
The Johannesburg Summit and Sustainable Development: How Effective Are Environmental Mega-Conferences?

Gill Seyfang and Andrew Jordan



The Long Road to Johannesburg

The Johannesburg Summit will be the fourth environmental mega-conference organized by the United Nations since 1972. Environmental mega-conferences are substantially different to the many environmental and sustainability conferences that have been convened around the world to establish new cross-national policies, monitor the implementation of existing ones, and promote long-term strategic thinking. Most of these smaller conferences¹ focus on a specific regional problem such as acid rain, a particular polluting substance or substances (e.g. those that are ozone depleting), or a specific ‘sectoral’ issue such as human health, food, or human population. Mega-conferences, on the other hand, try to take a synoptic overview of the relationship between human society and the natural world. Consequently, they tend to be held much less frequently than other conferences, the main argument being that a long time-frame is needed to encompass the breadth and complexity of the issues under consideration. So, rather than tackle a discrete environmental problem, they seek to provide an opportunity to consider the whole trajectory of human development, over much longer time-frames than national or even regional environmental policy is normally developed. Environmental mega-conferences are also ‘big’ in many other respects. They are self-consciously high-profile events, attracting world leaders and their deputies rather than just environment ministers and their specialist advisers. They excite global media interest, attract thousands of representatives of civil society, and are normally preceded by many years of careful planning and debate at the national and sub-national level.

The first environmental mega-conference was held in Stockholm in 1972, the second took place in Rio in 1992 (the ‘Earth Summit’), the third in New York in 1997 (‘Earth Summit II’), and the fourth in Johannesburg in 2002 (the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD)—or ‘Rio + 10’). Thirty years and two conferences after Stockholm, now is an appropriate time to assess the value of holding environmental mega-conferences. Are they the only way in which society can grapple meaningfully with the expansive agenda of sustainable development? Or are they as much a symptom of the problems of

unsustainable development as an effective institutional mechanism for addressing them?

This chapter charts the history and evolution of the environmental mega-conferences since 1972—and examines their effectiveness in terms of setting the world onto a more sustainable path of development. After describing their history and organization, we identify a series of functions that, over the years, mega-conferences have sought to perform. We reflect upon their effectiveness at fulfilling these functions and their wider role in environmental governance. Are they, as critics would maintain, a convenient smoke-screen which protects the more important drivers and forums of unsustainable development from serious critical scrutiny? Or are they an imperfect but nonetheless important mechanism for making slow but steady progress towards sustainable development at the global level? We conclude that, in spite of their very obvious flaws and the popular media image of them as expensive ‘talking shops’,² environmental mega-conferences *do* have an important part to play in steering and auditing the effectiveness of global environmental governance.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (The Stockholm Conference): Stockholm, 1972

With a growing awareness among industrialized countries of environmental problems such as cross-boundary air and water pollution, pressure was growing for a global environmental summit as early as the mid-1960s. The hope was that a global environmental conference would tap the emerging global consciousness, which had been pricked by the first pictures taken of Earth from space. The political initiative appears to have come from the Swedish government, which at the time was under strong domestic political pressure to address the issue of acid rain in Western Europe. Scientists, too, played an important role: a Swedish representative apparently proposed the idea of an environmental mega-conference at the 1968 Economic and Social Council Biosphere meeting hosted by the UN. Other states agreed it was a good idea, and Sweden offered to be the host. Four years later, in 1972, Stockholm hosted the first global conference on a single issue—the United Na-

tions Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE).

Nowadays, not a week goes by without a large international conference taking place in some part of the world or other. But Stockholm was genuinely mould breaking. Nothing remotely like it had ever been attempted before. Since then, mega-conferences have been held on population, women, and human settlements, but Stockholm was the first co-ordinated attempt to discuss an international issue at the global level. The conference itself was headed by an industrious Canadian, Maurice Strong, and was attended by representatives from 113 states as well as from important international organizations such as the International Labour Organization and the World Bank.³ Although political support for environmental protection was at an all-time high, the conference organizers soon discovered that many participants wanted to talk about issues other than 'the environment' (or, more specifically, cross-border pollution issues such as acid rain and marine and river pollution). Chief among these were issues of poverty and social justice. These and other human-development concerns, which centred on such thorny issues as the terms of international trade, development aid, and access to technology, were first raised by developing countries during the preparatory process. The Group of 77 (G77) developing countries, which was established in 1964, was adamant that environmental and human-development issues had to be discussed together, rather than in isolation. But, in the absence of a conceptual rationale for linking the two (e.g. sustainable development), the G77 struggled to push this point home.⁴ Meanwhile, a coalition of industrial country representatives known as the Brussels group (which included the USA, the UK, France, Belgium, and Germany) worked hard on the margins to undermine the environmental outcomes of the conference, namely the proposed United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and to protect their existing trade and industry interests at the expense of developing countries.⁵

The Stockholm Conference eventually produced three major documents: a Declaration on the Human Environment; an Action Plan for the Human Environment; and a Resolution on Institutional and Financial Arrangements. This first environmental mega-conference successfully identified the terms of what is now a continuing global environmental debate. In so doing, it laid the foundations of the international system of environmental law and defined the terms of the global debate on the environment and development. For instance, the core principle that a nation state's sovereignty over the use of its own environmental resources should not impact negatively on other states was negotiated at Stockholm, as were many others.⁶ Despite the efforts of the Brussels group, the Stockholm documents acknowledged that the priorities of developing countries were different from those of the industrial-

ized nations. This required nothing less than a probing reassessment of the ultimate purpose of human development.

Stockholm also made a pioneering effort to incorporate the voice of what is now popularly known as 'global civil society'. For instance, parallel NGO conferences were held outside the main venue, including an Environmental Forum, as well as the more radical People's Forum and Dai Dong, which drafted alternative sets of principles and proposals. Finally, Stockholm set in motion a process of institution building at the national level. Through processes of consultation, discussion, and policy review, a lot of countries had prepared in advance of the conference proper. These networks of knowledge and political support were put to good effect by the many national environmental ministries that were established after Stockholm to implement the conference's bold agenda. These activities were given a strong push when, a few months after the conference, European political leaders met in Paris to give European political integration a 'more human face'. The summit successfully initiated a process of institution building, which bore many hundreds of items of EU environmental policy.⁷ Regional inter-governmental conferences were also convened in the decade after Stockholm, and these generated a suite of conventions—for example, Bonn, 1976 (covering the Rhine); Paris, 1974 (covering marine pollution from land-based sources); Oslo, 1974 (sea dumping); and Geneva, 1979 (acid rain; the LRTAP). Many of these conventions were, in due course, given sharper teeth by EU legislation as part of a self-perpetuating dynamic of strengthening protection. Of course, Stockholm did not, of itself, generate these changes, but it encouraged them by emphasizing the commonality of national purpose.

However, Stockholm failed to resolve the difficult conceptual relationship between the environment and development. Although many countries took steps to live up to their pledges, the overall follow-up was weak. In 1982, UNEP held a ten-year follow-up meeting which concluded that, in spite of the widespread support for the Stockholm principles, there was little in the way of long-term, integrated environmental thinking and management planning. That meeting did, however, set in motion a process that created the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland.⁸ The Brundtland Commission duly provided the first coherent justification for treating the environment and development as two intimately interlinked problems. Having received the commission's report, in 1989 the UN agreed to convene a global conference to implement sustainable development, which was held at Rio in 1992.⁹

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (The 'Earth Summit'): Rio, 1992

The 1992 conference in Rio was significantly bigger than the one in Stockholm. The agenda was broader and much more complex. Physically, Rio eclipsed Stockholm in terms of the number of participants involved. It also generated much more media attention and attracted many more senior politicians, especially world leaders. The framework conventions on biodiversity and climate change, which were signed but not negotiated at Rio, will always be associated with the Earth Summit. But, strictly speaking, the main outputs of this, the second mega-conference, were threefold: Agenda 21; a statement of forest principles; and the Rio Declaration. These were designed to build upon the work done at Stockholm. Thus the Rio Declaration recast the Stockholm Declaration in the new language of sustainable development, while Agenda 21 was intended to be the UN's blueprint for implementing sustainable development. A new piece of UN machinery, the Commission on Sustainable Development,¹⁰ was created to maintain peer pressure on states to fulfil their Rio commitments.¹¹

However, in spite of these impressive achievements, Rio failed to secure long-term agreement on the need for the more equitable world order that Brundtland and others had called for. As was the case with Stockholm, Rio conspicuously failed to reconcile the conflicting demands of industrialized and industrializing countries. If anything, it helped to clarify the limits of environmental mega-diplomacy at a time when many assumed that the world's ills could be solved by holding a big environmental conference. This point was cogently expressed by Michael Grubb and his co-writers, who argued that Rio simply provided a new arena in which many very old grievances about human consumption (in the North) and population growth (in the South) could be articulated with much greater clarity and volume.¹² In effect, existing positions were polarized at Rio by the experience of meeting together under the media spotlight, not reconciled. Of course, after Rio, unsustainable development continued apace, and little of the 'new and additional' money mentioned in Agenda 21 for sustainable development in developing countries ever materialized.¹³ But, as with Stockholm, Rio did create new institutional processes of change that subsequently unfolded at national and sub-national tiers of governance. The Local Agenda 21 (LA21) process is one prominent example;¹⁴ another is the UNCSD's benchmarking exercise, which has succeeded in encouraging states to provide a more comprehensive account of their own national sustainable development strategies.¹⁵

The UN General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development ('Earth Summit II'): New York, 1997

Soon after Rio, the UN General Assembly requested a formal review of the implementation of Agenda 21. The UN General Assembly Special Session on Sustainable Development (UNGASS) was held in New York five years after Rio. Although its formal task was to review Agenda 21, UNGASS (or 'Earth Summit II', as it became known) was inevitably portrayed as a litmus test of government's support for, and record of, implementing sustainable development. The meeting produced two main outcomes: a six-paragraph 'statement of commitment' and a 'Programme of Action for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21'. The organizers had hoped to keep the conference agenda narrow and focused, but as soon as the meeting opened the agenda began to broaden, as different groupings pushed their own pet concerns. In the end, the meeting struggled even to agree upon a statement on common concerns such as forests, climate change, trade, and globalization.¹⁶ The UNGASS did, however, agree upon a new programme of work for the UNCSD, blessed the LA 21 process, and paved the way for the ten-year review of Rio I in 2002.

The World Summit for Sustainable Development: Johannesburg, 2002

Dubbed 'Rio +10', the World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) is the main follow-up to the 1992 Earth Summit. It is expected to be as high profile and significant as Rio, and will provide the opportunity for concrete steps to be taken towards implementing the principles agreed at earlier mega-conferences. The preparations for the WSSD began in May 2001, with the first of a series of four global preparatory conferences and a number of regional and national consultation exercises to set the agenda and propose solutions. It will be the first major environment and development conference to have a formally structured official input from a wide range of 'major groups' of stakeholders identified at Rio (e.g. youth, farmers, businesses, women) rather than relying upon the unofficial 'side events' to provide a proxy input from global civil society. It will also provide an opportunity for world leaders to recover some of the ground they lost in 1997, by ratifying a number of global agreements (e.g. the Kyoto Protocol and the conventions on biodiversity and desertification).

Environmental Mega-Conferences: An Evaluation

Each mega-conference was very much a product of the time in which it was held. Each one reflected policies, political priorities, and institutional practices which were

considered appropriate at the time, but which now appear somewhat outdated. Simply put, Stockholm placed the 'environment' on political agendas both internationally and in nation states. But it was a somewhat narrow, technocratic definition, which centred on particular polluting activities without really addressing human needs and wants. Rio tried to respond to Brundtland's challenge to link human development and the environment, but failed to achieve a lasting reconciliation or deliver much new finance for sustainable development.

What lessons can be drawn from the 30-year experience of trying to solve global environmental problems by holding regular mega-conferences? Advocates of mega-diplomacy claim that the conferences have to be mega-sized in order to adequately capture the complexity of the issues under discussion and the myriad competing viewpoints. But critics feel their size makes them ill-suited to dealing with the detailed, nitty-gritty problems associated with actually implementing sustainable development in specific localities or sectors. One of their main drawbacks is that such conferences simply encourage politicians to make grandiose promises that they have no real intention of ever implementing. One Zairean participant at the 1997 'Earth Summit II' articulated this view when he described them as an 'Earth Summit circus'¹⁷ which allows everyone periodically to pledge themselves publicly to implementing sustainable development and then return home to resume 'development as usual'. The truth probably lies between these two extremes. Because of their power and size, mega-conferences are undeniably good at doing some things. But their size also makes them institutionally 'clumsy' and thus ill-suited to tackling certain items on the sustainable-development agenda.

How, then, should we evaluate the effectiveness of mega-conferences? Like Peter Haas,¹⁸ we believe that it is incredibly difficult to measure their direct contribution to environmental problem solving. That said, it is possible to evaluate them according to some of the intermediate functions that they have individually or collectively sought to perform. Six functions in particular stand out as having dominated the work of the mega-conferences: setting global agendas; facilitating 'joined-up' thinking; endorsing common principles; exercising leadership by defining new objectives; building institutional capacity; and making global governance more legitimate in the eyes of governments, business, and civil society by promoting social inclusiveness.¹⁹ In the remainder of this chapter, we try to assess how effective the mega-conferences have been at performing these functions. In so doing, we look for evidence of institutional learning—that is, have the organizers of mega-conferences learned lessons and made improvements on the journey from Stockholm to Johannesburg, or do the same old problems resurface time after time?

Setting Global Agendas

Anthony Downs believed that environmental concern is normally created by the build-up of unforeseen crises.²⁰ However, once they have made the political agenda, environmental issues have to be kept there, which is one of the functions of big conferences. There is no doubt that mega-conferences are immensely successful at raising public attention on issues of global concern. There are very few other occasions when environmental issues have received such intense media attention as they did in the run up to the 1992 Earth Summit. Environmental pressure groups usually criticize politicians for not doing enough when they arrive at mega-conferences, but they have their own reasons for attending and being seen to confront political leaders and industry representatives. As well as maintaining public attention, mega-conferences also focus the debate around several, otherwise disconnected, issues such as poverty, health, and environmental quality. The Stockholm Conference, for instance, brought to a head the simmering conflict between the environment and development. Subsequent conferences have continued to work on that relationship, and the agenda is growing in a way that does justice to the interconnected and multi-dimensional philosophy of sustainable development.

In a fragmented world made up of over 200 sovereign states, the UN is probably the *only* effective forum in which the global dimensions of common problems such as sustainable development can be adequately resolved. Advocates of big conferences claim that they are the only politically realistic means of discussing big issues which have a genuinely 'global' reach. Mega-conferences provide a relatively open forum in which states, international organizations, and NGOs can meet to plan the future trajectory of human development. In fact, it is debatable whether environmental conferences would attract as much interest (at least from senior politicians) if they weren't so big. By commanding the front pages of national newspapers, the mega-conferences introduce debates about the environment and development to homes and businesses all over the world. Consequently, the general level of awareness about global problems is raised many times over. 'Sustainable development' becomes a more popular term in public discourse; individuals learn about their part in global processes; and citizens are empowered to ask their leaders awkward questions about human development and demand appropriate action. Of course, in practice, the principle of sustainable development is still not a matter of sustained media attention at the national level. On balance, though, environmental mega-conferences are probably getting better at raising awareness, although steps must be taken to ensure that they do not simply 'recycle' decisions that have already been taken in (or avoided by) different forums.

'Joining up' Problems

World-wide problems such as poverty, inequality, environmental protection, and development priorities are wide-ranging and long-term, requiring solutions and new thinking outside the scope of most daily political realities. More often than not, they are dealt with in a disconnected and *ad hoc* way. Mega-conferences are a means to promote joined-up thinking around joined-up concepts. So, although the term 'sustainable development' was not formally coined by the Stockholm Conference, Stockholm played an important part in its creation and dissemination. Mega-conferences make it possible to hold a global dialogue about global issues. While there are often problems with implementation and follow up, mega-conferences also have huge symbolic importance. They force politicians to raise their horizons and consider strategic, longer-term questions that might otherwise be sidelined by day-to-day economic and political exigencies.

Yet this ability to set global agendas, and discuss big, integrated questions, is held within a constraining framework of political and economic pre-commitments, which are often not open to debate in the conferences. To put it another way, not all aspects of sustainable development are actually opened up for discussion; some things are firmly off the agenda. Some are discussed in other, more specialized venues such as the World Bank and the IMF (e.g. financial flows) or the World Trade Organization (WTO) (e.g. trade flows). More often than not, these economic, social, and political agendas are kept quite separate. Even in the environmental domain, important but more specific issues are considered in separate institutional venues such as the Kyoto Protocol process or that governing biotechnology and biodiversity.²¹ In effect, mega-conferences are simply too big and cumbersome to unpick the most intractable disputes arising from the implementation of sustainable development. These have to be resolved in smaller, less politicized venues. The difficulty lies in preventing these different sectors from pursuing conflicting agendas, as in the case of climate change and trade,²² or ozone depletion and climate change,²³ to name just two. Somehow, future environmental mega-conferences have to become sustainability mega-conferences which maintain the necessary breadth of vision while at the same time addressing some of the more specific, long-standing contradictions between international trade, the environment, and finance policy.

On balance, environmental mega-conferences are getting better at taking a joined-up view of human problems. The agendas at Rio and Johannesburg are considerably more wide ranging than the one at Stockholm. The problem is that, in the quest for comprehensiveness (or joined-upness), mega-conferences are finding it harder and harder to get anything fully into focus. New ways must be

found in preparatory processes to identify meaningful priorities for effective negotiation and transparently audited implementation. Johannesburg in particular must secure agreement across a considerably broader sweep of issues than were discussed at Stockholm, and then turn that consensus into a committed and steady process of change: not easy.

Endorsing Common Principles

The agreements and principles signed at environmental mega-conferences are rarely binding. They tend to be guidelines and recommendations, standards, and resolutions. An oft-heard criticism of mega-conferences is that they are little more than high-profile (and hugely expensive) talking shops which give the illusion that the world is changing when it is not.²⁴ Politicians arrive, make their pre-prepared speeches, and haggle over the wording of a formal communiqué, before emerging bleary-eyed just before dawn breaks. They may offer token amounts of new finance or sign a new environmental agreement, but most politicians use mega-conferences to make only very marginal changes to the status quo. The conferences have produced so little concrete change because the declarations and agreements made there are voluntary, monitoring is difficult, and compliance is not generally followed up. It is indicative that some of the largest environmental pressure groups such as Greenpeace and WWF have turned their attention increasingly towards working directly in collaboration with industry, rather than through the formal apparatus of the state and international systems of diplomacy.²⁵

Nevertheless, environmental mega-conferences have provided an important and authoritative source of 'soft law'—that is, a halfway stage in the development of more binding legal frameworks. States will always interpret soft laws in a variety of ways—as justification for action that would not otherwise be countenanced, or as a vaguely stated and therefore acceptable obligation. However, there is strong expectation that soft laws will be generally adhered to over both short and long term, and that what is now 'soft' will gradually become 'harder', more precise, and more legally binding.²⁶ It is striking how many of the principles contained in the Stockholm Declaration now form the basis of national, regional, and EU laws. With hindsight, Stockholm and Rio were important sources of soft law, but future conferences are likely to be less important, as politicians move on from defining common principles to agreeing more detailed objectives and programmes of action.

Providing Leadership

Mega-conferences have become more effective at exercising world leadership by defining fresh objectives for action at lower tiers of governance. This occurred for the first time at Rio, with the adoption of Agenda 21 as a blueprint for action at lower levels of governance. However, it is becoming increasingly clear that a system of review and monitoring, coupled with comprehensive preparatory processes for each mega-conference, would encourage a more successful implementation. Important lessons were learned at the 1997 UNGASS. Although 'Earth Summit II' was never intended to be a repeat of Rio, there was a widespread feeling afterwards that it had been poorly prepared and had failed to move the debate along.²⁷ Upon reflection, some of the participants felt that UNGASS had underestimated the importance of having a lengthy preparatory process, culminating in a concrete agenda.²⁸ There was no figure such as Maurice Strong raising political and media awareness in national capitals beforehand, and there was insufficient preparation in New York. Consequently, too many participants arrived, gave their pre-prepared statements, and then left, without ever engaging in the type of meaningful debate that mega-conferences are supposed to facilitate. The WSSD has tried hard to overcome some of these problems by hosting several global preparatory conferences, which have been underway since 2001, alongside national and regional preparations.

The underlying problem, which is far from being satisfactorily addressed, is how to ensure that mega-conferences concentrate on the problems that cannot adequately be addressed at lower levels of governance. Here, one needs to ask how well mega-conferences are abiding by the federal principle of subsidiarity (the idea that problems should be tackled at the lowest effective level of governance). Many elements of the sustainability agenda, such as the transfer of pollutants across borders or the operation of world markets, can be effectively resolved only at an international level. For instance, some transboundary pollution problems (e.g. acid rain) are almost certainly better addressed at a regional level. Over the years mega-conferences have powerfully revealed the extent to which not all 'global' environmental problems are actually global. The G77 first made this point in Stockholm, when it sought to draw attention to the local causes of environmental degradation in developing countries. At Rio, this argument was linked to an equally powerful condemnation of consumption in industrialized countries. In effect, the G77 said that, although the symptoms of poverty and (over)consumption may be global, the causes are very often much more local.

In summary, there are very real limits to what can be resolved by world leaders meeting in mega-summits and

signing global agreements. The underlying problem is that most sustainability problems do not come in neat packages. Disentangling 'global' from 'local' issues is (and will remain) extremely difficult because participants in mega-conferences have very different conceptions of what is or is not global. The signs are that the organizers of mega-conferences have still not struck the right balance because, in Johannesburg, negotiators will grapple with a slew of problems ranging from toxic pollution in the North to contraception in the South.

Capacity Building

Mega-conferences create new environmental institutions in the UN, such as UNEP, the CSD, and the less well-known UN Department for Policy Co-ordination and Sustainable Development (DPSCD).²⁹ Mega-conferences have also given periodic shots in the arm to environmental ministries, agencies, and departments the world over through the creation of national sustainability plans and LA21s. This is presumably why advocates of mega-conferences such as Maurice Strong firmly believe that they should be judged as one contribution to a much larger process of societal and institutional change, rather than isolated, one-off events.³⁰ This is what Strong means when he says 'the process is the policy'.³¹ Thus, while politicians' promises may not be immediately fulfilled, mega-conferences provide important yardsticks which domestic pressure groups can use to maintain influence. Over time, conference after conference produces a cycle of ever-increasing domestic commitment. We may describe this process as a one-way ratchet which tightens slowly but very securely; despite the slow pace and continual frustrations, there is inexorable forward movement. To give an example, Stockholm created UNEP, which worked hard to prepare the way for the Rio Summit, which established the UNCSD. The creation of the UNCSD is evidence that learning does occur; policy makers realized that, without such a body, it would be all too easy to recycle promises made at previous mega-conferences.

However, critics claim that these new institutional innovations are weak. The UNEP and UNDP have no secure funding, and so cannot plan for the long term. Neither organization has much legislative power or the ability to enforce agreements or protocols. The UNCSD, being dependent on what states voluntarily submit, has struggled to move issues forward successfully during its annual review sessions. These institutions need to be vested with far greater legal and administrative powers in order to function better as engines of sustainability.³²

Mega-conferences also indirectly build new institutional capacity by creating domestic political opportunity structures. They do this by providing an opportunity for policy makers to embrace values and make promises which they

would not normally consider within their own domestic sphere. National environment ministries have probably gained the most from mega-conferences. Indeed, many owe their existence to the Stockholm Conference, and many more benefit at home because of the opportunities created by mega-conferences. For instance, they secure new mandates and powers through their own activities in international forums, or the pledges made by their prime ministers, which they use to obtain leverage over cognate departments at home. Mega-conferences therefore allow environment ministries to play what political scientists term 'two-level games'.³³

Fostering Inclusiveness and Legitimacy

A common complaint about mega-conferences is that they are, by their very nature, remote and elitist in comparison with more local environmental management systems, in which people can more directly participate. Big conferences may be ideally suited to providing international organizations and states with a comfortable setting in which to discuss new priorities and monitor old ones, but they struggle to capture grassroots debate about sustainable development. Mega-conferences are a magnet for the large and better-resourced interest groups, but these cannot be said to represent the full array of public opinion on any given issue. What has normally happened (see above) is that parallel conferences grow up alongside the intergovernmental ones to meet this need. Statements and 'visions' are adopted there by non-governmental organizations, but they remain outside the formal negotiation process. Legitimacy remains a serious concern for the planners of mega-conferences. After all, it is not beyond the bounds of possibility that future conferences might be invaded by the same street protesters that now follow the G8 and WTO summiteers around the world.

However, over time the mega-conferences have taken steps to make themselves more inclusive. Although 113 states participated in the Stockholm Conference, only two sent heads of state. More than 170 states participated at Rio, 108 of which sent their heads of state. Official participation was much lower in the 1997 meeting, although this was never planned to be as big as the one at Rio.³⁴ The participation of civil society has also increased significantly over time, especially in the recent past. NGOs in particular have grown in numbers: at Stockholm there were 134 NGOs in attendance, of which about a tenth were from developing countries; at Rio there were more than 1400 accredited NGOs, a third of which were from developing countries.³⁵ Outside the conferences themselves, host countries and NGOs have worked hard to produce informal venues for discussion and debate. About 17,000 people attended the parallel NGO Forum at Rio³⁶. The Johannesburg Summit is expected to match these numbers.

Stakeholder groups also have a structured input into the UNCED, for example (more than 1000 are officially accredited). This was a major step forward for NGOs, as they now have direct access to the agenda-setting process, although critics maintain that it simply has a 'decoy effect' of drawing attention (and debate) from more important forums.³⁷ Finally, the Internet is being used to find new ways to expand public participation. For instance, individuals may participate in the preparations for Johannesburg 2002 through websites and conferences, such as the UK government's Sustainable Development website (<<http://www.sustainable-development.gov.uk>>) and UNED-UK's preparatory conference on sustainable consumption and production. Another participatory initiative is the 'Earth Summit for All' educational web portal to help people to learn about and take part in the first mega-conference of the Internet era (<<http://earthsummit.open.ac.uk/>>). This website provides an opportunity for World Summit delegates and ordinary people to hold on-line discussions and collaborate in advance around a number of key topics. It provides a tool for developing the all-important practical projects needed to solve the major environmental and social problems that the Johannesburg Summit will be tackling, such as co-operative community networks and fair trade.

Conclusion

Environmental mega-conferences are an established part of the landscape of modern international environmental governance. That in itself is a good measure of their success. In fact, the conferences at Stockholm and Rio did much to create that landscape of international environmental organizations, legal principles, and policy objectives. By providing a global forum for the discussion of matters of universal concern, they have also played an important part in entrenching the language and practice of sustainable development into national policies, business operations, and public discourse.

In terms of the six functions outlined above, their record is actually not so impressive. Mega-conferences have successfully set new agendas, endorsed new principles of common action, and built new institutional capacity. They are more joined up than they used to be, and active steps are being taken to improve their legitimacy by engaging with civil society. However, a difficult balance still needs to be found between achieving a global perspective on joined-up problems and identifying topics that can genuinely be debated and resolved by leaders meeting at a global level. At best, they exercise real global leadership; at worst, they simply recycle old decisions that have not been properly implemented or legitimize the status quo. Crucially, the failure of successive conferences to finance appropriate

development is seen as the most important weakness in the eyes of many developing countries. To conclude, environmental mega-conferences have their flaws, and only an exceptionally naive optimist would claim that they—and they alone—will carry society in the direction of sustainable development. However, environmental mega-conferences do serve an important function in contemporary environmental governance, even though they are not the panaceas that some had hoped they might be.

Notes and References

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