

The Merits of Multilateralism

by Bagher Asadi*

My acceptance speech – if one were to call it that – cannot by any measure be an attempt by a multilateral diplomat – a jack of all trades by definition, and an amateur, in my particular case – to say anything of added value to the experts in the field. Thirty years after the Stockholm Conference, a decade after the Rio Summit, and just a few months before the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, what is left for any of us – least of all myself – to say about the critical role environment plays in our lives and also for the grim prospects for our future on the planet should we fail – or continue to fail – to undertake to effectively arrest and hopefully reverse the current dangerous trend. We have come, at long last, to a rather sophisticated understanding of the question of environment and its parameters and also of the inescapable imperative of its protection. Thanks to the great achievements of Rio – what I usually refer to as the peculiar and specific Rio heritage, the three pillars of sustainable development; economic development, social development and environmental protection – and the rather elaborate legal structure developed on that basis, the international community, all of us, both developed and developing, are now pretty well equipped with the overall conceptual framework for policy development and implementation at national, regional and international levels. What has been lacking has been the element of ever-illusive political will and also the requisite resources needed for the faithful implementation of previous undertakings and commitments.

Just a few days before the third substantive session of the Preparatory Committee for the Johannesburg Summit opens in New York, and while our colleagues have just begun the last phase of the much-sought-after and yet long-overdue Financing for Development Conference in Monterrey, Mexico, this year's awardee for environmental diplomacy is standing before you here in White Plains. What does he have to offer, beyond generalities and diplomatic niceties – which these fellows from mid-Manhattan, no matter what nationality, developed or developing and regardless of all their differences, genuine and otherwise – seem to master in ways not easily decipherable. As you remember, I just alluded, in the most succinct form, to what I will not, more precisely, to what I cannot, talk about today. In other words, you will not hear any expert analysis on issues of substance. Last year you had a diplomat/expert in the person of Ambassador Slade, now you only have a diplomat. I hope I won't disappoint you too much, particularly the distinguished Jurists – to the point of regretting the decision, the choice. What I try to do, instead, is to reflect, as an active diplomat, on the merits of multilateralism. Yesterday, and also earlier this morning, as I was breaking my head on the laptop and strug-

gling to put words together for this occasion in a way that would at least make some sense – and that is the never-ending headache for anybody who puts the hand to the pen and nowadays to the keyboard – I thought that this Award is in essence to glorify multilateralism and multilateral diplomacy, though, of course, in a very important area of interest and concern to the international community.

Notwithstanding the not so subtle parody of diplomats and their work just a moment ago, as an Iranian diplomat in New York since early 1997 whose multilateral endeavours and enterprises were blown out of proportion in the introduction, I cannot help but believe in the inalienable worth and merits of multilateral work. Just look at the already voluminous and ever-growing body of international instruments we have developed since Rio – quite an amazing, even dizzying, compendium. They embody the international community's consensus agreement on a wide range of concepts, strategies, policies, measures and actions which the States and also other stakeholders consider necessary to combat environmental degradation and promote its preservation and protection. All of us here and anybody even remotely associated with these instruments know full well that each one of these instruments represents the product of long, tortuous and more often than not boring processes of negotiation, preparatory and otherwise, involving the entire international community, and in a very practical sense, quite a large number of active States and stakeholders. Those of us directly engaged in actual negotiating processes carry with us, in our memories, vivid images of joyful moments of reaching agreement at usually ungodly hours of late night or early morning, or alternatively, moments of frustration and despair when agreement on an important concept or measure, paragraph or sentence, just eludes your collective grasp because of the inordinate intransigence of a party asking for too much or the bad judgement of another, or because of the all too familiar lack of sheer political will on the part of a party or parties whose yes or no counts more than that of the other mortals of the world. The point I am trying to make here is that in the multilateral processes we the State representatives, despite all our colourful diversity and intriguing differences, generally, more often than not, tend to reach agreement, and we do at the end of the day or the end of the night, whichever happens to be the case. Once looked from the viewpoint of the actors and protagonists – including the chairman, the co-chairman, the coordinator, the facilitator, whatever the label or the title – the final outcome represents an added value worthy of support – though, of course, to different degrees and for various reasons. Those outside of the process, including the critics and the detractors, among the NGOs or the civil society, it is not difficult at all to guess, usually find the final agreement unacceptable, compromised, weak and even a step backward. Our consensus language is usually accused

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by critics and detractors as the least common denominator, and hence, not worthy of all the hubris and the toil and trouble. True, more often than not, we tend to settle for the least common denominator just to have the agreement and not to leave the hall empty handed. We the actors who know the costs of failure tend to look at the fuller half of the glass; our critics and detractors prefer to see the emptier part. But, each of us represents a necessary segment of the bigger colourful picture we are all part of, and whose dynamic interaction and give and take is bound to enrich all of us and make the movement forward possible.

The Award the Elizabeth Haub Foundation has been kind, generous, considerate and visionary enough to institute celebrates the intrinsic and inalienable worth of collective multilateral work in the area of environment and its protection. If I were to reflect on the processes I have been directly involved in over the past five years, here in New York as well as in other venues – so generously and magnanimously covered in the introduction – I would state, in the most definitive manner and beyond any shade of doubt, that what was achieved in each and every one of these processes was a step forward.

Let me start with forests and the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests (IFF). Out of that three-year process and its two-year predecessor, IPF, we have had the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF), a new body under ECOSOC with universal membership – apparently an oxymoron in the UN family – which just finished its second substantive session last Friday. The international/intergovernmental policy dialogue on forests, a decade-old process since the adoption of Non-Legally Binding Forests Principles at Rio, has not yet managed to resolve the perennial, Hamletian question of to have or not to have a forest convention. But, it has overcome the North-South dichotomy in the critical area of forest policy and elevated the level of discourse from pure conservation of a certain type of forests to that of sustainable development and management of all types of forests and wooded lands. The newly established Forum has as well moved beyond mere policy deliberation and development, as was the case during both IPF and IFF processes, and is charged with the specific mandate of concentration on the implementation of the existing agreements, in particular IPF/IFF proposals for action. As the Co-Chairman of the IFF and the Coordinator for the

establishment of the UNFF, I know for sure that a whole lot of inevitable give and take went into the process that finally led to the final agreement on the new international arrangement on forests and the establishment of the UNFF. True enough, multilateral negotiation, like life itself, does not usually, if ever, move in a straight uni-linear path. Let me tell you, in all frankness, that the international community should be happier now to have the Forum, which any of us may find fault with on different counts and depending on where we stand on this or that particular issue, than having ended with an impasse at the close of the IFF process still bogged down interminably on the issue of convention. That specific issue, however looked at and pursued doggedly by some or de-merited by some others, as the case may be, is one of the issues on the agenda of the Forum before the five-year tentative period comes up for review in 2005.



Nicholas Robinson, Bagher Asadi and Erivan Haub (from left to right) in front of the Plaque honouring previous Award winners

Courtesy: Pace University

Moving to the Kyoto Protocol process, which captured everybody's attention for quite some time last year, and the outcome is now history, I would again use the same approach and measuring rod. What was achieved first in Bonn and later solidified and finalised in Marrakech was the outcome of the sound political judgement of the international community to save the embattled Protocol, itself the child of a several-year-old process emanating from Rio. As we all know, the US withdrawal last Spring from the Protocol confronted the process with a very difficult situation, which could hardly be saved except for some imaginative formulae that did inevitably lead to real horse-trading on the floor at the very last hours of COP-7 in Marrakech. Some real sweet concessions were indeed made, but, in the end, the decade-old climate change proc-

ess was saved. The Instrument is now on its way to be ratified, hopefully before the Johannesburg Summit in late summer 2002. As the Chairman of the Group of 77 at the time, I characterised the Political Agreements in Bonn as the “triumph of multilateralism over unilateralism”. And that is the crux of a several months of collective, well-oriented efforts, on our side in the developing community as well as on the part of the European Union and a host of other States, not to allow the hard-won climate change process and the Protocol go unravelling. Again, I hardly need to remind that the final agreement towards the ratification of the Protocol could be faulted, by various quarters, either developed or developing, on a wide range of issues. Let us rest assured that you can never have a perfect agreement or treaty within the framework of the multilateral world where the diverse and usually conflicting interests of a very large number of States, on both sides of the development divide and within each camp, have to be somehow reconciled and accommodated in a general sense. I might add as well that the Bonn Agreements and the Marrakech outcome, thanks to the political acumen of the EU and their positive consideration for some of the G-77 concerns and demands, contained enough elements that helped the developing community, with all its beautiful diversity, inclusive of the OPEC constituency on the one end and the AOSIS on the other as well as all other constituencies within the Group, find it possible to join the overall political agreement.

Let me also say a few words on the still on-going International Environmental Governance (IEG) process. The process which started in May 2000 in Malmö, Sweden, and followed a one-year long intensive journey, came to some overall agreement recently in Cartagena, Colombia (Note by the editor: See also page 169). The IEG process and its outcome so far along the way well reflect the parameters of agreement, or disagreement for that matter, on such a very sensitive subject as the question of governance in the field of environment and sustainable development. While the question of necessity of devising a better governance regime for so many conventions, protocols, agencies, institutions and programmes active in the area of international environment and environmental protection at international and regional levels has not been contested, however, there has been little agreement on what to do and how to do it and by who. As you are aware, the developing world; that is, the Group of 77 and China, have been very clear and forthright in emphasising from the outset in the IEG process that the protection of environment can only be understood and conceived within the bigger Rio conceptual framework of sustainable development – again the question of the three inter-related and mutually reinforcing pillars. This concern has led to the emergence of a new concept; International Sustainable Development Governance (see page 140), which is gaining coinage and is being currently discussed.

Further progress in this discussion should complement that of the IEG and provide the intergovernmental body with a fuller picture of all the nuances involved and finally make a more comprehensive contribution to WSSD.

I should be coming to the end of my address. It appears that the rather natural allure of podium has worked and I have already exhausted the indicated 20 minutes time slot. I have tried to sketch the role of the active multilateral diplomat as a consensus builder. Playing such a role, while considering diplomacy as the art of the possible, requires espousing an outlook and perspective of a wider calibre and bird's eye vantage point not hampered or constrained by particularistic, parochial interests of States or limited group constituencies. It as well calls for dedication to the promotion of the cause, in this particular case, protection of environment and promotion of sustainable development, as a public good, hence the concept “Global Public Good”, which seems to be on the ascendancy nowadays.

And just a half-baked rumination on the idea of consensus-building. In my view and based on the personal experience in a number of processes, consensus-building is to help everybody engaged in the particular process at hand to arrive at a more sophisticated understanding of the issues involved and their parameters. It is also imperative that the actors be able to take distance, within a reasonable degree, from limited national and parochial interests and concerns – not to divorce them, which is neither possible nor desirable, but to be able to look at and hopefully consider the legitimacy and practical relevance of the interests and concerns of others, big and small. Within

the actual UN context – the multilateral negotiating context – consensus building is needed at several levels and layers within and between limited group constituencies, within and between major groups, and finally, within the entire universal intergovernmental body. The major part of this process, however, involves consensus building between the developed and developing world; that is, across the development divide, which much to the chagrin of us all, has been widening and deepening. My very last word here is to add that as an Iranian multilateral diplomat I have endeavoured, to the best of my ability, to help lessen the divide on the issues and the processes I have dealt with. I will certainly continue along the same line, wherever and in whatever position I find myself in the future.

Notes:

¹ See *Environmental Policy and Law*, 31(3), p. 163-167.

² This Forum was later upgraded to the status of subsidiary body of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) on 18 October 2000 and rechristened United Nations Forum on Forests. For a report on the first substantive session, please see *Environmental Policy and Law*, Vol. 31 (2001) No. 4-5, page 207-211.

³ See *Environmental Policy and Law*, Vol. 30 (2000) No. 1-2, page 2-21.

