

It was an amazing week in Johannesburg at the United Nations World Summit for Sustainable Development, taking place amid news of drought, forest fires, devastating storms and flooding around the world. Everyone I met with in Johannesburg believed these terrible disasters are connected to our cavalier treatment of the environment. While embarrassed that the United States did not have a greater presence, and somewhat overwhelmed by the environmental challenges we face, I return with a greater sense of optimism that I would have thought possible just a month ago.

The big loser was the United States. President Bush stayed on his ranch in Crawford, allowing the United States to be portrayed as obstructionist. The United States had an opportunity to meet with our global partners, strengthen bonds, and support difficult policies that require international cooperation. Instead, we actually didn't get credit for many of the positive things we are doing.

The United States delegation finally did support the Summit goal to cut in half the number of people living without basic sanitation, matching our objectives for clean drinking water. At the last minute, the United States also abandoned its advocacy of destructive language undercutting women's reproductive health and freedom. The government-industry partnerships much touted by the United States (unfortunately, as an alternative to specific targets for sanitation, clean air and other goals) are actually taking root. There is a strong and growing understanding that governments alone are not going to be able to manage these problems, and engaging private investment in solving the world's problems is a good idea for the American and the world economy.

To be fair, everybody appeared to have a blind spot. For example, the European Union ignored its own egregious agricultural policies that are actually worse than the embarrassing Farm Bill that Congress enacted and President Bush signed into law. Not only are developing countries denied access to rich markets of Europe, but European sugar sells in African markets at well below the cost of production, undercutting poor local farmers. Similarly, U.S. subsidized corn is devastating Mexican farmers.

Rich countries are being taken to task for such hypocrisy by well organized and articulate poor people, non-governmental organizations, and a growing consensus of elected officials. Businesses are stepping forward to embrace the challenge of the Kyoto Protocol. The World Business Council for Sustainable Development joined the fight for a real target for investment in renewable energy. Citizen advocates and non-government organizations were

extraordinarily effective in their efforts to hold countries accountable. Despite the secrecy and backroom deals, they provided some of the best intelligence on what was actually occurring. Their reactions were anything but knee-jerk, as they provided more sophisticated analysis of trade and environmental practices and the impact on our globe, as well as proposing simple common-sense solutions that are actually within our power to implement.

I also come away from the Summit surprisingly encouraged. Yes, the problems appear overwhelming - 325 million children not in school, 1.1 billion people without clean water, 2.4 billion without adequate sanitation. Yet, amazing progress is possible, in sanitation and water supply, affordable housing and agriculture. It is clear that we have the know-how and the skill to change currently destructive practices and teach people how to help themselves.

What was also stunning to me was the potential resources that are within our grasp. For the amount Americans spend on cosmetics each year we could largely meet the target for sanitation, save millions of lives, and promote a more stable world. By reforming our costly, environmentally damaging farm programs, we could help poor farmers around the world while we protect the U.S. taxpayer, the environment, and our family farmers. Cleaning up dirty coal power plants as required by the Clean Air Act would reduce CO2 emissions to 1990 levels, putting us on track to meet the Kyoto goals.

Simply doing what we know how to do, spending money more wisely, following our environmental laws, and heeding the wishes of the public, we can save the planet. The World Summit was an important step in pulling these pieces together and making them a reality.

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