

EarthTrends: Featured Topic

Title: The World Summit on Sustainable Development: A Story of Many Summits

Source: WRI Working Paper [*"The Success and Failure of Johannesburg: A Story of Many Summits"*](#)

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From August 26 to September 4, 2002, eighty-two Heads of State and Government, more than one hundred cabinet ministers, and thousands more official representatives came together with observers from civil society, academia, the scientific community, local communities, and the private sector at the Sandton Convention Centre in Johannesburg, South Africa for the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD).¹ In addition to the more than 20,000 participants in the official summit, thousands of others from all over the world participated in parallel events—summits in their own right—organized to coincide with the WSSD (see Box 1).²

Together, the many summits of Johannesburg tell a complex story: of a world community confronted with immense poverty and serious environmental problems; of governments divided by competing visions of development and globalization; and of civil society, asserting the public's right to participate meaningfully in decision-making and increasingly holding governments accountable for the consequences of decisions on development and environment. The WSSD achieved some notable successes:

- The most concrete of the WSSD's successes was the adoption of a new basic sanitation target, which aims to halve the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and/or basic sanitation by 2015.
- The Plan of Implementation (see Box 2) adopted by the Summit encourages and promotes regional and national initiatives aimed at delinking economic growth and environmental damage. While the relevant language was much weaker than many had hoped, the Summit's very acceptance of the idea that economic growth must be delinked from environmental degradation is an important step forward.
- The Plan of Implementation also commits governments to ensuring access at the national level to environmental information and judicial and administrative proceedings in environmental matters, as well as public participation in decision-making. Although it failed to pledge new resources or expand implementation of these "access principles" adopted at the 1992 Rio Summit, the WSSD reaffirmed the importance of ensuring individuals' access to information, participation in decision-making, and justice.
- One of the WSSD's most significant outcomes was a new recognition of voluntary partnerships between civil society, government, and corporate interests ("Type II" partnerships), a development that highlights a transition from traditional multilateral diplomacy to a voluntary approach to implementation. The Summit witnessed the launching of several key initiatives and partnerships on sustainable development, including the Partnership for Principle 10, a global coalition of civil society organizations, governments, and international organizations working to strengthen public access to information, participation, and justice. Also launched in Johannesburg were "Type II" partnerships on sustainable agriculture, water and sanitation, and renewable energy, among many others.
- The WSSD provided unequivocal recognition of community-based natural resources management, including reaffirmation of the vital role of indigenous peoples in sustainable development.
- The Summit acknowledged the need to consider ethics in the implementation of a sustainable development agenda, marking the first time that an explicit reference to ethics has been made in any

official United Nations environment or development document.

- The political declaration adopted at Johannesburg, as well as the Summit's Plan of Implementation, contain references to corporate responsibility and accountability, including "the full development and effective implementation of intergovernmental agreements and measures." Although the final negotiated text fell short of NGO demands for binding corporate accountability measures, the decision to promote corporate responsibility and accountability is an important sign of progress.

Nevertheless, the Summit's official outcomes were disappointing to many. In Johannesburg, governments looked at the state of the world, recognized its immense development and environment problems, acknowledged that they need to do more to respond to these challenges, and then concluded weakly by ratifying existing efforts and approaches that have been found wanting. New commitments and innovative

thinking were largely absent, particularly on global environmental issues and how they threaten development in all countries.

The governmental meeting that took place in Sandton was only one of the many "summits" (see Box 1) that took place in South Africa before and during the official sessions. These summits and conferences addressed issues as wide-ranging as responsible tourism, children's rights, environmental justice, business interests, local governments, and legislators. Each of these "summits" illustrates how far the world has come toward meeting the challenges of sustainable development, and how many stakeholder groups are clearly far ahead of governments in building a local sustainable development movement.

The story emerging from Johannesburg and its many summits is both inspiring and disturbing. Despite low expectations, the official meeting achieved concrete gains, many of which could be directly linked to the efforts of stakeholder groups. The diversity of voice and faces reflected in the other "summits" was important and valuable.³ However, governments' failure to agree

on effective means of implementation (including financing) makes it likely that the successes of WSSD could be rendered meaningless. Division within and between civil society and governments will remain an obstacle to addressing development and environment concerns for years or even decades to come. Bridging these divisions and charting a course that takes advantage of the strengths that come from diversity is the challenge now before those working toward sustainable development.

BOX 1**OUTSIDE OF SANDTON: THE OTHER “SUMMITS”**

The larger success of Johannesburg is not in the official story. The government meeting in Sandton was only one of the many “summits” that took place not only in Johannesburg, but also elsewhere in South Africa during and before the official meeting.

The Global People’s Forum (GPF) at the NASREC Fairgrounds was attended by thousands of representatives of nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from all over the world, a majority of which were from the Global South. The GPF convened many commissions on important themes related to sustainable development and adopted its own declaration and plan of action.⁴

The People’s Earth Summit (PES) brought together environmental and globalization activists and local communities worldwide and was uncompromising in holding governments and corporations accountable for poverty and environmental degradation.⁵ The PES ultimately withdrew its consent from governments attending the WSSD.

The Summit of Indigenous Peoples in Kimberley reaffirmed their mutual solidarity in their struggle for social and environmental justice and asserted their rights to self-determination. The Indigenous Peoples Summit also asserted the rights to own, control, and manage their ancestral lands, territories, waters, and other resources.⁶

The Cape Town Conference on Responsible Tourism brought together tourism stakeholders from all over the world to examine the challenges of sustainable tourism development and the responsibilities for achieving this at the local level.

The Gathering of Landless People from South Africa, other African countries, and other regions of the world, in a run-down amusement park near Soweto, spent the week attending workshops on land reform, holding rallies, and preparing for a march to Sandton during the final days of the WSSD.⁷

The Forum on Environmental Justice emphasized the “forgotten” agenda of the official summit: environmental racism and its costs and consequences. The Environmental Justice Forum challenged governments and corporations to halt destructive and unsustainable practices that disproportionately harm people of color, indigenous peoples, and poor communities.⁸

The International Forum on Globalization⁹ and its teach-in were conducted by an alliance of activists, scholars, economists, researchers, and writers. The Globalization Forum sought to bring a critical perspective of the WSSD process by highlighting what it considered the number one threat to the survival of the natural world: economic globalization.

The Children’s Earth Summit in Soweto brought more than 100 children from different countries together to demand that the world give them a future.¹⁰

The many meetings at the IUCN Environment Centre in NEDCOR Bank focused on partnerships and the future. The IUCN Centre provided space for stakeholders (over 20,000 of them visited the centre during the WSSD) to convene and dialogue with each other so that the stakeholders might seek ways to move forward on sustainable development.¹¹

The Summits of Legislators¹² and **Local Governments**¹³ convened legislators and local government officials, respectively, to explore common approaches and solutions to sustainable development.

The International Business Days¹⁴ were held in the IUCN Centre and at other venues during the WSSD. The Business Days brought together the world’s business leaders to explore the private sector’s contributions to sustainable development and to conduct dialogues with stakeholders.

The Implementation Conference¹⁵ was convened to inspire stakeholders to create collectively clear, measurable, and ongoing action to implement sustainable development.

The Ubuntu Village Exposition Centre,¹⁶ **the Water Dome Exhibition Centre**,¹⁷ and other exhibitions displayed the latest in sustainable development technology, innovations, and ideas. The displays were produced and staffed by diverse countries, groups, and organizations worldwide.

BOX 2**SUMMARY: PLAN OF IMPLEMENTATION ADOPTED AT THE WORLD SUMMIT ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT, JOHANNESBURG, SEPTEMBER 2002**

- **Introduction:** Governments reaffirm commitment to the Rio Principles and Agenda 21 and to achieving the UN Millennium development goals. They recognize that good governance, peace, security, stability, respect for human rights, and fundamental freedoms are essential for sustainable development.
- **Poverty eradication:** Dealing with poverty is identified as the greatest global challenge and poverty-related targets, goals and initiatives are reaffirmed or established with an emphasis on giving the poor access to health, water, land, energy, food, education, infrastructure, credit, sustainable technologies for agriculture and natural resources management, and housing. A World Solidarity Fund, voluntary in nature, is established.
- **Changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production:** Governments acknowledge that changing the way societies produce and consume is indispensable for sustainable development. This section identifies actions that could accelerate this shift, including initiatives that would result in delinkage of economic growth and environmental degradation through improved efficiency and sustainability. The transition to a sustainable energy future is emphasized, though governments were not able to agree to time-bound targets that would increase the contribution of renewable energy sources to total energy supply.
- **Protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development:** Time-bound targets on access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, the development of integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans, maintaining or restoring depleted fisheries stocks, and reducing the rate of biodiversity loss are adopted. Governments recognize the rights and the role of indigenous and local communities in utilizing and managing natural resources.
- **Sustainable development in a globalizing world:** The opportunities offered by globalization are acknowledged, together with the recognition that serious challenges remain, with poorer countries facing special difficulties in responding effectively to these opportunities and challenges. Governments support the successful completion of the work programs contained in the Doha Ministerial Declaration (on international trade) and the implementation of the Monterrey Consensus (on development cooperation). They also decide to actively promote corporate responsibility and accountability, including through the full development and effective implementation of intergovernmental agreements and measures.
- **Health and sustainable development:** There is recognition that sustainable development can only be achieved if the prevalence of debilitating diseases is overcome. Time-bound targets on health are incorporated, including health literacy and reduction of mortality rates and HIV/AIDS.
- **Sustainable development of small island developing states:** Actions and commitments to support the sustainable development of small island developing states are identified.
- **Sustainable development for Africa:** Actions to support sustainable development for Africa are identified.
- **Other regional initiatives:** Various initiatives on sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean, Asia and the Pacific, West Asia, and Europe are recognized.
- **Means of implementation:** Governments recognize the need for significant increases in the flow of financial resources, in particular to developing countries, to achieve sustainable development. Identified as the principal strategies are: facilitating greater flows of foreign direct investment, substantially increasing Official Development Assistance (ODA), and exploring ways of generating innovative public and private sources of development finance. The implementation of the outcomes of the Monterrey Consensus and the completion of the Doha work program are singled out as priorities.
- **Institutional framework for sustainable development:** Governments call for strengthening the institutional framework for sustainable development at the international level. They reaffirm that the Commission on Sustainable Development should continue to be the high-level body on sustainable development within the United Nations. Actions to strengthen institutional arrangements at the regional and national levels are also recognized.

¹ For a detailed summary of the official negotiations in Johannesburg, see International Institute for Sustainable Development. *Earth Negotiations Bulletin*, Friday, 6 September 2002, <http://www.iisd.ca/linkages/2002/wssd/> Vol. 22 No. 51.

² For a list and description of parallel events, see <http://www.joburgsummit2002.com/> and http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/basic_info/parallel_events.html

³ For a sampling of civil society positions on key issues during the WSSD, see the Eco-Equity bulletins released during the summit at www.greenpeace.org or www.rio10.dk

⁴ See <http://www.worldsummit.org.za/>, the official website of the Global People's Forum.

⁵ See <http://www.peoplesearthsummit.net/celebration/joberg.asp>, the website of the People's Earth Summit.

⁶ See <http://www.tebtebba.org/> for the Indigenous Peoples' International Centre for Policy Research and Education.

⁷ See <http://www.christian-aid.org.uk/wssd/020830s.htm> for information on the Gathering of the Landless People.

⁸ See <http://www.ejrc.cau.edu/envreparationWSSD.html> for an account of the forum.

⁹ See <http://www.ifg.org/> for more on the International Forum on Globalization.

¹⁰ See <http://www.josummit.com/news/fullstory.sps?iNewsID=21025&itype=1687&iCategoryID=350> for more on the Children's Earth Summit.

¹¹ See www.iucn.org/wssd/ for more on the IUCN Centre.

¹² See <http://www.globeinternational.org/wssd.html> for information on the Summit of Legislators.

¹³ See www.iclei.org/lgs/ for information on the Summit of Local Governments.

¹⁴ See <http://www.basd-action.net/activities/business.shtml> and <http://biodiversityeconomics.org/business/020831-00.htm> for information on the International Business days.

¹⁵ See <http://www.earthsummit2002.org/ic/> for more information on the Implementation Conference.

¹⁶ See <http://www.joburgsummit2002.com/activities/ubuntu.sps?itype=1690&id=3537> for information on the Ubuntu Village Exposition Centre.

¹⁷ See <http://www.waterdome.net/> for more information on the Water Dome Exposition Centre.