

REPORTS

The World Summit, Sustainable Development and Environmental Education

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People, Planet and Prosperity

Despite the bad press surrounding the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), the outcomes of the event confirm that WSSD served to reinvigorate global commitments and actions to sustainable development.

The Summit, which took place from 26 August - 4 September 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, aimed to review progress made towards Sustainable Development over the past 10 years and to work towards commitments to action (UN General Assembly Resolution 55/199). It saw the largest ever gathering of world leaders and over 21,000 participants from 191 government, intergovernmental and non-government organisations, the private sector, academia and the scientific community (IISD, 2002). The mere presence of these stakeholders, willing to engage in the negotiation process, demonstrates that sustainable development is very much alive and relevant.

President Thabo Mbeki opened by characterising the growing gap between North and South as "global apartheid" and highlighting the crises of poverty and ecological degradation. It was clear then that the outcomes of the Summit had to go beyond the Rio 1992 commitments which focused on environmental actions. He called for a practicable and meaningful Johannesburg Plan of Implementation to fulfil the framework of Agenda 21 within the Summit theme of "*People, Planet and Prosperity*".

The Negotiations and Commitments

Well before the Summit was officially opened the stakeholder negotiations had begun at the UN Preparatory Committees (PrepCom) meetings held over a period of twelve months. However, it was at the Summit where negotiations came to a head with tensions surrounding the setting of targets for sanitation, energy subsidies, trade and human rights, biodiversity loss and the Kyoto Protocol. Dispute over and rejection of the Rio Principle 15 (precautionary principle) by some countries marked tense moments in the negotiations. Such disagreements are to be expected when one considers the ambitious and confronting nature of sustainable development. The negotiations reflected how seriously those present were taking sustainable development commitments and that there is not always a clear path towards progress. In the end, it was the successes on the Kyoto Protocol and rejection of supremacy for the WTO which helped bring the

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Summit back from what several NGO leaders had described as “the brink” (IISD, 2002).

Many significant, but unsung, commitments were made. Through signing the 54-page Summit Implementation Plan, those present committed to using and producing chemicals in ways that do not harm; reducing biodiversity loss by 2010; restoring fisheries to their maximum sustainable yields by 2015; establishing a representative network of marine protected areas by 2012; and implementing a Global Program of Action for the protection of the Marine Environment.

Perhaps the most important outcomes were commitments made to halve the proportion of people without access to sanitation and safe drinking water by 2015. The US, EU and others committed over a billion dollars to bring this about. Similar financial commitments (over US\$700 million) and type II partnerships were made to improve access to energy. The shifting of commitments towards socio-development issues such as poverty, health and sanitation was seen by delegates as the key successes of this Summit.

There were a number of issues where agreement was not reached. This, however, does not stop nations from moving forward independently on these issues. For example, with regards to renewable energy, the European Union and Group of 77 could implement the renewable energy targets proposed which were blocked by the United States of America.

From Rio to Johannesburg

The Johannesburg Summit was held 10 years after The Rio Earth Summit which involved over 100 Heads of State and Government, representatives from 178 countries, and some 17,000 participants. The principal outputs of 1992 Summit were the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, Agenda 21 (UNCED, 1992) - a program of action, the Statement of Forest Principles and the UN Framework Conventions on Climate Change, Desertification and Biological Diversity.

To many, the difference between the Johannesburg and Rio Summits was that the environment was shifted away from centre stage. Instead, issues like poverty alleviation were considered as a core and running theme across the implementation plan. Those present recognised that the environment cannot be protected in a way that leaves half of humanity in poverty. Similarly, long-term development cannot occur in an unhealthy or depleted planet. Interpretations of poverty also changed. Poverty is no longer just about income but is instead linked to access to energy, water and sanitation and thus to sustainable livelihoods.

At the Summit, UNEP Executive Director Klaus Töpfer noted progress since Rio in achieving sustainability, but said new scientific evidence of global environmental change required a quantum increase in efforts. He characterised the WSSD as a Summit of implementation, accountability and partnership (IISD, 2002). Töpfer also called for stronger links between environment and development concerns as he described the root causes of global environmental degradation as pervasive poverty and inequitable distribution of wealth.

Two key documents were adopted at WSSD.

The ‘Plan of Implementation’ is designed as a framework for action to implement the commitments agreed at Rio. It includes chapters on poverty eradication; consumption and production; the natural resource base; health; means of implementation; and institutional frameworks.

The Johannesburg Political Declaration is a three-page, six-section document that outlines the path taken from Rio to the WSSD and emphasises the need for

implementation. It reaffirms a commitment to sustainable development and building a humane, equitable and caring global society.

The Plan of Implementation not only strengthened the Rio perspective on environment and development but also reflected new developments since 1992. Globalisation had not been a theme of the political negotiations in 1992. However, it has separate section in the Johannesburg Plan.

As well as poverty alleviation, key sustainable development themes in the WSSD documents include human rights, desertification, pollution, the benefits and costs of globalisation, international trade and the loss of confidence in democratic systems (Farago, 2002). Biodiversity threats also featured at the Johannesburg Summit but this time around it had a strong link to issues of globalisation and trade

The Implementation Plan, in particular, also stresses womens' empowerment, the vital role of indigenous peoples as well as the corporate sector in moving us towards sustainability. Those at the Johannesburg Summit made a commitment to strengthening inclusive processes involving all major groups in decision-making and emphasised the need to form partnerships for change.

Another key difference between the two Summits (Rio and Johannesburg) was the degree of integration of the three pillars of sustainable development (environment, economic and social) reflecting how much the notion of sustainable development had matured over the past ten years. This more sophisticated understanding was evident in most discussions and reinforced by greater representation from all major groups as well as from officials from development, commerce, and foreign ministries and not just those concerned with the environment (IISD, 2002).

Despite the public cynicism that surrounded both Rio and Johannesburg, the Summits play a catalytic role in changing what takes place in workplaces, communities and institutions around the world. This is done not only by committing to international agreements and improving access of all major groups to decision-making but also by raising awareness of key issues for a better future.

Education at the Summit

The "Implementation Plan" (UN, 2002b) recognised that education is critical for promoting sustainable development. The document calls on governments to (i) integrate sustainable development into education systems at all levels to promote education as a key agent of change; (ii) incorporate education for sustainable development into education plans alongside the integration of the Dakar Framework for action on "Education for All"; and (iii) provides all community members with a wide range of lifelong learning opportunities in education for sustainable development. Education appears in many guises throughout the document under the headings of "capacity building", "training", "empowerment", "awareness", and "information and participation". It features very strongly in many sections from poverty eradication to sectorial and regional issues. Goldstein (2002) argues that without education the Plan cannot be implemented.

This outcome could be seen as a significant step forward given that recommendations to promote Education for Sustainable Development (ESD) were not in early versions of Summit documents and were only inserted through the efforts of many who lobbied between and during the PrepComs meetings in New York and Bali (Tilbury, in press). However, many are disappointed by limitations of the language and scope associated with ESD and see that there is still a long way to go to increase understanding about the strategic role education can play in delivering commitments signed at Rio and Johannesburg (see Paden, 2002). Nevertheless, there were a number of significant education achievements arising out of the WSSD (Birney, 2002). These include a

declaration from professional environmental education associations from around the world; the announcement of Type II partnerships; and the Summit's official recommendation to the UN General Assembly to adopt the proposal for a UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development starting in 2005.

For the first time in the 30-year history of environmental education, representatives of national and regional professional environmental education associations met and issued a joint statement calling for "a quantum leap" in the implementation of education programs aimed at promoting sustainable development (Paden, 2002). The declaration was read into the record on the floor of the World Summit two days later by a delegate from Mexico.

The Summit also hosted a series of education side-events which included a UNESCO event and IUCN Commission on Education and Communication seminar each of which attracted over two hundred people over a period of two days and revealed a high level commitment from government and civil society to education for change.

The UNESCO event emphasised the importance of learning to think critically and creatively about our culture and about our future. It calls for education which questions our thinking and assumptions as well as our practice, and helps our communities develop their own histories. The document "From Rio to Johannesburg" launched at the event argues that "Sustainable development is more about new ways of thinking than about science or ecology...it is primarily a matter of culture" (UNESCO, 2002, p. 8).

The IUCN seminar provided a space for environmental educators to practise what they had been preaching at the Summit. Presenters from formal education, business, government and NGO sectors spoke for no longer than fifteen minutes outlining the key principles which guide their work. They then engaged in facilitating learning activities with the audience which practiced environmental education for sustainability principles such as engaging in dialogue, envisioning, engaging in participatory learning and critical thinking (see Paden, 2002).

The Implications for Environmental Education

The Summit stretched conceptions of environmental education and challenged environmental educators to:

- make stronger links between the environment and sustainable development. This means addressing the core sustainable development themes of globalisation, trade, poverty alleviation, consumerism as well as biodiversity, water, health, sanitation and climatic change;
- further integrate the three pillars of sustainable development within the core of our work;
- to come closer to understanding the socio-political root causes underpinning threats to the environment and move away from naïve and aesthetic concerns;
- be more inclusive in focus and address women's and indigenous rights issues within our learning areas as well as expanding our education programs to reach out to government agencies and the private sector;
- practice education which questions our thinking and our assumptions, as well as our practice;
- educate for the future and consider scenarios available to us;
- educate for participation in decision-making processes and not just for awareness raising about issues; and

develop partnerships with non-educators to assist with the mainstreaming of environmental education for sustainability across a number of socio-political levels.

The UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development 2005-2014 (adopted by the UN General Assembly in December 2002 following the recommendations of WSSD) will offer further opportunities for environmental educators to reflect on, share experiences of and learn about the implications of sustainable development.

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