



World Summit on Sustainable Development: Reaffirming a Common Goal

The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) convened in Johannesburg to review accomplishments and outcomes of the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, and to adopt concrete measures and targets for better implementation of sustainable development action plans. Heads of states, international agencies, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), and representatives from all of the major groups identified in Agenda 21, including businesses and industries, local authorities, scientific and technological communities, child and youth organisations, workers and trade unions, farmers, and indigenous people attended the Summit to reinforce commitment to a partnership for change and the achievement of the common goal of sustainable development.

Conference Focus

The objectives of the WSSD were to: re-examine critical environmental and development issues and formulate innovative, concrete and realistic proposals for managing them; identify accomplishments and areas where further efforts are needed to implement Agenda 21 and other outcomes of the Rio Summit; identify future challenges and opportunities in the pursuit of a sustainable future; and renew political commitment and support for sustainable development.

The summit focused on lessons learned over the past decade about selected environmental, economic and social challenges such as climate change, biodiversity loss, water scarcity, infectious diseases, illiteracy, poverty, and the progress made in achieving goals set to address these challenges. The Summit recognised that pressures on the environment and natural resources have kept the state of the world's environment fragile; poverty has increased in absolute terms; and unsustainable production and consumption patterns abide in many parts of the industrialized world. And while notable achievements have been made in improving health, problems such as HIV/AIDS have reversed hard-won gains worldwide.

Conference Outcomes

Facing these challenges, Summit participants collaboratively worked to:

Broaden and Strengthen the Definition of Sustainable Development

The understanding of sustainable development was broadened and strengthened during the Summit. The Political Declaration states that sustainable development is built on three "interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars" - economic development, social development and environmental protection - which must be established "at local, national, regional and global levels" (Para. 5). The new paradigm establishes linkages among poverty alleviation, human rights, biodiversity, clean water and sanitation, renewable energy, and the sustainable use of natural resources. While this view of sustainable development does not stray from the key principles outlined by the World Commission on Environment and Development to ensure "a better quality of life for everyone now and for the generations to come,"¹ it reaffirms sustainable development as a central element of the international agenda.

Make Commitments

Governments, NGOs, United Nations (UN) agencies and the private sector agreed to and reaffirmed a wide range of commitments for action to achieve more effective implementation of sustainable development objectives. The WSSD Plan of Implementation includes targets and timetables on key issues such as: poverty, unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, biodiversity loss and global health challenges. While there has been some criticism of Summit commitments - there were no agreements that led to new treaties and many of the targets drew on existing ones e.g., the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) - they provide important benchmarks against which future trends can be measured.

Develop Partnerships

In addition to these commitments, the Summit resulted in the launch of more than 300 voluntary partnerships between Governments, NGOs and businesses to support efforts to implement sustainable development on a

¹ World Commission on Environment and Development, *Our Common Future*, 1987.

wide range of issues. Partnerships between Governments and civil society help translate political commitments into action by building broad legitimacy for initiatives and by engaging partnerships whose support and skills are needed for effective implementation.

Affirm the Role of Education

Education as the foundation of sustainable development was reaffirmed at the WSSD, as was the commitment embodied in Chapter 36 of Agenda 21. The centrality of education to the creation of a sustainable future is evident through several references in almost every chapter of the Plan of Implementation and in Paragraph 18 of the Political Declaration. The Plan of Implementation recognises education as critical for sustainable development in its own right, but also sees education as a key agent for change and a tool for addressing such questions as gender equality, rural development, health care, HIV/AIDS and consumption patterns.

The Plan also calls for synergy among global initiatives in education, specifically mentioning the Dakar Framework for Action on Education for All (EFA), in which literacy, gender issues, and quality education play central roles and are essential for sustainable development and the MDGs on universal primary education. Finally, the Plan recommends that the UN General Assembly consider adopting a Decade of Education for Sustainable Development starting in 2005.²

UNESCO and the WSSD

UNESCO's contribution to the World Summit built on its mandate in the fields of education, science, culture and communication, and its overarching commitment to sustainable development. UNESCO organised and participated in a large number of parallel and side events and prepared documents and position papers on a number of UNESCO's action areas including:

- Educating for sustainability;
- Promoting and applying science for sustainable development;
- Supporting principles and political and ethical norms to guide sustainable scientific and technological development;
- Ensuring sustainable development through cultural diversity; and
- Contributing to sustainable development through the media and information and communication technologies (ICTs).

The main activity of UNESCO's Education Sector was a parallel event held jointly by UNESCO and the Government of South Africa's Ministry of Education, in cooperation with the NGO UNESCO Liaison Committee entitled "Educating for a Sustainable Future: Action, Commitments and Partnerships." The objectives of the event were to: stress the indispensability of education at all levels for achieving sustainable development; draw attention at the highest levels to the vital role of education in building sustainable futures; provide a forum for discussion and shared learning; and emphasise partnerships and commitments to future action, consistent with the purpose of the Summit.

The event also served as a platform to launch various partnership projects including:

- *Global Higher Education for Sustainability Partnership*: between UNESCO and the International Association of Universities, Copernicus Campus, Association of University Leaders for a Sustainable Future;
- *New Flagship Programme for Rural People*: between UNESCO, the Food and Agriculture Organisation (FAO), Egypt and various NGOs; and the
- *International Marketing and Communications Initiative for Sustainable Development*: between UNESCO, J. Walter Thompson Advertising Company, the Canadian Federal Department of Industry and Environment, and York University.

The WSSD resulted in a broadened understanding of the concept of sustainable development and an increased awareness of the complexity of promoting development that is people-centred, equitable and sustainable. Commitment at all levels will be key to successful partnerships for change and the achievement of the common goal of sustainable development.

* * * *

Section for Education for Sustainable Development (ED/PEQ/ESD)
 Division for the Promotion of Quality Education, UNESCO, 7 Place de Fontenoy, 75352 Paris 07 SP, France
 tel: 33 1 45 68 06 86 -- fax: 33 1 45 68 56 29 -- email: esddecade@unesco.org -- web: www.unesco.org/education/desd

² UN General Assembly on December, 2002 adopted a resolution establishing a UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development (2005-2014) and proclaimed UNESCO the lead agency to promote the Decade.
