

Slouching toward Rio

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By Shefa Siegel | Jun.08, 2012 | 4:57 AM

When climate change negotiators meet later this month in Rio de Janeiro there will, as ever, be hope. For 20 years, since the first Earth Summit in Rio - hence this year's name Rio +20 - these biannual conferences have convened with the same benediction: This time, somehow, let it be different.

Two years ago in Copenhagen, President Barack Obama intervened with late-night, last-ditch talks, only to be kept waiting by a Chinese delegation that was holding private sessions with Brazil and India. Obama crashed that meeting, but no final covenant was sealed.

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It seems crazy to think about it now, but there was a window of Clintonian optimism in the 1990s when ecology seemed poised to be the central organizing principle, as Al Gore called it, for post-Cold War diplomacy. That period was punctuated by environmental conferences where international policies were written for ozone, desertification, biodiversity and global warming.

The 1992 Earth Summit was often dubbed a failure, but in retrospect it was magnificent. More than 100 heads of state attended, and a Republican president participated, reluctantly perhaps, but he was there. Global "framework conventions" were the rage. The environment was riding the crest of a high wave.

Some say the defeat of the ideal came when the Kyoto Protocol was written, in 1997 - that its targets for reducing greenhouse gas emissions were too weak, and failure to include China and India catastrophic. Others blame Clintonian cynicism for not trying to ratify the protocol in the Senate, and George W. Bush's unilateral withdrawal from Kyoto.

But the turning point was September 11. To live in Washington, D.C., during this period was to watch the ideal of international cooperation be replaced by a cult of inevitability, in which war, cultural clash and hydrocarbon economics are fated rather than chosen. Instead of being atop the crest of a wave, it felt like standing on the outside looking in, watching the end of everything.

Today, environmental policy-talk conforms to the language of the marketplace: It's all "win-win," "value-added" and "competitive advantages." But founders of international environmentalism envisioned a high-minded concept of public service, ambitious idealism and spirituality.

"Some new opening of hope and creativity is becoming an urgent spiritual necessity," wrote the diplomat and scholar George F. Kennan. "Could there be," he asked, "any undertaking better designed ... to relieve the great convulsions of

anxiety and ingrained hostility that now rack international society, than a major international effort to restore the hope, the beauty and the salubriousness of the natural environment in which man has his being?"

"To Prevent a World Wasteland," Kennan's essay published in a 1970 issue of *Foreign Affairs*, called for a global environmental agency. The first UN environmental conference, in Stockholm in 1972, laid a foundation for this agency but did not establish it.

One kind of proposal for remedying environmental cooperation returns to Kennan's concept of governance. The Earth System Governance Project, for example, calls for Rio +20 to be the moment when UN environmental activities are finally upgraded from a program to an organization.

Reforming UN bureaucracy is overdue; too many programs have lost their reasons for existence; too little legitimacy is vested in environmental policy. But we are slouching toward Rio in a gloomy mood; at a time of such public disaffection with internationalism, it is hard to imagine a popular movement rallying around such inside baseball.

Instead of once again convening in Rio only to write reports and declarations, a hopeful, if imperfect, outcome would be to identify new leaders to help renew faith in the ideals - not just the policies - of international cooperation.

As anybody who attends these conferences can attest, they are dominated by a circulation of paper so relentless it once provoked Canada's Lester Pearson to describe the UN as "drowning in its own words and suffocating in its own documents." For this round of talks, we need to hear more from the people trying to solve the problems of, say, their island-nations disappearing into the sea and mineral-rich countries descending into resource wars, and less about resolutions, frameworks and conventions.

A recent encounter in West Africa reminded me just how fatigued people everywhere are with politicians, civil servants and researchers like me talking and writing about problems, but never solving them. I was listening to three gold miners describe their exposure to toxic pollution, when we were interrupted by the impatient intervention of the mine superintendent. "Hey you," he cried, walking toward me. "I know you. People like you keep coming here and writing things down. But you never come back."

His gaze fell upon the pad in my right hand, to which he now pointed vigorously. "I have a suggestion," he said. "Why don't you stop writing in your notebook and do something already?" By the time I realized it was "Amen" I wanted to say, he had already spun around and walked bitterly away.

Shefa Siegel is lead environmental policy researcher at the Vale Columbia Center on Sustainable International Investment, a joint center of the Earth Institute and Columbia Law School.