

# Global civil society? The Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development

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## Abstract

In the face of mounting environmental degradation and persistent poverty over the previous decade, Johannesburg's World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) of August and September 2002 inherited a number of unmet accords from the 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit. Consequently, the United Nations Stakeholder Forum Implementation Conference (IC) was convened to integrate civil society stakeholders into global deliberations on sustainable development and to marshal their forces in the implementation of WSSD accords. Given the importance of the IC as the first civil society forum at a major global summit on environment and poverty, intriguing questions emerge as to its effectiveness in achieving civil society objectives. As a first attempt in exploring this topic, we examine three fundamental aspects of the IC. Specifically, we examine the relative "civility" of the IC forum in terms of (a) fidelity of representation of the community of global environment and development stakeholders; (b) autonomy of the IC agenda from state and institutional interests; and (c) interpretations of space and place as reflected in deliberative processes and outcomes. The paper begins with a review of the civil society literature with a particular emphasis on civil society representation in UN meetings since Rio. The paper concludes with a discussion of IC participation at the Johannesburg summit, and considers implications for future civil society participation in global decision-making forums.

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## 1. Introduction

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which convened August 26 to September 4, 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa, aimed to reinforce a multilateral commitment to sustainable development and take stock of developments since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. More than 20,000 participants, from governmental and non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and the scientific community, assembled at the summit to address increasing challenges in environmental degradation and sustainable development. The large number of unmet

accords inherited from the 1992 Rio Summit – in no small part due to the US governments' failure to participate in key global treaties (such as the Kyoto Accord) – called for a structural shake-up at the Johannesburg summit. Consequently, a novel approach emerged at the WSSD to include civil society in global agreements and action plans – the UN Stakeholder Forum Implementation Conference (IC). The IC was designed to mobilize stakeholder participation and facilitate the implementation of commitments established in Rio as embodied in Agenda 21's Declaration on Sustainable Development.

The IC represents a new approach to civic engagement. The organizers of the conference, United Kingdom-based Stakeholders Forum for Our Common Future, hoped that integrating civil society at an international level would help reverse disappointing trends since Rio. By including

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stakeholders in the planning and implementations process, it is hoped that a better record for achieving proposed international accords might be realized for the next World Sustainability Summit. Although thousands of NGO representatives attended the WSSD and numerous side events, this event was unique as it provided a forum for a concentrated group of global civil society actors to engage in a process that would directly impact the policies and outcomes of the main global summit.

The concept of civil society is dynamic and ambiguous – changing in scale and scope depending on time period and geographic location. For the purpose of this paper, we engage with the term civil society as “the sphere or space between individuals and the state and/or market” (Blair, 1997; Howell and Pearce, 2001; McIlwaine, 1998; Taylor, 2004). We frame the term also within recent NGO, and more specifically, UN efforts to incorporate non-government stakeholders into international sustainable development policy efforts (see Section 3 below). Drawing on this contemporary definition of civil society, we raise a series of questions regarding its effectiveness at an international scale. Specifically, we address three interrelated themes: (a) fidelity of representation of the community of global environment and development stakeholders; (b) autonomy of the IC’s agenda from state and institutional interests; and (c) interpretations of space and place as reflected in IC deliberative processes and outcomes. The paper is organized into four sections: introduction to the IC, literature review of civil society, analysis of IC “civility”, defined here as degree to which civil society participation is achieved, and implications for future global civil society.

## 2. The WSSD Implementation Conference

For the WSSD to reconcile continuing concerns of human and environmental progress since Rio with flaccid commitment by the wealthiest nations to mobilize around these concerns, structural changes were implemented to marshal civil society participation. To leverage stakeholders to implement the Rio and Johannesburg accords, the UN-sponsored Stakeholders for Our Common Future Implementation Conference (IC) was formed. The Stakeholder Forum was initiated with the belief that partnerships of stakeholders can create solutions regardless of the level of involvement (and commitment) of governments in the global sustainability movement. The IC met in Johannesburg for three days subsequent to the WSSD, with 331 representatives from 50 countries. The conference addressed four key themes: water, energy, health, and agriculture. Each theme had six to seven sub-groups, with a total of 25 sub-committees, which addressed specific items to be incorporated into the WSSD action plans. These sub-groups fell roughly into five categories: capacity building; operational development projects; networking and knowledge building; research and policy; and public awareness. The IC themes were adopted from the International Development Goals (IDGs) created in Rio, which later evolved

into the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The outcome of these stakeholder partnerships and collaborations is embodied in the “Plan of Implementation” (United Nations, 2005a).

By folding many of the issues outlined in the MDGs into four salient topics, the organizers were able to have a meaningful voice within the international community and at the WSSD. This strategic essentialization is a well worn tactic for CSOs and one that was not lost at the IC (Van Rooy, 1997, 2004; Keck and Sikkink, 1998). By framing, as Keck and Sikkink note, “old issues in new ways”; CSOs “help transform other actors’ understandings of their identities and interests” (1998: 17). This was consistent in the case of the IC, where hundreds of issues were on the table at the WSSD. For the participants at the IC, the issues and the outcomes were strategically and clearly identified.

In addition to the “Plan of Implementation”, delegates at the Implementation Conference developed a series of “Type II agreements”. These agreements embody formal partnerships between NGOs, inter-governmental organizations, private companies, and scientific institutions. Type II agreements are intended to enable stakeholders to advance concrete implementation strategies for the official outcomes of the WSSD covenant. Although some IC members expressed concern that such action may undermine governments’ sense of ownership in complying with international agreements, the IC network of multi-stakeholder partners renews hope that WSSD agreements will be realized. Some of the new WSSD accords include: halving the proportion of people that lacks access to clean water or proper sanitation and restoring depleted fisheries by 2015 (United Nations, 2002).

As the IC is a pioneering effort to address sustainable development inequities worldwide, a host of questions emerge. We limit our analysis to an evaluation of the level of various aspects of civil society achieved by the IC forum. More specifically, we posit three interrelated questions: (1) How representative of the community of global environment and development stakeholders were the delegates to the IC in terms of nation of origin and gender; (2) how autonomous did the IC’s agenda remain from the interests of state and multinational institutional donors? In other words, how “(un)civilized” was the IC in positioning itself in the space between state and institutional stakeholders on the one hand and local individual interests on the other; and (3) to what extent was space and place reflected in IC deliberative processes and outcomes. That is, was local heterogeneity duly accounted for or were places spatially “essentialized”?

## 3. Civil society in a globalizing world

Before we address these questions, we engage a more root (albeit elusive) one: What does “civil society” mean? The definition of civil society is widely debated, but generally refers to formal or informal social and advocacy associations inhabiting the space between the individual and

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