

World Summit on Sustainable Development: SMART'ly Turning Rhetoric to Reality

Executive Summary

The nations of the world expressed the political will for Sustainable Development (SD) at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) that was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26th August to 4th September 2002. This will was summarised in a Plan of Implementation ¹, a document that contains hundreds of commitments, objectives, promised actions and targets.

However, analysis shows that of the five hundred and thirty-one commitments made therein only seventeen are SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Realistic and Timely). Seven out of these seventeen SMART commitments were announced for the first time at the Summit (the other ten were pre-existing commitments such as the Millennium Development Goals). Five of these seven were commitments to produce documents. One was a commitment to eliminate destructive fishing practices by 2012 and the other was a commitment to halve the number of people who do not have access to basic sanitation by 2015.

The remainder of the commitments are political statements with no binding implications. Some contain 'get-out' clauses such as "if possible" or "aiming to achieve". The majority (83%) contain neither a date nor a specific commitment that can be measured. Around ten per cent are stated as things that "should" be done.

Although there will be actions carried out in areas, countries or regions that will affect the lives of millions or billions of people it appears that the political will of the WSSD was not very SMART. It is suggested that the creation of a global body held accountable to manage commitments on sustainability would be an effective mechanism for achieving our commitment to sustainability.

Introduction

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) was held in Johannesburg, South Africa, from 26th August to 4th September 2002. Thousands of representatives from business, the NGO community, activists, youth groups, national governments, academia and the sciences attended the event. Essentially the World Summit was one part of a developing agenda to create a better and more sustainable way of life for the people of all nations.

The intention was to address the contradictions that exist across the world in economic prosperity, environmental degradation and the human condition – and to develop concrete actions to improve these conditions. The conference had the title of, “People, Planet and Prosperity”, and focused on five themes (Water and sanitation, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity – WEHAB) plus cross-sector activities to deliver actions in each area.

It was hailed by the United Nations as the opportunity to set real and concrete objectives to achieve sustainable development. However, many media reports, prior to the Summit indicated that steps taken since Rio in 1992 had not matched targets that the political delegations had set. There was much doubt on the likelihood of the Summit achieving a positive result.

How society could develop more, causing less harm to the environment and ensuring an improved quality of life for more people was debated during the Summit. Countless presentations were given, numerous meetings were held, technologies that could aid the process were advocated, and literally millions of words were spoken about how to make the world a better place to live in. It appears that the technology and know-how exists to deliver this more sustainable world. However, do we have the will and intention to do so?

This article analyses the political commitments that were made at the Summit in an attempt to answer whether the energy spent talking about sustainable development turned into concrete commitments?

Political Commitments

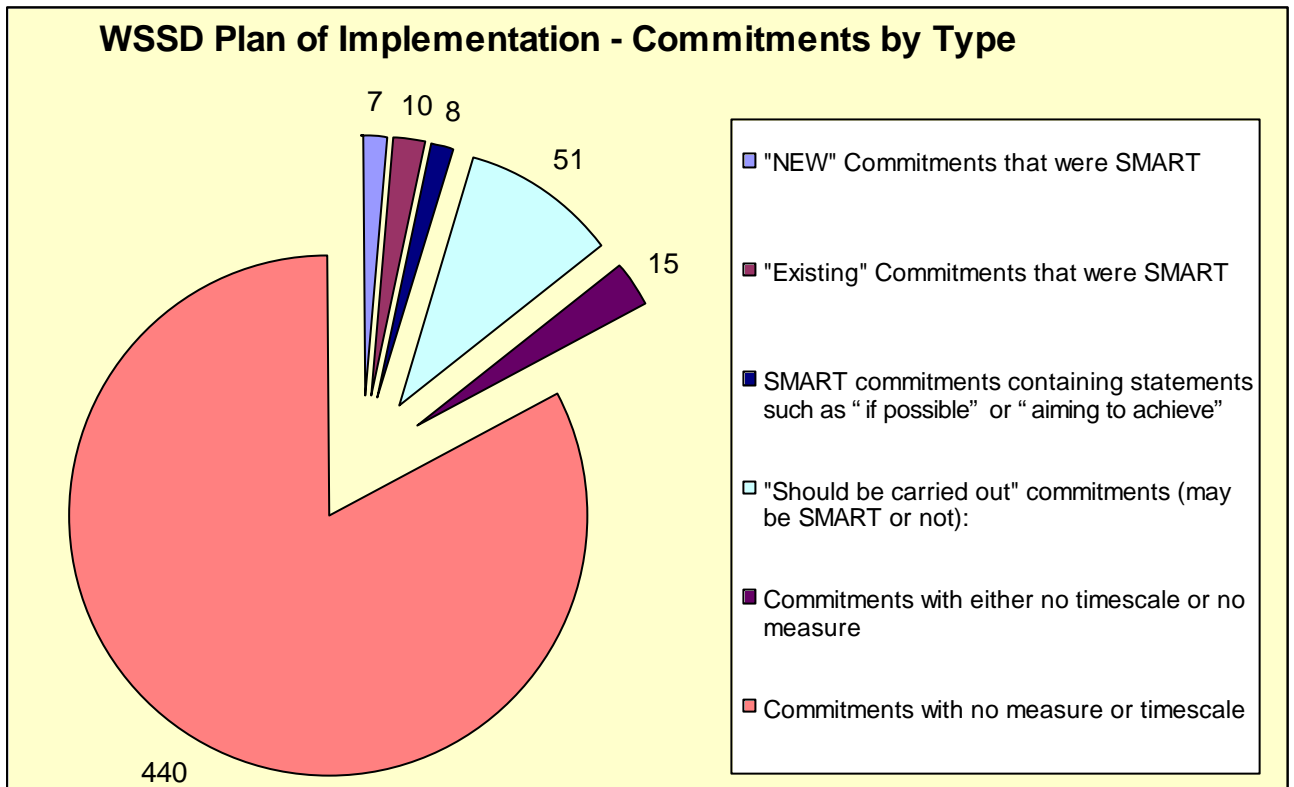
The WSSD Plan of Implementation ¹ is a fifty-four-page document written to represent the agreements made between nations. It contains hundreds of commitments, objectives, promised actions and targets.

One of the most common and effective techniques used in setting objectives or targets is the SMART methodology. Table 1 and Chart 1 analyse the commitments made by the political delegations at the Summit, on the basis of SMART (Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-Based) criteria. The SMART principles are applied to each paragraph of the Plan of Implementation. For the sake of analysis commitments are defined as encompassing objectives, promised actions and targets. Paragraphs that contained no actions were not counted; paragraphs with more than one commitment were classified by the highest order of (SMART) commitment.

Table 1

Type of Commitment	Number	%
1. Commitments that were SMART	17	3.2
<i>1.a. Of which 10 were re-commitments to agreements already made</i>	<i>10</i>	<i>2</i>
<i>1.b. Of which 7 were new</i>	<i>7</i>	<i>1</i>
2. SMART commitments containing statements such as “if possible” or “aiming to achieve”	8	1.5
3. Commitments that should be carried out (may be SMART or may not):	51	9.6
4. Commitments with no measure or timescale	440	82.9
5. Other commitments with either no timescale or no measure	15	2.8
Total	531	100

Chart 1



SMART Commitments

The most pressing issues at the Summit were poverty, the lack of sanitation, water and food experienced by many, and the need for development for all – these have been reflected in the commitments made. There are SMART commitments in the Plan of Implementation in these areas to:

- Halve the number of people whose income is less than \$1 dollar per day by 2015
- Halve the number of people without access to safe drinking water by 2015
- Halve the number of people who do not have access to basic sanitation by 2015
- Develop integrated water resource efficiency management & water efficiency plans at national levels by 2005
- Ensure that all children are able to complete a full course of primary education by 2015
- Reduce by two thirds the mortality rates for infants and children under five; and by three quarters maternal mortality rates by 2015
- Reduce by 25 per cent the prevalence of HIV / AIDS among young men and women aged 15-24 by 2010

However, of these eight SMART commitments only two are new commitments – the commitment on sanitation and to develop water management and efficiency plans. The others had already been made as part of the Millennium Development goals or at other global forums ². Other existing commitments that were repeated in Johannesburg were on chemicals and pesticides, persistent organic pollutants, and fisheries.

Only seven of the five hundred and thirty-two commitments were new measurable commitments. The new commitments contained in the Plan of Implementation were the following:

- A strategic approach to chemicals will be developed by 2005
- A report on the state of the marine environment will be delivered by 2004 (plus a process to continue reporting)

- An assessment of progress on Forests and Trees will be presented to the UN in 2005
- There will be a full and comprehensive review in 2004 of the implementation of the Barbados Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States
- Destructive fishing practices will be eliminated by 2012.
- Developing integrated water resource efficiency management & water efficiency plans at national levels by 2005
- Halving the number of people who do not have access to basic sanitation by 2015

The remainder of the fifty-four-page Plan of Implementation is made up of re-commitments and political statements with no binding implications.

Non-Binding Commitments

There were eight commitments contained in the document that would have been SMART if it were not for the fact that they contained ‘get-out’ clauses. For example, one Summit commitment, that has been highly publicised, is to maintain or restock fish to levels that can produce the “maximum sustainable yield” by 2015. However, in the Plan of Implementation this commitment is followed by the phrase, “where possible” (1: p.13). Other such phrases include “aiming to achieve”, “where appropriate” and “encourage the application”.

These phrases may not have been intended as ‘get out clauses’. They may well represent incomplete agreement on issues by government delegations, which may be a common feature of such political declarations. They may represent an intention to do more in the area (e.g. with fish stocks). However, despite all the best intentions if one’s goal is not binding then it is less likely to be met, and there is an excuse if not – such as “we were only aiming to achieve it”.

Around 10% (51) of the commitments made were phrased as things that “should” be done. The word “should” is concerned with obligation, duty, probability,

conditionality, or it is used to moderate the directness of a statement. It is not the most useful word when expressing commitments that you would like to be SMART. All of the fifty-one commitments that contain the word “should” might remain as things that should be done.

Commitments Missing Dates or Measure

The majority (455 or 86%) of commitments did not contain a date for when they would be accomplished or were not specific enough in definition to be measurable (given my interpretation of the subjects in question). Most of these contained neither a date nor a specific commitment (440 out of 455).

Summarising Political Commitments

It appears that the political will of the WSSD was not very SMART. There may be actions carried out beyond the commitments, and the promises that were made may prove to have been made cautiously. However, this is speculation.

There are commitments all nations are aligned with, such as reducing poverty and water shortages, plus others that were not mentioned in the WSSD Plan of Implementation (e.g. reducing the incidence of Malaria). The implications of the Summit will be far reaching and the lives of millions, even billions, of people will be improved as a result. However, there were only a handful of new SMART political commitments made as a result of the WSSD.

However, many non-binding statements are being quoted as concrete commitments. For example, Margot Wallström (the Member of the European Commission responsible for Environment) in her speech at the Centre for European Policy Studies (CEPS) on the 11th September 2002 ³ referenced the statement on sustainable fish stocks highlighted earlier in this document as a firm commitment – not something that will be delivered if possible. Whether this means that the European Union will deliver this commitment in its waters only, or whether politicians will be able to say that it

was “not possible” if they fail is not clear – only time will tell. This is not to say that the EU and UK governments are not taking serious stock of this situation – they are.

This illustrates some of the problems that exist in interpreting commitments that are not SMART – it is difficult to tell if they have happened. SMART (Specific, Measurable, Actionable, Realistic and Timely) commitments are truly useful as objectives in a number of ways:

- They are easily communicable as objectives to people
- They provide motivation and a sense of urgency
- They allow you to form a plan of action for their achievement
- You know if you have achieved your objective or not
- If you fail it allows you to re-commit
- If you succeed you have something to celebrate

In achieving a more sustainable world we need to think smart and have SMART commitments. This sort of thinking is common in business, academia, the scientific community, sports, and in all walks of life. A company’s board of directors would not get away running a company without specific objectives such as increasing shareholder return, reducing costs, improving customer and employee satisfaction, etc. In our work on sustainable development let us challenge ourselves to ensure that our strategies, policies and intentions are SMART.

In Conclusion

It is worth considering that the political commitments we have on sustainable development are not going to save the world. It will take bravery and community thinking from politicians and business leaders to be able to set the type of strategies, policies and targets that will deliver this. It will then require planning and integrity to meet these.

There are many tough choices that will have to be made by governments and society and in areas that were not been fully addressed at WSSD:

- How to develop economies *whilst* avoiding environmental degradation
- Altering what are currently unsustainable consumption patterns (moving from resource efficiency to resource conservation)
- Setting urgent targets and measures to reverse trends in climate change (using less fossil-fuel based transport and energy sources) beyond Kyoto
- Promoting local community renewable energy sources
- Developing a framework for corporate accountability on firms above the SME size
- Involved the youth and poor of the world in setting our global strategy on sustainable development

Measures like these are necessary to turn the rhetoric of sustainability into a reality. Without targets and actions it is likely that the next global Sustainable Development Summit will be called to address the problems caused to people and planet as a result of decisions made today. How much longer this disparity between spoken words and actions can continue is debatable. In their own political declaration the Heads of States have written ⁴,

“We risk the entrenchment of [these] global disparities and unless we act in a manner that fundamentally changes their lives, the poor of the world may lose confidence in their representatives and the democratic systems to which we remain committed, seeing their representatives as nothing more than sounding brass or tinkling cymbals”.

As Achim Steiner expressed in his statement at WSSD ⁵,

“Sustainable Development means that each one of us accepts responsibility, and that we work together to make it happen. If you look outside this room, you will find thousands of dedicated people, from governments, civil society and the private sector, who are taking responsibility and are looking for this room to do the same.

The responsibility of this Summit is to express the will of this world for justice and equity, for a world that does not squander its riches for the short-term benefit of the few, for a world that protects its natural resources, for ourselves and future generations.

For many species, ecosystems and communities it may be too late.... A possible failure of this Summit will not mean the end of the world, but it will increase the terrible price of unsustainable development”.

It is possible to do better next time. Making SMART commitments is one mechanism. In addition placing accountability for the achievement of SMART objectives with a group also aids their accomplishment. For example, a board of directors is accountable to its shareholders to produce results – they often resign or are replaced if they fail. This accountability has them be motivated to succeed. A global organisation with the responsibility to deliver SMART and sustainable commitments would provide a structure for achieving them. It could be accountable to its shareholders (the people of all nations). This sort of arrangement could attain the development we require for a sustainable future in my lifetime.

Bibliography

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