World Summit on Sustainable Development

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which convened in Johannesburg, South Africa, from August 26 to September 4, 2002, aimed to reaffirm and assess the progress of the multilateral commitments launched at the Rio Conference 10 years earlier. Specifically, the WSSD was designed to evaluate the progress of the Millennium Goals and Agenda 21 and to set new priorities and goals to counter global poverty and environmental degradation in the coming years. United Nations (UN) Secretary General Kofi Annan identified five priority areas for action at the Summit: (1) water and sanitation, (2) energy, (3) health, (4) agriculture, and (5) biodiversity.

The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development served as the central organizing body of the WSSD. A 10-member steering committee (representing each region of the world) guided the process and attempted to raise political support for the summit. Four preparatory meetings were also held prior to the WSSD, three in New York City and one in Bali, Indonesia.

The WSSD is one of a series of UN global earth summits popularized since the Stockholm Summit in 1972. It was the largest summit to date, with more than 100 heads of state and an estimated 25,000 participants (from 180 countries) representing governmental, business, and activist organizations. The WSSD differed from the previous summits in two important ways: (1) it adopted a sustainable development approach, which widened the environmental goals to include poverty alleviation, and (2) it created opportunities for greater civic engagement through the organization of a parallel stakeholder's forum conference. Stakeholders included businesses, women and children, trade unions, indigenous leaders, local representatives, farmers, and the scientific community.

Despite this new approach and the unprecedented number of attendees, the WSSD was widely criticized for failing to devise a specific time frame and funding provision for the implementation of their goals. Many blame summit fatigue for the lack of results. Others blame the increasingly neoliberal approach to global governance and the subsequent weakening of the sustainable development ideology. Furthermore, the events of September 11, 2001, and the subsequent War on Terror, along with the credit crisis of 2008, have contributed to widespread unilateral policies that prioritize military and financial security over global environmental conservation and sustainable development.

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Further Readings


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