



COMMISSION ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development

Established in 1993

Number of members 53

Secretariat at the United Nations Plaza, Room DC2-2220, New York, NY 10017, USA



Problem

The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was created at the 1992 United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) to oversee the implementation of sustainable development. In spite of its ambitious mandate, CSD was not given decision-making or legislative powers. As a result, it has been able to do very little besides pass resolutions which 'recommend' and 'urge'. As debates seldom go beyond traditionally-held North-South positions, CSD has become another UN talk shop. Its credibility as an effective instrument is at an all-time low. Although the question of how CSD can become a political forum has arisen, governments have lacked the political will to use it as a platform for resolving environmental concerns.

History of concern

In 1982, the World Commission on Environment and Development published *Our Common Future*, which emphasised the importance of a new type of development that integrated environmental protection with social and economic development. Subsequently in 1992, UNCED adopted Agenda 21, an action plan for sustainable development. The document, which was not legally binding, consisted of 40 chapters on issues relevant to sustainable development and included their objectives, activities and means of implementation. CSD was set up in order to monitor the implementation of Agenda 21's programmes locally, regionally and internationally.

How CSD works

CSD, which reports to the UN's Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and through it to the UN General Assembly (UNGA), monitors progress of Agenda 21 through analysis of reports from UN organisations dealing with environment and development information from governments. It collects information in form of national reports, on activities governments have undertaken to implement Agenda 21, and inputs from various stakeholders, such as non-governmental organizations and industry. Once these agencies submit their reports to CSD, it develops guidelines for the implementation of Agenda 21's programmes and presents them during its annual sessions.

At its first session, CSD adopted a work programme for five years. Agenda 21 was divided into sectoral and cross-sectoral issues. Sectoral issues, such as health, desertification, forests and atmosphere were marked for review for specific years, while cross sectoral issues, such as consumption patterns, technology transfer and financial resources, were discussed annually. This was followed by an overall assessment of CSD's work in 1997, and a full review of Agenda 21 at the 1997 UN General Assembly Special Session (UNGASS). In its 1997 session, CSD adopted a work programme for 1998-2001.

A ten-year review of this process will take place at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), scheduled to be held in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002.

ozone depletion

hazardous waste

prior informed consent

right to information

commission on

sustainable development

climate

biodiversity

desertification

persistent organic pollutants

forests

trade and environment

multilateral agreement

on investment

global environment facility

institutions for environment



As debates seldom go beyond traditionally-held North-South positions, the Commission on Sustainable Development has become another United Nations talk shop. Its credibility as an effective instrument is at an all-time low

Challenges ahead

Who is in charge of the sustainable development agenda –the CSD or the United Nations Environment Programme? There has been heated debate on this issue in recent years, in light of CSD's failure to impress. Many governments and NGOs have called for the strengthening of UNEP, and expanding its 'environment' agenda to incorporate 'sustainable development' as a whole. In addition, there have been calls for the creation of a World Environment Organisation (WEO), along the lines of the World Trade Organisation (WTO), to spearhead international environmental governance.

CSD's future will probably be a key points of discussion at WSSD. If the commission is to continue with some credibility, raising its political profile is a must. The crucial part is how much CSD's programme –environmental protection and sustainable development –becomes a priority to national governments.



GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL NEGOTIATIONS

This series provides a close analysis of important environment-related conventions and institutions from their origins, and demystifies the politics of 'saving the environment'.

A first-ever comprehensive Southern perspective of the impact of global environmental governance on the real lives of real people.

In addition to dealing with five new issues, the second volume, *Poles Apart* contains updates on the issues dealt with in the first report, *Green Politics*. The updates cover only recent developments –a complete historical background can be found in the first report.

