

The Environment and Sustainable Development

Over the last 25 years, environmental issues have become increasingly important on the international agenda. Since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, these issues are now viewed through the wider "sustainable development" lens. Sustainable development means integrating environmental, social and economic concerns to ensure that current needs are met without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs. Once perceived as primarily local, many environmental problems are now recognized as having a regional and global impact. Their solutions must not only come through concerted domestic and international co-operation and action but also by integrating economic, social and environment agendas.

Addressing sustainable development concerns

Recent economic summits have played a significant role in addressing and providing high-level impetus to a number of emerging sustainable development issues on the international agenda.

Substantive discussions on the environment at the 1988 Toronto Summit led to an official endorsement of the principle of sustainable development. Subsequent summits have addressed such key issues as climate change, ozone depletion, sustainable forest practices, management of oceans, land-based sources of marine pollution, the protection of fish stocks and other living marine resources, conservation of biodiversity, endangered species, management of toxic chemicals and the "greening" of development banks and governments.

Summits have also addressed the economic aspects of sustainable development, such as financial and technological assistance, trade, and the environment. The social dimension has been addressed through discussion of links between environment and development issues such as poverty, lack of education, access to fresh water, and between health and the environment and the importance of good governance and public participation.

Summit leaders have supported the 1992 UN Conference on Environmental Development (the Rio Earth Summit) and the creation of its followup body, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. They also support the important role of the World Bank, International Monetary Fund and other bodies in promoting sustainable development and the different roles the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and the UN Environment Programme are intended to play. The interest shown by summit leaders in UN reform issues has also extended to improving the effectiveness of UN environment-related bodies.