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**Thomas Brendler, National Network of Forest Practitioners.**

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**Catherine Fedorsky, WSSD Green Energy Project.**

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# Liza Grandia, anthropologist



Liza Grandia is a doctoral candidate in anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley. She serves on the board of ProPeten, a Guatemalan nongovernmental organization with which she founded Remedios, an integrated health, population, and environment program, in 1997. She is a fellow of the Environmental Leadership Program.

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**Wednesday, 04 Sep 2002**  
**JOHANNESBURG, South Africa**

Every morning as I walk into the WSSD convention area at Sandton, my bile rises when I see the BMW display in what ought to be a public square. Were it not for these enormous, high-tech tents and cars on display, this courtyard would have been an excellent informal meeting area, and who knows what wonderful encounters, friendships, and alliances might have developed in that space.

BMW is not, of course, the only corporation here with a fancy, multi-million dollar exhibit. While I resent this appropriation by big business of scarce physical space at the WSSD, the corporate takeover of the conference has been far more insidious on the ideological front. Ten years ago at Rio, there was a revolutionary focus on the critical importance of NGOs and grassroots movements as partners in sustainable development. By contrast, in Johannesburg, economics and trade have dominated the discussion. According to the official propaganda, sustainable development will somehow trickle down to developing countries as soon as they agree to open their markets to foreign trade and investments. And if that doesn't work, then Type II initiatives will save the day.

When I first arrived, everyone was talking about these "Type II outcomes" and I wondered what in the world they were. The U.S. delegation in particular seemed wildly excited about them. I noted, as well, that several days had been set aside in the agenda for plenaries about them. Being a good anthropologist, I decided to inquire with a native member of the tribe of summit nomads (aka conference jetsetters) about the meaning of this phrase and learned that it is U.N.-ese for "partnerships." Partnerships. On the surface, they sound warm and fuzzy enough. Who could argue against fostering collaborations for sustainable development among the private sector, government, and civil society? Yet, over the past 10 days, I've grown increasingly suspicious about the cheery rhetoric on partnerships here at the WSSD.

First, this emphasis on partnerships seems entirely inappropriate for a multilateral summit. Our governments are supposed to be negotiating internationally binding agreements and not just crossing their fingers and hoping that some voluntary partnerships will save the planet. There are no formal mechanisms of accountability for these partnerships --



**Sandton Convention Centre: looks so shiny.**  
*Photo: IIDS.*



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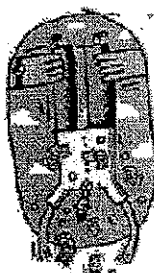
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and so of course multinational corporations love the idea. In essence, the plan for partnerships mirrors big business's preference for encouraging "best practices" rather than creating new regulatory frameworks.

Over and over, I've heard here at the WSSD that for these partnerships to be successful, developing countries must create environments of "good governance" with a strong "rule of law." Again, big business loves this idea, since it would serve to create a healthy climate for foreign investment. It's telling, though, that the rhetoric here is about "good governance" and not about "democracy." When they talk about "good governance," business isn't really concerned about human rights; they just want help from governments to control the unruly elements of their society (such as anti-globalization activists).

What's more, most of the 218 official partnerships announced here with great fanfare already existed or were in the planning stages. In other words, they aren't new initiatives -- but they have certainly provided a good distraction from the failure of the conference to reach any new agreements. Many delegates, in fact, are joking that the WSSD should be called Rio minus 10, not Rio +10.

Finally, I am skeptical of all the partnership propaganda because it fails to address the disparities of power between the private sector and civil society and, increasingly, between the private sector and government. A couple of alarming statistics I've learned here at the WSSD illustrate this. Of the 100 largest economies in the world, 51 are corporations and 49 are governments. (Wal-Mart is bigger than Norway.) Yet, while the Fortune 500 corporations represent 47 percent of the planet's collective GNP, they only employ 1.6 percent of the world's population. Given corporations' overwhelmingly skewed economic power, NGO or government partnerships with them are likely to be more coercive than collaborative. Northern and mainstream NGOs are particularly vulnerable, I think, to being co-opted and having their agendas diluted by corporate partnerships -- about which I'll comment more tomorrow in my closing reflections on the disastrous divide I've witnessed at the WSSD between rich and poor NGOs.

Meanwhile, we have much work to do as civil society organizations and movements to reclaim our rightful role as the real partners in sustainable development.

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