

Waste: by Philip Hunt

Back in 1995 I saw \$200 million thrown away. The money was lost in Copenhagen at the UN World Summit on Social Development. This week in South Africa they are doing it again.

The waste of this money by the political leaders of our world was an appalling scandal. But, as always, they got away with it.

I was there. I'm sorry I was there, but sorry may not have been good enough. I was already in the United States at another meeting. So it seemed a good idea to pay the little bit extra to go on to the Summit in Copenhagen. And I found myself in a cheap hotel well away from the harbour side lodgings of the official delegations. Just the same, when I visited their hotel, I discovered I had a bigger room for less money. Of course, I didn't have the harbour view. And there was no chauffeured Volvo down my end of town, laid on by the truly generous Danish government.

Not that I was complaining, mind you. The same Danish government had given me a free bus pass for the entire week. For free, I could go anywhere in Copenhagen. A few times I did, simply by getting on the wrong bus.

Not long before I had been in a village in Guatemala where a small child had just died because no one had the fifty-cent bus fare to take her to hospital.

Many missed the news about the Copenhagen Summit. Certainly few political leaders wanted it publicised. After all, publicity might lead to public pressure for action. No. Better to keep it as quiet as possible.

But surely we remember the Rio Summit? That was where the delegates worried about the planet, pretending for most of the time that people weren't important in the equation.

Perhaps you heard about the Vienna Summit? That was about human rights. Since there were no baby seals, or almost-extinct fauna, it got little publicity.

Or the New York jamboree that was for children? A lot of really worthwhile commitments were made about eliminating childhood diseases and providing primary education for every kid on earth. Most of the deadlines for action have long since passed.

And you must have heard about the Cairo Summit? That's where the world talked about whether people should be born in the first place. And the Vatican had a particular point of view.

In Copenhagen there were many journalists and little news. No animals were made extinct. No native trees were cut down. Just people. People were in danger. Twenty percent of the world living unnecessarily in absolute poverty.

And it wasn't that nobody cared. Everybody cared. We all cared the same. Indeed, we all agreed that something must be done. Such harmonious agreement doesn't run well on the six o'clock news.

Hilary Clinton even flew over to talk to me and say how much she and her husband appreciated the work of the non-government organisations. I would have thanked her, but there were 800 other people in the room, and she was the only one with a microphone.

So what was the problem? How come we wasted \$200 million?

Everyone agreed something must be done. Nobody agreed to do anything.

Well, maybe that's not fair. Denmark forgave about \$200 million of poor countries debts, getting itself more publicity than the poor creditors who forgave three times that amount of Alan Bond's debts.

And Hillary was vying for Hypocrite of the Year with a symbolic gift of US\$100 million over ten years for women's literacy. That was hardly more than the small Australian NGO I worked for spent on women's literacy. And this from the richest nation on earth. A few crumbs for the illiterate. Too many people were so in awe of the First Lady they thought she was actually doing something important.

But apart from these few isolated and welcome symbolic acts, nobody agreed to do anything.

The truly regrettable thing was that the wrong people got the blame.

First, vitriol was slugged onto the United Nations.

Pity. It wasn't the UN's fault. The people from the UN tried very hard to make the Copenhagen Summit a success. They provided a process, albeit incredibly bureaucratic and inefficient, in which real progress could have been made. They provided the playing field. But the players went on strike.

And it wasn't the charities that were at fault. Although a visit to the parallel NGO forum (for Non Government Organisations), down the road at the Holmen Naval Base, was to a kind of save-the-world hippy wonderland.

Every scatter-brained, intense loony with an idea about how to save the world seemed to mingle with fair dinkum development aid workers. Some genuine people came to learn and share information. Often they were overwhelmed by the neurotic grandstanders. People who would offer workshops in the official program under headings like "The International Cerebral Attainment Coalition" and then fail to show at the appointed hour. Twenty people might be cheesed off that they cancelled the workshop, but two thousand people had seen their name in print.

But don't blame the NGOs for the failure of these Summits. The involvement of the development aid agencies was, at best, tolerated. Briefings held by official delegates, including Australia's own Ambassador to the UN were marked by an atmosphere of indulgent condescension and diplomatic obfuscation. For the first two days of the Summit, NGOs were required to line up (twice) for tickets to enter the main conference rooms. It was an exercise in exclusion. And since one of the Summit themes was social exclusion it was a good object lesson.

The real blame must be laid at the feet of political leaders.

The rich refused to give a milligram of extra support for social development. Ideas like a speculation tax on foreign currency transactions were dead before the Summit started. The only new initiative was called the 20:20 initiative because it required 20% of development aid and 20% of developing countries budgets to be spent on basic social development. By mid-week the proposal had been so watered down that it became merely voluntary. There was no need to worry about a rush of volunteers.

When I, and others, wrote to our Prime Minister at the time, Paul Keating, urging him to attend the Summit, we got what was as near a straight answer as was possible out of Canberra. He said, "Australia would be represented at a very senior level." This meant that he was not going, but that the Deputy Prime Minister would represent him.

We heard that, against his better judgement, Paul was eventually persuaded that it would be embarrassing for him to be in Germany and not pop over for the Summit. I had felt the same about being half way round the world, and not keeping going.

In the end, I have to say Paul's instincts were better than mine. He shouldn't have gone. And nor should I.

For me, the Summit provided no significant new opportunities to enhance my work among the poor through World Vision. Although, to be fair, I learned a few things from seminars I attended held by Danish Red Cross and others.

For Paul, the Summit merely provided him a chance to stand in the bright light wearing the Zenger suit of the emperor without clothes. He spoke fine words, and promised nothing to put those words into action.

Not that he was alone. Just about everyone who stood at the podium was dressed the same.