

Sustainable Development and the United Nations Efforts

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Abstract

UN work on environment and development began with the Stockholm Conference in 1972, out of which the UN Environment Program was created. It continued with the Rio "Earth Summit" in 1992, which created the Commission on Sustainable Development, which oversees the implementation of Agenda 21, one of the main documents from that conference. Implementation was further explored at the Johannesburg summit in 2002, in which partnerships between business, NGO's, states, and UN programs, became the major outcome. The North-South divide, very much in evidence especially in 1972, over whether environment was simply a way to keep the advantages of development for the North, led to efforts to make clear the positive linkages between environment and development, and thus the concept of sustainable development was born.

Sustainable development is defined in the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (the "Brundtland Commission," 1987) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs." Two principles from the Rio Declaration (another Rio document), the "precautionary principle" and the "polluter pays principle," are important in framing the role of international business efforts with respect to the environment. Agenda 21 also introduces the concept of the 9 "major groups," or groups with which the UN engages with respect to sustainable development issues. The business role is addressed in Chapter 30 of Agenda 21. Several business groups have formed to address environmental issues, chief among them the World Business Council for Sustainable Development.

Two treaties emerged from Rio conference, the Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biodiversity, and partnership efforts are underway with respect to both of these. Scientific work led to the greater understanding of the human role in producing greenhouse gases, and their impact in turn on temperature and sea level rise and on weather-related disasters, leading finally to the coming into force of the Kyoto Protocol in February 2005. The insurance industry has been pro-active in work on mitigation of and adaptation to climate change, and many other business sectors are becoming involved. Codes of conduct and measureable goals, with targets and timetables, are beginning to proliferate, and businesses are beginning to pay attention to the linkages between the indicators of sustainable development that come from Agenda 21, the Millennium Development Goals, and other frameworks. Business schools and businesses have an opportunity to be involved in the UN Decade of Education for Sustainable Development, in which UNESCO is the lead agency, and which began January 1, 2005.