meetings called World Water Fora that focused on the issue of water management: Marrakech 1997, the Hague in 2000, and Kyoto 2003.

Despite progress in terms of morbidity rates, longevity and illiteracy and other indicators, there still remains a deplorable state of affairs of deep poverty. This state of affairs prompts the question as to whether the United Nations' many global megaconferences have made much of a contribution in the struggle to reduce the world's severe deprivations; and if it has not done so to any significant degree, to ask why and what are the alternative means to attain the desired goals?

It has been claimed repeatedly that these conferences have been helpful in many ways and, in this regard, it might suffice to quote one commentator (Taylor 2003: 157) who has made that point in a succinct manner in stating that the conferences have been:

A focus of heroic effort by non-governmental organizations throughout the world, ... (that have) promoted intense interaction between members of participating governments; ... (that have) added something new to multilateral diplomacy (in) identifying a core of

agreed values and purposes which formed the basis of special actions and programmes over a very wide range of human interests and needs; ... (that have) strengthened among diverse groups a sense of common destiny, and (that have set forth) a global agenda ... (that) frequently included specific targets, timings and policy proposals.

Above all, he concludes, ultimately the most important outcome of the conference process has been “entrenching of multilateralism”, by which he means that by virtue of the conferencing process “the United Nations System has become a forum of obligation.”

It is fair to say that there is a widely held contrarian view that maintains that this is not a realistic assessment, that the inducements or pressures contained in the conference resolutions have been neither specific enough nor strong enough to assure the desired follow-through “on the ground” at either the level of global or national governance. There, indeed, may be as an outcome of these conferences a greater sharing of “a sense of common destiny” and a sense of “obligation” but these are ambiguous concepts operationally and, therefore, not helpful enough to lead to *concrete* measures as differentiated from a form of action that is basically preparing more meetings and writing more reports. Given the talent and the money and the hopes that have gone into preparing and running these megaconferences, the conferences might even be deemed to have been a drag rather than a stimulus to action.

A sceptical view has been put forward by *The Economist*. In its 9 September 2004 issue, in an article headed, “The United Nations has set benchmarks for progress in poor countries—are they (of) any use?”, a cryptic answer is provided by another heading: “ends without means”. The following assessment is offered:

The weakness of the whole Millennium Development Goals (MDG) concept is that it wills the ends without willing the means—something which the United Nations, perforce, has come to specialize in.... It remains questionable whether the MDG exercise with its unimpeachably good intentions and its proliferating bureaucratic overhead, has done any good at all, on balance.... In fact, how far the MDG initiative is making a difference, one way or another, is unclear.

The United Nations observes that ‘many countries are in the process of retooling development programmes and strategies in line with the MDGs’. How odd: were those governments hitherto unconcerned about poverty or AIDS?

Parodying Marie Antoinette, this is followed with the advice: “let them eat reports”. There has never been a shortage of reports as the follow-up “activity”.

The positive impact “on the ground” will likely remain inadequate in terms of the amount of aid and the use to which it is put. The article in *The Economist* poses a question on this vital issue: “has the MDG process (the series of megaconference culminating in the MDG) at least succeeded in directing more aid to the right uses?” And their answer is: “not really”. As evidence of this, they note that the total amount of official development aid flows (ODA) for the poorest countries is \$68.4 billion or only 0.25% of the donor countries’ aggregate annual incomes, an amount that is still far short of the goal of 0.7% of national income that was agreed upon at a United Nations conference several decades ago. But what is more damning is the fact the pledges made at the recent Monterrey Summit, where the

world's financial ministers convened post-Millennium Development Conference, would only increase ODA by an amount that would raise the percentage to only 0.3% by 2006. This is less than half the target that was pledged a quarter century ago!

There are others who share this scepticism as to whether the mega conferencing process has succeeded in increasing aid flows, directing more of the aid to the right uses and improving the effectiveness of these aid flows. Focusing on the water-related aspect of such conferences, Asit Biswas, the president of the Third World Centre for Water Management, has tackled the issue succinctly and clearly. In an article titled, "From Mar del Plata to Kyoto: an analysis of global water policy dialogue" (Biswas 2004: 87) he has this to say about past conferences:

The question that must be asked at present is, are these mega-meetings worth their costs and the efforts needed to organize them, especially when their final and overall impacts are considered.... It is high-time that we stop being politically correct and objectively review our past performances in order to develop a cost-effective and impact-oriented road map for the future.... Conceptual attractiveness alone is no longer adequate.

He goes on to quote the Dutch Minister for Development Cooperation, Agnes van Ardenne who "said categorically at Kyoto that large-scale conferences like the World Water Forum have no future" and to also quote the head of a United Nations agency who remarked sarcastically: "all our delegates are honourable, all our backgrounds documents are excellent, and all our meetings are outstandingly successful."

Even those who attempt to give a favourable assessment are ambiguous in terms of the accomplishments of these megaconferences as, for example, a United Nations official, Masumi Ono, who, writing on the issue of the follow-up to United Nations conferences, gave this qualified assessment: (Ono 2001: 180)

The United Nations through its series of global conferences has contributed to building consensus and norms by initiating a continuous process of mobilizing political will...it is too early to say anything definitive about the success or failure of many of the items on the agendas of United Nations conferences.... The challenge now is to operationalize the consensus and norms in a comprehensive and coherent way.

Would it, therefore, be impertinent to pose the following question: if, as Ms Ono puts it, *now* is the time to operationalize the resolutions and agreements about goals and procedures, what have all the blighters at these conferences been doing all this time?

George Bernard Shaw's heroine of the play *Pygmalion*, Liza Doolittle, comes to mind: she became justifiably exasperated with "her betters" in her struggle to learn how to act and speak like "a fair lady". Unlike Pygmalion, the mythological king of Cyprus, who with a stroke brought to life a statue he had made of the goddess, Aphrodite, with whom he had fallen in love, there are no magic wands, nor magic words that can turn a vision into reality. After the talk of what needs to be done, it is the follow-up in terms of making institutional and policy changes that is the hard slog up a steep slope full of obstacles. Only in mythology can there be the attainment of wishes without Herculean effort over a considerable span of time.

One of the key elements of this Herculean effort is political will and this is reflected in the financial muscle applied to the task. There is first of all the issue of obtaining sufficient public support to cover the necessary financial costs of proposed policies with their ambitious programmes and projects. This is a formidable challenge in the light of the fickle nature of gaining public support for the proposals emerging from these conferences. There is the basic matter of whether the process of conferencing with its attendant publicity succeeds in spreading knowledge and enhancing trust in the desirability and feasibility of the proposals. To illustrate how feeble this follow-through impact happens to be, we could cite the reaction of Canadians: it was reported in an issue of *The Ottawa Citizen* (2 October 2004) that a poll taken on 5 September 2004, of the opinion of a representative sample of Canadians, revealed that four out of five persons supported ratification of the Kyoto Protocol, but nearly two out of three had no idea what it was about, and half had never heard of it! The journalist reporting this cites a study that found that the annual cost of Kyoto is estimated to be about C\$4,700 per Canadian for the next 5 years, an amount that is roughly equivalent to *per capita* spending on health care and then the journalist goes on to observe that when this fact was mentioned to those being questioned, the pollsters found that “support shrinks as people understand its (financial) impact”.

There is, comparatively speaking, a much lower cost in financial terms for preparing, organizing and staging the event and some follow-up business such as preparing reports and publicizing them. This is a cost that is borne by the delegates, by the United Nations itself and by the host country (when the event takes place outside United Nations facilities). This expenditure is rationalized as a democratic way of policy-making by informing the public and assuring greater public support for the proposals that emerge. It is generally accepted without challenge given that these are events that have taken on the nature of traditional activities of a global institution such as the United Nations System, and, in any case, their financing is trivial in amount for the world community and, in any case, are seen – especially by non-governmental organizations or what is called, “civil society” – as appropriate political responses to troubling issues of global scope.

But this cost in financial terms pales in significance beside two other costs of a non-financial nature:

- One is the “opportunity cost”, that is, the factor of delaying what might otherwise have been done with that time, talent and money that could possibly have been spent more effectively than indulging in talk, talk, talk and promises, promises, promises.
- Then, in addition, there is the collective psychic cost incurred when expectations are aroused and disappointing outcomes become apparent after a lapse of time. What follows is greater scepticism and its close cousin, cynicism and, from that, diminished trust in the political leaders who made the decision to take the conference talking/promises route. This, in turn, would undoubtedly make it more difficult to find the financial and other forms of support for corrective action that goes beyond posturing and rhetoric.

But, in the final analysis, the over-arching questions that need to be answered are as follows:

- Have the United Nations megaconferences provided the launching pad for effective initiatives that would involve changes in institutions, policies, projects and practices that are commensurate with the nature and scope of the global-wide challenge in terms of poverty alleviation, reducing inequality and instability, protecting and expanding human rights, assuring access to educational and health services (and, in that connection, potable water), etc.? (see Box 2).
- Given their nature (size, complexity, etc.), could they ever have succeeded in doing so, and, if not, what are the alternative approaches that hold promise as an initiative at the international level of governance?

Box 2

Water has been a key deprivation with over 1 billion people unable to access clean drinking water, more than twice that number lacking access to adequate sanitation facilities and about four times that number without access to sanitary wastewater disposal facilities. (The World Health Organization defines “reasonable access” as the availability of 20 litres per person per day from a source within 1 kilometre of the user’s home.) An estimated 12 million people die annually from the scarcity of clean water leading to waterborne diseases. Yet, on the present trajectory according to a recent report, The World Water Report (UNESCO 2003), by 2050 there will be severe water shortages confronting 7 billion people, that is, about two-thirds of the projected global population. At the same time, it bears noting that the United Nations Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights explicitly recognizes the rights to water as a “human right”, that the Director-General of IFPRI has stated in the foreword to one of his organization’s publications that “the defining issue of the 21st century may well be the control of water resources” (Rosegrant 1997), and that others have put forward the case that “the nexus between development, water, and human rights is well established in the international legal regime” (McIherney-Langford and Salman 2004).

One way to proceed is to examine some types of conferencing that by their very nature illustrate how not to proceed and, by inference, illuminate a way to proceed. One such conference of the how-not-to-proceed variety is the broad-based Millennium Development Conference that took place at the very beginning of this millennium. It has set out an ambitious and eminently desirable array of goals as a stimulus to action and as a guide to institutional and operational initiatives that should and could be undertaken at various levels of governance.

Another type of conference that merits examination is one that has focused on a particular aspect of the global *problematique*, as, for example, the United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy (UNCNRSE) that took

place in Nairobi in 1981 a quarter of a century ago, and, for our purposes, has the virtue of being related to the water management theme of this workshop and to the many facets of life in which energy, the environment and water issues are intimately connected.¹

Though both these conferences are representative of two types of approach, the broad and the sectoral, they are characterized by similarities in terms of scale, organization and procedures that are typical of United Nations conferences. The assessment of their success or failure and the lessons to be learnt from a broad-brush description and analysis of both of them should have implications about United Nations conferencing in general as an approach to tackling global-scale problems and about possible alternative approaches.

2.3 Two Case Studies: The Millennium Development Conference and the United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy

2.3.1 The Millennium Development Conference

There'll be crumpets and tea without you.
Art and music will thrive without you.
Somehow Keats will survive without you.
And there still will be rain on that plain down in Spain,
even that will remain without you.
I can do without you.
— lyrics from *My Fair Lady*

There have been several broad-based United Nations conferences on such themes as human rights, social development and, most recently, to mark the new millennium, a catch-all one called The Millennium Development Conference from which emerged The Millennium Declaration with its long list of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). It set targets for reducing key deprivations such as access to educational and health facilities and such basic needs as clean drinking water and sanitation. A perusal of the eight goals, as listed in Box 3, shows that four MDGs are concerned with health and one of the four is focused on the aspect of access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

1 And it has the additional bonus of being a conference with which the author was intimately involved as its Assistant Secretary-General and which, therefore, could provide an insight from the special vantage of an insider and could enable lessons to be learnt on the basis of a retrospective vision of more than two decades.

Box 3

The MDGs to be achieved by 2015 are the following:

1. reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than \$1 per day and those suffering from hunger;
2. achieve universal primary education;
3. eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education;
4. reduce by two-thirds the mortality rate among children under five;
5. reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality rate;
6. halt and begin to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS and the incidence of malaria and other major diseases;
7. ensure the environment (including reduction by half those without access to safe drinking water and sanitation facilities) and significantly improve the quality of life of at least 100 million slum dwellers by 2020);
8. develop a global partnership for development.

As the United Nations Secretary-General observed, “at this stage of global development, such deprivations were deemed to have persisted for too long and constituted an affront to the conscience in what purports to be civilization. This goal-setting exercise was followed by more meetings in Doha, Monterrey and in the summer of 2002, in Johannesburg, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) attracted 40,000 persons: 1200 heads of state and government officials, executives of 500 corporations and thousands more from non-governmental organizations. There had been backsliding since the Conference on the Environment and Development held in Rio in 1992; the declared challenge was to get on track to achieve “sustainable development”, an over-arching goal that has become a cliché and, as such, is regrettably vacuous in operational terms (Miller 2005).

There has long been recognition of the need for these meetings to get beyond the traditional communiqués that have been comprised of wish-lists of goals or targets with timelines that are devoid or weak on the aspect of implementation, that is, how such matters as institutional changes and financing and other requirements are to be achieved. Thus, the mandate of the General Assembly for the Johannesburg Summit called for going beyond an assessment of what had been and what had not been accomplished since the Rio Conference. The Johannesburg meeting provided an occasion to revise the goals and to harden up the soft language of Rio with regard to how to attain the goals, including the challenging aspect of finding the necessary financing that in 1992 at the Rio Conference was estimated to be over \$600 billion of which \$125 billion would be expected as the contribution of the international community. A Plan of Implementation was drafted along with a firm financial commitment of only \$3 billion replenishment for existing programmes and with an expectation of raising the necessary additional funding through a programme called Type II Partnerships that would be voluntary agreements with the private sector for financing specific initiatives.

The Millennium Conference of 2000 went further: it established an entity called the Millennium Project, the mandate of which is to advise the Secretary-General. The Administrator of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) would be assigned to act as chairperson of a special unit called the United Nations Development Group (UNDG). Coordinators working under the leadership of Professor Jeffrey Sachs have been assigned to head 10 Task Forces comprised of world-class scholars, personnel of United Nations agencies, public and private sector institutions, and non-governmental organizations. Each task force has been charged with producing a report focused on assigned themes that are wide ranging (see Box 4). The mandate of the Millennium Project is clear and ambitious – to recommend by June 2005:

operational strategies for meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) (that includes reviewing current innovative practices, prioritizing policy reforms, identifying frameworks for policy implementation and evaluating financing options, the ultimate objective (of which) is to help ensure that all developing countries meet the MDGs.

“So”, wrote one commentator, “the summit was anything but a complete failure” (Ruffing 2002: 40). To which the appropriate reply might be “let’s wait and see.”

Box 4

The themes of these task forces are the following: (1) poverty and economic development, (2) hunger, (3) education and gender equality, (4) child and maternal health, (5) major diseases (HIV/AIDS, malaria, TB and others) and access to essential medicines, (6) environmental sustainability, (7) water and sanitation, (8) improving the lives of slum dwellers, (9) open, rule-based trading systems, and (10) science, technology and innovation. Further details on these reports can be found at www.unmilleniumproject.org.

The interim reports of the 10 Task Forces have already been made available. On the face of it, to judge by the quality of the analysis and the evident concern of the authors for the factor of feasibility, there would appear to be some promise that actions commensurate with the challenge might actually follow. Scepticism, however, arises from the gap between promise and performance revealed by a study of the historic record of past United Nations megaconferences, especially those of ambitiously broad scope. Short of some means of enforcement, reliance has traditionally been placed on the weak reed of moral suasion underpinned by regulation, offering incentives to do “the right thing”, and by monitoring followed by publicity that might shame governments who fall short of commitments, if they even have made commitments by signing on a dotted line.

This line of reasoning has given rise to the World Bank’s publication of *The Global Monitoring Report 2004, Overview: From Vision to Action* (World Bank 2004a). On the opening page the authors are quite explicit in stating that:

the themes of implementation and accountability constitute the fundamental motivation behind the global monitoring initiative... With broad agreement on the goals and strategies to achieve the MDGs, *the task now is implementation*. (emphasis added)

Now implementation? Does this suggest that not much of significance has been achieved at these meetings beyond identifying a problem and setting goals? The usual answer is that goal-setting is a spur to action.

To assess this answer there is a need to examine the record with regard to the implementation follow-up. While *The Global Monitoring Report 2004* and *Rising to the Challenges: The Millennium Development Goals* (World Bank 2004b) lists progress towards attaining some of the MDGs it reports, as well, on the lack of progress and, in that regard, it states that only about one out of six of the developing countries are currently on track to reach the relevant MDGs and that this shortfall still leaves more than 10 million children in their countries dying before reaching their fifth birthday and as many as 500,000 women dying during pregnancy or in the process of childbirth. On the positive side, there is a list of achievements that include attainment of some of the MDGs well before the target date and of progress towards achieving them. The progress appears impressive:

globally, adult illiteracy fell by half over the past 30 years, while life expectancy at birth rose by 20% over the past 40 years... from 1990 to 2002 Vietnam reduced poverty from 51 to 14%... over the course of the last 15 years Botswana doubled the proportion of children in primary school... in the 1990s Benin increased its primary enrolment rate and Mali its primary completion rate by more than 20%... between 1990 and 1996, Mauritania increased the ratio of girls to boys at school from 67 to 93%...

What is noteworthy is that this progress has been made without any contribution of the 10 Task Force Reports of the Millennium Project. It is on the basis of the proposals contained in these reports with regard to programmes and projects and related institutional changes that governments are being asked to take action. The point of this is simply to illustrate that there is no evidence of a necessary relationship between the conference process, including its follow-up in terms of report writing, and the implementation phase. There are too many factors at play to correlate the desired actions on the ground with the articulation of goals and of proposals emanating from these conferences as a cause-and-effect relationship. Indeed, as the authors of the cited World Bank reports point out, rapid progress is possible given "good policies and the support of partners".

Perhaps the most cogently expressed put-down of such conferences is that presented by Stephen Rosenfeld, in an op-ed piece in the 16 September 1994 issue of *The Washington Post* titled, "The Cairo Mandate" when he posed the following questions in connection with the International Conference on Population and Development that was held in Cairo in 1994:

What could a conference like this actually do? Did the world really need a population conference to determine that the most rewarding remedial actions is to spend more on such programmes as the education of girls and the empowerment of women?"

He noted that “(these questions are) asked somewhat dismissively, or despairingly”, and went on to make an observation about the Cairo Conference that would seem to apply to all other United Nations megaconferences:

Cairo’s accomplishment lies in the essential chemistry of social change: converting a slowly won new expert consensus on population and development into a virtually worldwide political consensus, thus fortifying advocates returning to battle in their own countries on an agenda that assigns new weight to a developmental approach to women’s rights and health... You are left with the largest calculated act of social engineering in history.

Is it any wonder that he is prompted to characterize the United Nations in staging these conferences as a “dumping ground of desperate hopes... (that) badly needs a shot of relevance and effectiveness”?

This gives rise to the thought that these large-scale well-publicized United Nations conferences were very likely conceived by politicians who are under pressure to address serious problems or crises that call for action at the level of international governance: these conferences are a showcase that demonstrates their shared concern with their constituents – *and is a form of action*. Whether it is useful in the sense of giving rise to follow-up action “on the ground” is a secondary consideration for these politicians. At best, through the staging of such conferences, they could hope to achieve the modest goal of raising public awareness and spreading some key elements of knowledge about such issues while not being obliged to do much beyond talking the good talk and signing operationally vacuous do-good agreements. The mode of operation of these conferences lends itself to this viciousness since the most reluctant participant among the donor industrialized nations can impose their will with regard to financial or other commitments. The old adage applies: the convoy cannot go faster than the slowest ship. And what is worse, the slowest ship may be deliberately stalled in the water or sail off course when mixed signals are received as to the direction and speed to be taken.

In this regard the observation of a Canadian participant at the conference that gave rise to Agenda 21 seems apropos. Peter Padbury, a former Director of the Ottawa-based Canadian Council for International Cooperation, in a report entitled, *UNCED and the Globalization of Civil Society: Lessons for United Nations Reform* (Padbury 1993: 4) had pertinent comments on the issue of the negotiations at that conference, a process that is all too typical of broad-scope megaconferences:

as negotiations proceeded the wording became more general and the commitments less precise...The negotiations did not seem connected to problems or actors in the real world...The principle strategy of governments seemed to be to ensure that nothing happened that obligated their governments to make any changes...

The debate on financial resources to pay for Agenda 21 was illustrative. A great deal of time was spent on the finance question (but) the discussion on finances was a stalemate that was never formally resolved.

He went on to characterize this as,

an amazing process, but, like many United Nations conferences, it suffered from a number of problems (such as putting) emphasis on negotiations rather than on an effective change process, on sectoral rather than on system level change, on the nation state rather than on the planetary system...

The mixed signal metaphor would seem to be suggestive of what is likely to transpire when the attribute of interconnectedness arises with its attendant complexity for both analysis and its operational implications. Agenda 21 exemplifies this phenomenon that makes it very difficult to arrive at decisions as to what needs to be done and how it is to be done in terms of executing agencies and financing and other aspects. This difficulty is also clearly exemplified in the case of the World Summit for Social Development at Copenhagen in March 1995 that, like the Millennium Development Conference, was very broad-based. The former United Nations Secretary-General, Boutros Boutros-Ghali, made a pertinent observation (Boutros-Ghali 1999: 171) that recognizes the interconnectedness of the broad-based and sectoral conferences.

The ills that societies feel most acutely all have social origins and social consequences (necessitating) focus on the urgent and universal need to eradicate poverty, expand productive employment and enhance social integration... (By placing the) focus entirely on the most deprived segment of global society the World Summit for Social Development at Copenhagen in March 1995 stressed the interconnectedness of the entire continuum of United Nations conferences.

The stress arising from this interconnectedness of the entire continuum of United Nations conferences appear to have been too great. Even the eminently desirable and seemingly feasible 20/20 proposal (that would have obliged the international community to devote 20% of their aid to social programmes and projects with the recipient developing countries in their turn committing to devote 20% of their budgets to the same type of programmes and projects) could not emerge as a recommendation from the deliberations of the United Nations' Social Summit in Copenhagen. Other concrete recommendations failed to make it to the ultimate draft; only very vague statements survived the weaning-out process. As Professor Michael Schecter observed in his conclusion to a book on the impact and follow-up of United Nations-sponsored world conferences (Schecter 2001: 219),

One of the truths of such conferences is that they cannot paper over significant differences amongst governments and cultures on salient and contentious issues, especially when they are negotiated at a widely publicized global conference... The United Nations-sponsored conferences...seek to focus on one major issue-area whereas globalization makes that difficult, if not actually infeasible or dysfunctional.

But, as we shall see in the last section of this chapter, this does not mean abandonment of a facilitating role for the United Nations via smaller and sharply focused conferencing where meaningful outcomes at the international level of governance are possible, if not likely. The United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy would seem to be a good candidate to illustrate this point: despite being focused, it was not small and it failed to have any significant impact. Though it is, so to speak, "a vintage conference" having taken place in 1981 after, and in response to, the so-called "international energy crisis" of the 1970s, the lessons to be learnt apropos the effectiveness or non-effectiveness of United Nations megaconferences are pertinent to the challenge we face today.

2.3.2 The United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy

Just you wait, 'enry 'iggins, just your wait!
 You'll be sorry, your tears will be too late!
 You'll be broke and I'll have money;
 Will I help you? Don't be funny!
 Just you wait, 'enry 'iggins, just you wait!
 — lyrics from *My Fair Lady*

How long do we have to wait? More than a quarter of a century has passed since the so-called “international energy crisis” was precipitated by OPEC’s tripling of oil prices and the world was gripped with fear at the prospect of living in the dark. The neo-Malthusian Club of Rome’s publication, *The Limits to Growth*, became a best-selling tract rivalling the sales of the Bible. The financial/economic impact of a three-fold rise in oil prices and the dire implications for the global economy, and particularly poor oil-importing countries, prompted the United Nations members to convene a major conference, the United Nations Conference on New and Renewable Sources of Energy that, after 2 years of preparation, was held in Nairobi in 1981. To what effect?

Here was a conference arising out of an urgent need to address an abrupt large increase in the price of an essential commodity. The “oil shock” of the 1970s brought on a realization that there would need to be a search for alternatives to fossil fuels in part to assure an energy supply and in part to reduce environmental damage. The Nairobi Conference was, thus, born out of recognition of the need for research and other measures to bring forth alternative energy sources in a form and at a price that could make a significant global impact. The conference’s mandate was to identify the problems and recommend steps to meet them through national and international-scale policies and programmes.

After more than 2 years of preparation, a so-called Plan of Action emerged, a distillation derived from the discussions in over twenty workshops and from the many background papers prepared by the workshop participants, special consultants, NGOs and government agencies. The recommendations pertained to national and internationally sponsored actions, including new institutional arrangements, to promote research and development of alternative sources of energy, particularly those that could displace fuelwood and, therefore, prove of special relevance for developing countries.

If judged by follow-through “on the ground”, all this effort and expenditure of talent and money ended in failure. There is little residue in the public consciousness of its deliberations and of its proposals for action. It is rare to even find in the media any reference to the Nairobi Conference when the major environment-related conferences are listed and discussed. We hear of Stockholm, Rio, Kyoto and Johannesburg but the one that focused on environmentally benign energy, the key to a better environmental future, is almost always omitted. But, notwithstanding, one could ask: did the Nairobi Conference’s Plan of Action have some impact on the conferences that followed? It would be hard put for anyone to demonstrate

that there has been any follow-up worth mentioning to the initiatives that were put forward in the Nairobi Conference or in any of the subsequent United Nations conferences on the same theme.

It is relevant to understand why the Nairobi Conference did not leave an indelible footprint on either the public's consciousness or the politicians. A large part of the reason would seem to lie in the inappropriateness of the process of large-scale conferencing to tackle such international challenges. The oil-importing countries campaigned hard for the launching of the conference, and desperately wanted it to succeed, but were tactically inept as might have been expected when, in the name of G-77 unity, they acquiesced in the appointment of officials from the oil-exporting countries to be their leading spokespersons! They were unprepared for the opposition led by the United States, the Soviet Union and the OPEC spokesmen, all of whom clearly desired that the conference fail. The result is an impressive-sounding Plan of Action but one that was devoid of concrete programme or project initiatives except for those that were known *a priori* to be desirable. What emerged were proposals that were a traditional collection of pious platitudes and exhortations formulated in very general terms that lacked specified follow-up steps regarding institutional arrangements and the financing of actionable programmes (see Box 5). This prompts the question: Was there any point to staging the conference?

Box 5

To illustrate, the list of recommendations were the following:

1. governments should undertake surveys and assessment programmes regarding alternatives to oil, gas, coal and nuclear power;
2. the costs and risks of demonstration of new technologies should be shared so as to accelerate their application;
3. more training should be provided for the personnel in poorer countries;
4. governments should undertake a follow-up study to establish estimates of the funding requirements for the relevant programmes and projects.

This megaconference proved to be an effective way to impede change while, at the same time, pretending to recognize the need for change. It is, unfortunately, a very effective and, therefore, a common tactic of politicians, all of whom (as distinguished from statesmen) operate under constraints that are parochial and short-term. Thus, this approach to addressing a major global challenge does little to overcome the institutional system obstacles to change.

2.4 The Barriers to Effective Action

Let a woman in your life, and patience hasn't got a chance;
 she will beg you for advice, your reply will be concise,
 she will listen very nicely and then go out
 and do exactly what she wants!!!

— lyrics from *My Fair Lady*

If the global community is to get what it wants, as identified by the ambitious objectives articulated at the United Nations megaconferences, the nature of the resistance to change has to be understood in its many guises. The barriers to such change can most helpfully be identified under three headings (Miller 1994a):

1. The first is a factor labelled *inertia* with its related attributes such as ignorance, scepticism, fatalism, alienation and such. It is a powerful force that sustains the status quo. If effective action on the requisite scale is to be launched and sustained, the necessary condition is a political base that rests on knowledgeable and committed popular support that is powerful enough to overcome the forces of inertia in all its forms.

The argument has often been made that the United Nations conferences, by virtue of the publicity that they generate, have an impact on government policies by raising public consciousness of the problems and of the possible solutions. It has been argued that non-governmental organizations are the committed and organized voice and, therefore, have been effective in playing a role as “the conscience of the world... by placing issues of social justice on the global agenda” (Schecter 2001: 180). Given the half-life of the publicity – and notwithstanding the valiant efforts of some NGOs, most of whom are pulling in different directions and many of which have no compunction about falsehood and exaggeration in their reliance for public support on the fear factor – this is a rather weak basis for action. The attention of the public drifts quickly to other matters with rationales for inaction in the form of cynicism, scepticism, indifference or ignorance in the form of not knowing or relying on blind faith rather than reason (see Box 6).

2. The second barrier to action is a category of responses to suggested initiatives that can be labelled as *aversion to risk-taking*. This barrier is of very special relevance in undertaking initiatives that are of a significant scale. Thus, people settle for “the second best” even if that fear to embrace significant and swift (and often disruptive) change perpetuates deplorable conditions and also has attendant risks: “Better the devil you know” is the watchword.

This is dramatically evident in the case of a water-related issue, the precarious state of the oceans and fisheries and the understandable short-sighted risk-averse perspective of those who are directly dependent for their livelihood on the oceans and fisheries. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) provides the case in point: the WSSD ended with an objective about restoring fish stocks to sustainable levels by 2015 and with suggestions about the measures that would need to be taken to attain this goal within this span of time. The rationale for this

item in the Plan of Implementation was that it would hopefully exert pressure on the politicians to eliminate or significantly reduce the subsidies that were contributing to an over-capacity in boats, gear and processing plants. However, no account was taken of the short-term political risks involved in a policy of reducing subsidies when, as a consequence, there was a high probability, if not a certainty, that the suggested course of action be resented and, in any case, would not be followed despite the awareness of the long-term denouement of declining fish stocks and declining employment and income and the slow death of the communities. The politician's signature to a United Nations accord means little in the face of the political risk of the possible or probable loss of the vested interest in maintaining office.

Box 6

The blind-faith factor would appear to be a phenomenon of relevance for policy-makers.

A poll of the beliefs of Americans taken in May 2004 by the Association for Canadian Studies revealed that 7 in 10 believe that hell and the devil exist and that 8 in 10 believe in the existence of a heaven where angels abound. There were more self-declared Satanists than self-declared atheists, 30 to 25%! In the Canadian case, only about 1 in three believes in the devil, over 4 in 10 in the existence of heaven and of hell, but almost 6 in 10 in angels. This religiosity cuts two ways: for some there is hope in perceiving an optimistic denouement if the failings of enough individuals are forgiven and redemption follows, and for others, there is the Apocalypse that is foretold and about which we humans can do little except pray.

Reported in the 21 November 2004 issue of *The Ottawa Citizen*, in an article titled, "In God we (Canadians) don't trust as much as Americans do."

3. This brings us to the third barrier that can be categorized as *vested interests in the status quo*. Resistance is to be expected from those who are fearful that they would likely bear the lion's share of the financial and other costs of change without assurance of commensurate benefits or pay-off. There is no institutional or policy mechanism for winners compensating the losers associated with change and the reason is simply greed: those who have it, want to keep it, and want to get more of it! And the way to do that is to resist significant changes to the prevailing systemic arrangements.

These institutional barriers are especially operative with respect to finding enough funds and talent to adequately support programmes and projects under United Nations auspices that are designed for the "global common good". The factor of financing is especially applicable to those activities when there is asymmetry with respect to both the costs (who bears them?) and the benefits (who reaps

them, when, and how much?). Given the magnitude of the capital required to meet the ambitious MDGs, the financial aspect of vested interests is critical.

Take water as an example: the goal articulated in the Millennium Summit is to cut by half by 2015 the number of people that lack access to water for drinking and sanitation. Attaining this objective translates into providing potable water for an additional 1.5 billion people and 2.1 billion people in the case of sanitation, the annual cost of which, according to *The Economist* (15 May 2005: 75), is estimated to be \$1.7 billion and \$9.3 billion respectively at a bare minimum, but going as high as \$40 billion for an acceptable standard. This, the author points out, would be an expenditure that would yield

an impressive rate of return by any measure, the benefits being social in the sense of avoiding illnesses attributable to dirty water, bad or non-existent sanitation and poor standards of hygiene stemming from lack of access to clean water.

This scale of increase, imprecise as it may be, is not attainable unless and until there is a large increase in official development assistance (ODA) and in private investment flows. A minimum estimate of the capital needed adds up to an amount that would call for a four-fold to five-fold increase in the total of foreign aid that now flows at an annual rate of about \$50 billion, or, to take another measuring rod, adds up to roughly a doubling of the total flow of official aid, private bank lending and investment. While private capital flows to the developing countries have been increasing over the past few years, the overwhelming proportion of this capital flow is being directed to a very few developing countries under the aegis of multinationals that are investing for ventures with short payback periods. The fact is that too little of this capital is spent on the type of research, infrastructure and services that respond to the priority needs of the developing countries. Since it is not in the short-term financial interests of donor governments and private investors to be concerned with this, the systemic rules of the game provide insufficient incentives to do much about it.

But, lest it be thought that the financial aspect is the only way that vested interest thinking manifests itself, it needs to be stressed that there is also resistance to change by those who have a vested interest in maintaining positions of political/bureaucratic power whether in the public sector or the private. This resistance is a factor that goes part way to explain why there is support by some and resistance by others in the United Nations System. That is called upon to play the role of the host organization for the series of megaconference. There are many niches for the exercise of power in a large complex organizational system with a multifaceted mandate such as the United Nations System that is comprised of many separate (almost completely) autonomous agencies in which the head of each operates like a feudal lord, always on the alert to protect or to expand the agency's turf. (For example, over a dozen international organizations are concerned explicitly with issues related to water management so this jurisdictional issue is one demanding alertness and toughness.) The United Nations' Secretary-General is not vested with the requisite power to forge collaborative initiatives between these United Nations agencies. Persuasion is a weak force, but it is all that seems available under the "constitutional" arrangements that established each of the various

agencies that comprise the United Nations *as a system*. The specialized agencies are constitutionally distinct entities and, as one author (Taylor 2003: 19) noted, each one of them has “a strong urge to go their separate ways and have the power to do so...It is a stubbornly polycentric system”.

The member countries of the United Nations System have long recognized the need for coordination and, indeed, in the late 1960s, the UNDP’s Inter-Agency Consultative Board commissioned Sir Robert Jackson to study the operation of the United Nations with regard to its mandate to promote development. His report was very critical in noting the United Nations’ “non-political weakness” in not having the capability to work as “a highly coordinated unit under governmental control via the General Assembly” (Jackson 1969). He went so far as to liken the United Nations to

some prehistoric monster, incapable of intelligently controlling itself, not because it lacks intelligent and capable officials, but because it is so organized that managerial direction is impossible.

Two decades later, the United Nations’ Secretary-General attempted once again to overcome the lack of coherence that characterizes the structure of the United Nations as a system of agencies (see Box 7). The UNDP Administrator was appointed to act as a coordinator. This attempt to address the problem of coordination could not succeed to any appreciable degree and for very good reasons. Merely to sketch its operational dynamic reveals the difficulty of overcoming the vested interest to achieve effective coordination.

Not much, or not enough, seems to have changed since these authors and others have written and spoken about the issue. Over the decades there obviously has been formidable resistance to change. Yet without radical institutional changes that would reduce complexity, the role of this variant of vested interests will continue to frustrate efforts to “do the right thing”.

But the direction of institutional change is towards increasing complexity. The Millennium Development Conference provides an illustration of this. The scope of the commitments was enlarged and was also made complicated by resolutions of the prior conferences. It should suffice to cite this as an example. A central issue about which there is little disagreement is, namely, the concept of human rights. Almost all the United Nations’ specialized agencies have laid claim to responsibility for one or more aspects, and were helped to do so by the resolutions emanating from prior well-publicized megaconferences. The net result has been overlapping in terms of themes and of proposals (see Box 8).

As Michael Schecter observed in his article on the difficulty of achieving effective follow-up of these conferences (Schecter 2001: 218–222),

it is no easy task to maintain a clear focus on the specific issues at the core of each conference, while at the same time, ensuring that all the conferences advance a comprehensive view of development. The agenda of the conference have tended to take a cross-sectoral approach (but the United Nations System had tended to be organized along sectoral lines...As the United Nations’ organs, bodies and programmes proliferated, so has the need for greater coherence within the system...The sweeping, cross-sectoral approach adopted by the global conferences has made the need for coherence even greater.

Box 7*The Coordination Conundrum*

The founders of the United Nations Charter, trying to improve on the mechanism of the League of Nations for overseeing the economic and social institution, agreed to establish the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to carry out this specialized function. But they did not give ECOSOC the necessary powers to manage effectively (as) it was only empowered under Article 61–6 of the Charter to issue recommendations to the specialized agencies, that are not only self-contained constitutionally, but are self-sustaining financially and not subject to direct United Nations control. Thus, as Sir Robert Jackson noted:

Historically there has been no organization capable of defining a coherent overall agenda or coordinating and managing the wide range of economic and social activities which were carried out beneath the U.N. umbrella. The Administrative Committee for Coordination (ACC) which was intended to function as the main coordinating mechanism has generally failed as its members, the Agency heads, used it to defend their territories rather than agree (about) its management.

Another author, Martin Hill, in his book on coordinating the economic and social activities of the United Nations (Hill 1978: 95) was very categorical about this issue as it presented itself, a decade after Sir Robert Jackson had sung the same plaintive song:

There exists no means of harmonizing the thinking of the executive heads and the senior staff of organs concerned with central policy issues, such as UNCTAD, UNIDO, UNDP, and directing it towards problems facing the international community and towards possible initiatives that the United Nations might usefully take.

There have been many attempts to address the problem posed by this lack of coherence, two of which involving institutional and procedural changes are illustrative. The process to achieve coordination has involved several steps:

- The establishment of functional commissions such as the Commission on the Status of Women, the Commission on Sustainable Development, the Commission on Human Rights and the Commission on Population and Development.
- The reinvigoration of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) that operates under the authority of the General Assembly in trying to harmonize the agendas and work programmes of the functional commissions.
- Establishing a coordinated follow-up with regard to the implementation of the goals of these conferences, especially on the twelve themes common to these conferences, one of which was the provision of “basic social services for all: primary health care, nutrition, education, safe water and sanitation, population and shelter” (United Nations, E1995/86, 25–38, Table 1).

Box 8*Human Rights as a case in point re Conference Theme Overlap*

The World Conference on Human Rights in 1992 defined the scope as inclusive of economic, social and cultural rights, the rights of women and children, and the right to development. This laid the foundation for the ambitious Agenda 21 that was formulated in 1992 at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development that went beyond specifying action on environmental issues to include proposed action with regard to poverty, children, women, education, private sector involvement, etc.

The United Nations International Conference on Population and Development in 1994 was equally ambitious in expanding its scope in relating population to economic development and the environmental goals of the 1992 conference. The 1995 World Summit for Social Development expanded the scope yet again by including social integration as well as poverty and employment. The United Nations Conference on Women in that same year identified 12 critical areas of concern from poverty to armed conflict in addition to health, the environment and human rights. And so it went from year to year from conference to conference to include food and housing and other aspects that became the foci of other conferences.

The coordination of proposals and follow-up on each of these themes has proven to be a difficult task as has become evident in the reports for the special sessions that are 5-year post-conference reviews of progress (United Nations, E1998/19 and E1999/11). The further complicating factors in the institutional process, namely the need to coordinate the involvement of the various specialized agencies of the United Nations System, has been addressed by establishing a special entity for that purpose, the Administrative Committee on Coordination (ACC). In turn the ACC in 1995 established three inter-agency task forces (IATFs) whose roles are to coordinate three broad themes arising from the conferences:

- environment for social and economic development;
- employment; and
- basic social services for all (that includes the provision of water).

There is, as yet, little evidence that this complicated process is working or could work effectively to achieve the desired results on a significant scale. Overlaid on all this, as if to acknowledge that the coordination arrangements cannot be expected to work well, an entity called the Millennium Project has been established as “an independent advisory body”. Beyond the issuance of impressive reports, the contribution of this institutional add-on remains to be seen. But, in any case, some basic questions remain: was a megaconference needed to have these reports commissioned and have they advanced the day of follow action?

The sad fact is that the act of signing protocols has too often been a ritual to be followed up by inaction or by half-hearted scarcely effectual steps (see Box 9). Writing on the issue of follow-up, Richard Jolly, a person steeped in United Nations lore through his long involvement with several United Nations agencies, has suggested that the prospects for effective follow-up might be more hopeful if there were the following factors at play (Jolly 1997):

strong determined national and international leadership...(along with) political and social mobilization...(to undertake) doable low-cost strategies...(to achieve) a focused set of priorities.

Where are these attributes likely to be found? The very limited success of these conferences to achieve an action programme with the requisite financing can only in small part be attributable to the absence of *strong and determined national and international leadership*. There are the forces of inertia, risk-aversion and vested interests to contend with. Under these circumstances, it is important to recognize that the modality of United Nations conferencing on a global scale would not likely be effective as a means of tackling the host of issues that desperately need to be addressed. But political vested interests will want to play the charade of staging well-publicized megaconferences full of sound and fury but signifying little else.

So what is to be done?

Box 9

The follow-up to the Convention to Protect Wetlands provides an example when, after a decade of failure to advance towards the declared goals, the United Nations nonetheless pops off the cork to celebrate its “achievements” with a United Nations day. The same story could be told with regard to the dismal record of the 1994 Convention to Combat Desertification of 1994 that *celebrated* its tenth birthday with another special United Nations day though the pace of desertification has accelerated, prompting a spokesman for the United Nations department overseeing the programme to characterize the situation as “a creeping catastrophe” as each year since the Convention was signed about 3500 square kilometres have turned to desert and it is estimated that by 2025 two-thirds of arable land in Africa, one-third in Asia and one-fifth in South America will have disappeared leaving about 135 million people at risk or accelerating their exodus from rural areas to urban centres that are already strained to provide adequate clean water and sanitation facilities.

2.5 If No Mega Conferences, What Are the Alternatives?

I'm getting married in the mornin'
Ding dong! the bells are going to chime .
Kick up a rumpus, but don't lose the compass
And get me to the church on time.
For Gawd's sake, get me to the church on time!
—lyrics from *My Fair Lady*

Both the theory and practice of United Nations conferencing on a mega scale would seem to indicate that this mode of operating to address global problems or crises could not be relied upon to get us to the figurative “church”. And, given its cumbersome structure and procedures, such conferences could not be, and should not be, counted on to overcome the obstacles to change and, in any case, to do so on time. Thus, there emerges a wide gap between what is promised and what is delivered, between rhetoric and reality.

Where does this leave us?

When a serious problem and/or an impending crisis is of a nature and scale that precludes any single nation from having any hope of success in tackling it alone, there is an understandable inclination to convene a meeting of interested parties. But several questions arise: need these meetings be global and, therefore, of mega size and scope? Need the outcome of discussions be couched in terminology that is cliché-ridden, that is to say, operationally vacuous?

An issue related to water management can provide an illustrative case: There are calls for the establishment of a World Water Institute (Kirpich 2004) to lead the research to more effectively address such phenomena as the excess of water (flooding), the dearth of water (desertification), the contamination of water, the conflicts in the allocation of water to meet the urban explosion in the demand for water for households, for electric power production and for agriculture use. All these are of great concern in many parts of the world and in that sense the problems have global dimensions. The challenge is complicated by the crisis aspect that adds the element of urgency:

- How fast could scientific, technological and policy research be geared up to significantly reduce the unacceptable death toll of about 12 million people each year that is directly attributable to waterborne diseases stemming from a lack of access to uncontaminated water?
- Could the amount of water available for agricultural purposes be increased sufficiently over the next quarter century to meet the anticipated increase of 80% in the need for food?

But, on the contrary, it is relevant to ask:

- Could/should these problems that are couched in global terms be more effectively tackled at the level of national or regional governance (river basin or metropolis) since its resolution would seem to be well within the purview and the capacity of a national or sub-national government?

However, if the answer is that a research programme is best underwritten and undertaken by an international body for financial and other reasons such as the size and frequency of risk of disaster and urgency of response, a case could be made that the appropriate measures should be within the purview of global governance. The research in water management could be very helpful if focused on technology for finding water sources underground, for desalination plants, for pumping, for transporting water and for determining the best ways in which water should be used in households, in industry and on the farm. For example, research has already brought down the cost of desalination to less than 50¢ per m³, or less than \$1.80 per 1,000 gallons and the minimum scale of the units has been radically reduced so that the cost effectiveness issue is being resolved. The outreach to spread the knowledge of the research findings and accelerate their application through the dissemination of literature and establishment of training programmes would also call for institutional arrangements and programmes that are international in their financing and in their implementation as “best practices”.

The question that follows is: If a mega scale conference is not an effective way to launch such research initiative, what is the alternative?

Three initiatives come to mind that were conceived and implemented without the need for a megaconference to launch them, one of which is rather recent and two, rather dated but, nonetheless, suggestive and pertinent for today:

1. The first is the agreement called the Montreal Protocol that was launched by a process involving small-scale meetings and a conference that were all sharply focused on the issue of ozone depletion as an environmental challenge of global dimensions. Here the objective of the meetings was to devise an agreement among all nations on the why and how and when of reducing the emission of chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) into the atmosphere. The reasons why the Montreal Protocol has been a success story that is still in progress should be identified to reveal under what conditions United Nations conferences could hope to succeed. The factors were the following:

- It was more a series of relatively small meeting in terms of participants and publicity;
- Its recommendations to reduce the amount of CFCs released into the atmosphere was based on accepted scientific knowledge;
- There was a feasible alternative to CFCs in terms of cost and ease of application by industries in both the industrialized and developing countries;
- The results could be monitored and nations could be encouraged and pressured to undertake the necessary regulatory regime by the publication of periodic reporting on shortfalls, thereby exerting moral suasion. (Pending a form of “world government” able to enforce rules of “good behaviour”. Reliance has to be placed on a process of shaming non-compliant nations.)

2. The establishment of the Consultative Group on International Agricultural Research (CGIAR). The idea was initiated by three non-governmental foundations (Kellogg, Rockefeller, Ford). The World Bank and the United Nations’ Food and Agricultural Organization (FAO), in 1970, enabled the transformation of that idea

into an operational entity for undertaking research to increase food output and improve policy-making on all issues related to agricultural production and consumption (see Box 10).

Box 10

CGIAR is an alliance of governments, regional and international organizations, donor institutions and research centres that mobilize funds and expertise for both technical and policy advising for the benefit of poor farmers in developing countries. It now supports 18 research centres around the world, all but one in the developing countries. (The policy entity is the International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) that is located in Washington, DC.)

For a fuller exposition, in addition to CGIAR'S annual reports, see Anderson et al. (1988) and Miller (1992).

It is estimated that the increase in food production attributable to CGIAR as a way of organizing and financing research more effectively has yearly enabled the feeding of more than 1 billion people.

The report, *CGIAR Annual Meetings 2004: In Search of Solutions for the Farmer of the XXI Century*, reveals that each dollar that has been invested through its research system has generated nine additional dollars in increased food production, and that income *per capita* in the poorest economies of the world would not have increased by about 7% had there not been the active presence of the CGIAR. Its dynamism is typified by the recent launching of a \$120 million dollar research consortium, known as the Challenge Programme on Water and Food, to investigate how more food can be produced with less water, that is explore new technologies to optimize the use of water in agriculture that presently accounts for 70 to 90% of water use.

It seems relevant to note in this connection that neither the concept nor the establishment of CGIAR arose from a conference at all. Sometime in 1969 the heads of the Ford, Kellogg and Rockefeller foundations made a decision to arrange a meeting with the President of the World Bank, Robert McNamara, to discuss how they could meet the demand for funds to support agricultural research that was overwhelming them. It was a time of crisis in the sense that during the 1950s and 1960s there had been famines in India and China that took a toll of hundreds of millions of lives and the need for increased agricultural output was obvious. They decided on the establishment of CGIAR as a means of using whatever funds were available in a more effective manner. The result is, between 1970 and today, while global population doubled, food production tripled and over time both India and China became net exporters of food.

3. The establishment of the Manhattan Project to build the atom bomb was a response to a crisis or, more accurately, a response to head off a potential disaster that was deemed to be possible or even likely. The threat was the possibility of the

Nazi regime succeeding in producing the atom bomb with all its dire implications. Though in a much different context with the global warming hypothesis as the impending global threat, voices are being heard that allude to the Manhattan Project as a relevant precedent for preventive action (see Box 11).

Box 11

An eminent professor of physics at New York University, Dr Martin Hoffert, has stated:

the country needs to embark on an energy research programme on the scale of the Manhattan Project ...or the programme that put a man on the moon. Maybe six or seven of them operating simultaneously.....We should be prepared to invest several hundred billion dollars in the next 10 to 15 years.

Dr Arthur Nozik, a senior research fellow at the National Renewable Energy Laboratory, has echoed Professor Hoffert. In an article in *The New York Times* of 4 November 2003, he is reported to have stated that:

We need something like a Manhattan Project or an Apollo programme to put a lot more resources into solving the problem. It is going to require a revolution, not an evolution.

And now columnists are adding their voice: recently *The New York Times* columnist and author, Thomas L. Friedman, posed the question: "Why didn't the (United States) administration ever use 9/11 as a spur to launch a Manhattan Project for energy independence and conservation?"

The context for the launching of the Manhattan Project that was rationalized on the basis of the precautionary principle is somewhat akin to the current global anxiety about climate change due to the warming effects of ever higher carbon emission levels. The reports of the Inter-governmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC 1994), which was established to follow-up a resolution of a United Nations megaconference, are the bible with its warning of a possible and likely dire denouement for the humanity if the precautionary principle is not taken seriously enough.

What is being suggested by these three examples of relatively successful initiatives is that the hope of being effective in making significant changes is to advance energetically on a few *salient* issues that are feasible in the sense of the likelihood of being endorsed and being implemented within the prevailing global economic/financial system. The outcome of the smaller sharply focused type conferences is more likely to lead to actionable initiatives as contrasted with the approach of the traditional elephantine exercises of mega conferencing that hardly go further than securing pledges to toothless protocols or agreements. We should take heed of the 103 Nobel Laureates who stated in their Millennium Manifesto of December 2000:

to survive in the world we have transformed, we must learn to think in a new way.

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2009, XVI, 276 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-3-540-37223-3