

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

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Received 21 July 2005; received in revised form 6 July 2007

## 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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*Keywords:* Civil society; Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD); Environment; Sustainable development; Human dimensions of global change

## 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

the state and/or market (McIlwaine, 1998; Mohan, 2002). If thriving, civil society influences government by enhancing political responsiveness by distilling the desires of the public through non-governmental associative groups and by protecting the public against arbitrary government abuse (Schmitter, 1997; Lipschutz, 2000).

Practices of civil society are ubiquitous both in geographic and temporal scope. Gibbon (2001) and Loy (2001) show how informal associations have long provided a check to state power as citizens fill the interstices of space between states and individuals – as exemplified by Tocqueville, and earlier by Buddhist philosophy. Tocqueville, for example, purported that civil society's role was to ensure individual freedoms by holding accountable the liberal political and economic spheres, especially the increasing actions of the territorial state. In its pure form, civil society consists of non-governmental organizations and associations operating freely and distinctly from the state. Ideally, as we examine in our first question relative to the IC, CSOs unite diverse interests, encourage interaction, co-operation and a respect for diversity (Hyden, 1997; O'Kane, 2001).

Spatially, civil society was traditionally conceived at the national level (Clark et al., 1998; Muetzelfeldt and Smith, 2002). Increasingly, however, the presence of a 'global civil society' has emerged with increased ties and networks between NGOs and IGOs at a supranational level (Taylor, 2004; Van Rooy, 1997, 2004). However, it is unclear exactly how the global civil society plays out within the international state system – whether it is, as Taylor (2004, p. 2) posits, progressive or reactionary. The power shift to multilateral organizations and the international network of NGOs is interpreted by some as a way to broaden hegemonic power within the context of neoliberal globalization (e.g. Pasha and Blaney, 1998 as cited in Taylor, 2004). Conversely, global civil society can represent the actors that aim to challenge the undemocratic and incapacitating practices of neoliberal globalization.

Perhaps even more salient in this discussion is whether a global civil society can truly exist. Those adhering to the mainstream political sociology with state-centric politics found within the social movement theory (e.g. McAdam et al., 1996) argue that "the structural preconditions for the genesis of a global civil society are lacking – primarily because there is no 'global state' and the power and influence of the nation-state remains dominant" (Taylor, 2004, p. 4). As Halperin and Laxer (2003, p. 13, 16) argue in the *Global Civil Society and its Limits* "the state remains the central locale of power and potential control ... national politics remains the most effective vehicle [for anti-globalism resistance]" (as cited in Taylor, 2004, p. 5). In the absence of this global state, scholars such as Tarrow (1998, 2001) argue that collective action, global mobilization and identity formation are severely limited. Simply, as the nation-state dominates both politics and society, how can a civil society shift scales from national to global?

Keck and Sikkink (1998) engage in these questions of locality and transnational civic engagement in their seminal

work, *Activists beyond Borders*. Through the investigation of several transnational activist groups, they find that a truly global civil society has not yet emerged. Rather, they conceive the transnational civil society as a contested site, an arena of struggle where "the politics of transnational civil society is centrally about the way in which certain groups emerge and are legitimized (by governments, institutions, and other groups)" (Hurrell and Woods, 1995, p. 468 as cited in Keck and Sikkink, 1998, p. 33–4). Taylor (2004, p. 1–10) also views the normative content of global civil society as highly contested. In his edited volume, *Creating a Better World: Interpreting Global Civil Society*, he aims to advance theoretical thinking on what some consider the "indeterminable" meaning of global civil society.

Taylor attempts to transcend the mainstream social movement theory, by re-articulating theoretical underpinnings of civil society. His edited volume, *Creating a Better World: Interpreting Global Civil Society* explores the concept that the nation-state system does not provide a barrier to global civil society and that supranational NGOs can serve as a grounding body – or state. Keck and Sikkink (1998) who are more cautious in their approach (using language such as transnational rather than global) also argue that domestic and international civil society organizations function similarly. Working through networks and coalitions, CSOs are bound together by shared causes that easily transcend political spheres of the nation-state (Taylor and Naidoo, 2004). In the case of the IC, the UK seemed to serve as the surrogate home state, where the organizing infrastructure and staff were located.

Despite the contestable nature of the effectiveness of a global civil society it is clear that the "NGOization" of the political landscape impacts the relation between Developed World NGOs and their Less Developed Country (LDC) beneficiaries (Lipschutz, 2000; Khondker, 2001; Edwards, 2002). Civil society has become increasingly common in discourses of environment, society, and development, partially due to the increased role of NGOs in augmenting state responsibilities. Increased privatization and decentralization in the 1980s, consistent with then US President Reagan's *laissez faire* political agenda and a decreasing confidence in the efficiency and financial security of investments in state structures, has brought about a mushrooming of NGOs and their financial backers. During the 1980s funding for NGOs increased five times faster than did official development funding (Fowler, 1992). This international relief-and-development effort impacts the international state system – evidenced by the fact that NGOs now dispense more money in aid and development than the World Bank and the United Nations (The Economist, 2000; Tvedt, 2004). And even the money dispensed by the Bank and the United Nations is increasingly influenced by and connected with CSO stakeholders.

Some scholars argue that large donor institutes such as the World Bank and other CSOs peddle their interests with a Tocquevillian spirit that belies more complex political agendas (Fowler, 1992; Hudock, 1999). Below we investi-

gate this, as our second question in relation to the IC is whether the autonomy of local donor-recipient NGOs becomes compromised (Ashman, 2001; Orvis, 2001). Instead of embodying a plural and autonomous representation of their constituents' ideas, the makeup of local NGOs is selected based on their willingness to cooperate with donor institutions (Hearn, 2001). As Locke and later Mohan (2002) note, the powerful influence of large institutions and the state in shaping the agendas of civil society associations means that civil participation does not necessarily lead to improved governance. After all, civil society in its applied form does not exist apart from states and institutions, but in conflict and compromise with them (Keane, 1988; Markovitz, 1998), and increasingly with other CSOs (Robertson, 2000).

Aware of the top-down traditional aid paradigms, and the growing chasm between national and global structures from individuals, a celebration of the "local" has emerged in the civil society rhetoric of international organizations. Such efforts, laudable for their sensitivity to diversity in local conditions and interests, can also result in an "essentializing" of places as hermetically circumscribed milieux of homogeneous populations and socio-political characterizations (Blaikie, 2000; Mohan, 2002). An emphasis on the local also threatens to balkanize efforts to combat globally pervasive structures in local places worldwide implicated in unequal access to resources, such as rural land availability and employment opportunities (Nyamugasira, 1998; Ikelegbe, 2001). Lastly, a focus on the local may also promote a simplified vision of geographical consensus and cohesion that contradicts recent conceptions of place as socio-economic and cultural associations that transcend a given locale (Mohan, 2002). We address the issue of representation of place in the third section of our analysis of the IC.

We have discussed some of the problems in arriving at a working definition of civil society given the plurality and dynamism of its recent incarnations. More difficult still is to attempt to build on the foundations of such an uncertain concept in forming a civil society forum. We face the same challenge in evaluating the relative level of civil society participation in the IC. With that in mind, we now turn to a brief overview of such efforts involving the UN since the 1972 Stockholm Summit.

#### 4. Civil society representation and the UN since Stockholm

The 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment was the progenitor of the WSSD and one of the first mega conferences to deal with questions of the environment and development at a global scale. The Stockholm Conference paved the way for civic engagement in the global arena. However, the actual number of civilian participants was, by contemporary standards, staggeringly low with fewer than 300 NGOs attending the summit (Morphet, 1996). Twenty years later, at the Rio Earth Summit 1400 NGOs were officially registered and 18,000 represen-

tatives attended a parallel summit specifically for NGO participants (Earth Summit: The NGO Archives cd-rom, 1995; Willetts, 1996). In recent years, the number of NGOs participating in UN-sponsored events has swelled to tens of thousands (Clark et al., 1998).

Part of this success can be attributed to the Commission on Environment and Development, which was established to reflect on the escalating environmental crisis and devise a global agenda for change. The 1984 commission, also known as the Brundtland Commission after the chair, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, produced the widely received and provocative document *Our Common Future*, which decried the world's failure to achieve sustainable development and outlined several far-reaching actions that needed to occur to mitigate anticipated environmental disaster. This document was instrumental in laying the foundation for the topics to be discussed at the Rio Summit and in shaking up the global community to attempt another global summit.

Despite the steady increase in civic engagement in the global arena, civil representation has remained unbalanced geographically and socio-spatially (Clark et al., 1998). State governments still dominate agendas and inconsistently welcome CSO participation. At Rio, CSOs were ancillary collaborators to states and largely remained distant from the central politics shaping Agenda 21, the main document produced at the Earth Summit (United Nations, 1993).

Thus, despite rapid growth in numbers of CSOs and their involvement in UN conferences, a long road remains to attaining a truly global civil society. For both NGOs and states, differences between developed and developing economies, and wealthy and poor remain primary divisions claimed by stakeholders in UN conferences – but the roles and goals of NGOs have also expanded. Regarding the second question addressed in this paper, more NGOs representing local interests and originating in the developing world are participating in the decision-making processes. However, relative to our third theme, with myriad interests competing for decision-making mandates, CSO stakeholders may essentialize geographic regions or topics of concern, threatening to diffuse solutions applicable to the majority (Clark et al., 1998).

Despite some persistent shortcomings, the recent swell in CSO involvement at global decision-making forums, including UN conferences, is rich with implications for shifting dynamics in global political processes and representation (Herz and Ebrahim, 2005). With large international institutions such as The World Bank and the UN promoting economic and human development through CSOs, important questions emerge regarding representation of local interests and implications for "trickle-up" decision-making.

The creation of a civil society Implementation Conference makes the Johannesburg Summit qualitatively different from the largely informal and peripheral CSO participation of previous UN meetings. If the intent of

the WSSD was to move beyond the “NGO-meets-NGO activities” of the Rio summit to engage dialogue in ways to influence international politics, several questions arise as to its efficacy (Clark et al., 1998). How consistent was the Stakeholders’ Forum Implementation Conference with UN civil society ideals? And what are potential implications of the IC’s successes or failures?

## 5. Methods

Intended to remedy previous deficits in stakeholder participation and of the poor implementation record since the Rio Earth Summit, the Johannesburg IC was designed as a forum for stakeholders to identify, prioritize and commit to tangible action. Specifically, the IC aimed to (1) bring global attention to the burgeoning civil society movement; (2) to influence the decision-making at the WSSD and the language of WSSD documents; and (3) to enhance the successful implementation of WSSD outcomes as stated in the Plan of Implementation and Type II Partnership Initiatives (United Nations, 2002). The relative effectiveness of the IC in reaching these goals is ultimately predicated on the nature of civil society involvement at the IC.

In conducting this analysis we rely on (1) a data set compiled by the IC conference organizers, United Kingdom-based Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future, to examine representation by country of origin and gender of participants in each of the IC stakeholder sectors; (2) data and literature from the US Census Bureau and the World Bank regarding country-level populations, GDP per capita, regional sustainable development needs and country aid allocations to investigate the participant distribution of the Johannesburg IC meeting relative to these factors; and (3) participant observation data collected by the co-authors during their participation as delegates to the IC and in follow-up interviews with IC delegates in order to add qualitative information to help interpret the quantitative findings and to assess the current and future implications of the IC efforts. We recognize that the distinction between NGOs, CSOs and GCS is problematic. We include in our analysis all participants in the IC, whether government, business, or NGO, since the vast majority of representatives are from NGOs. Similarly, while growing numbers of NGOs are linked to governments and carry out social services formerly the responsibility of states, we are unable to measure such distinctions here. However, from our vantage point as IC participants, it appeared that this type of representation was embodied in only a small minority of delegates. Lastly, we recognize the potential limitations to attributing NGO representation to a region. For example, an NGO registered in a particular country does not necessarily only involve citizens of that country, or even work just in that country.

This paper is a first attempt to examine the composition of an important civil society forum. Our methods are imperfect. A delegate from Brazil might, for example, represent an institute whose purview is food security for all of

Latin America, not just Brazil. Further, focusing our analysis on representation relative to IC sectors, we are aware that some crucial sustainable development concerns, such as population growth and distribution, and pollution, were treated only tangentially within the four sectors. Similarly, while the data provided by the IC limited our analysis to nation of origin and gender, other important axes of difference – ethnicity, and socio-economic status for example – could be usefully incorporated into future analyses with the aim of achieving a ‘representative’ summit.

We are also aware of a host of space-specific caveats associated with causes of (under) representation from each different country and organization. An intriguing question for future research is how did the IC organizers determine the priorities of the IC forum and how and why did they organize the conference in four themes that necessarily leave out some key sustainable development issues? For example, population was addressed through the auspice of women’s issues, which was addressed sporadically throughout the groups, but population certainly did not receive the amount of attention it merits as a fundamental player in global sustainability. These uncertainties call for geographically nuanced reconsiderations of theory regarding civil society, representation and autonomy.

## 6. Results

### 6.1. Stakeholder representation at the IC

As we explore the question of representation at the IC, we operate within the theoretical assumption that global civil society requires equitable socio-demographic representation. This view, however, is not shared by all scholars. Scholte (2001, p. 3), for example, maintains that the term global civil society “is not meant to imply that the associations in question span every location on earth, but to indicate that they operate in the world as a single social space” (as quoted in Taylor, 2004, p. 5). We maintain, however, that the larger scale, global summits – such as the WSSD and corresponding IC – necessitate equitable representation. Hearing voices the world over is an integral part of the civil society process at this scale; without this representation not only is the spirit of the forum lost, but global powers are reified and voices silenced. Similarly we find, Florini and Simmons’ (2000, p. 7) assertion that no organization “is truly global, in the sense of involving groups and individuals from every part of the world” is theoretically incomplete, as it does not fully consider fora operating at this global scale. Thus, when investigating participation at the IC, we maintain that a successful conference means equitable representation.

Although a laudable number of countries and regions of the world were represented at the IC, the distribution of participants was less than equitable. The IC drew 331 participants from 49 countries (Table 1). Overall, continental Africa had the largest participation at the IC with 161 representatives (49% of the total) (Table 1). Europeans repre-

Table 1  
Distribution of group participation by region

Region of origin	Total	Percent of total
Africa	161	49
Europe	76	23
North America	40	12
Asia	31	9
Latin America and Caribbean	14	4
Australia	9	3
Total	331	100

Source: Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data.

sented 23% of the forum with 76 representatives; North America sent 40 participants (12%); Asia sent 31 participants (9%), half of whom came from India. The remaining regions drew 7% of all participants. Inequality of representation is evident in an analysis of stakeholder origins from the Americas and Africa. Whereas only nine delegates represented South America (all but one from Brazil), 40 participants represented North America (35 from the US, 3 from Canada, and 2 from Mexico). Of the 161 participants from continental Africa, 104 came from the host country of South Africa. It is unsurprising that South Africa had the largest number of participants considering the relative ease of travel to the conference venue. The preponderant representation from South Africa suggests that even in today’s interconnected world and increasing ease of air travel, distance decay remains a major factor in conference participation. Within Africa, Fig. 1 clearly shows a distance gradient from Johannesburg whereby participation dissipates with distance from the host city such that participation from West Africa was modest and virtually non-existent from North Africa.

After continental Africa, the next largest regional groups represented were Western Europe and North Amer-

ica (Table 1 and Fig. 1). The large number of participants from North America and Europe overshadowed regions such as Asia and South America, where the representation was significantly less and in marked disproportion to their regions’ population (Fig. 1). Although, it may be just as important for donor countries to be represented at these international meetings, we are concerned that, in opposition to the aim of a truly ‘civil’ representation, overrepresentation from western countries disproportionately shapes outcomes. Despite IC efforts to prevent this – the IC provided partial travel reimbursement for many of the participants from the Global South – a large discrepancy exists between participants from the Global South and North. The much larger representation from North America relative to South America, for example, suggests economic ability eclipsed spatial constraints, size of constituency, (and, it could be argued, appropriateness of representation relative to the theme of sustainable development) as determinants of stakeholder participation. On the other hand, one could argue that given the US’s contributions to global warming, resource depletion etc. it is vital that US delegates attend such events.

In sum, despite the explicit aim to rectify power imbalances as measured by national representation, the world’s “stakeholders” were less represented at the IC than at the WSSD forum. The WSSD drew representation from 180 countries (including representation from heads of state), whereas only 49 countries were represented at the IC. Thus, our results reinforce those of Clark et al. (1998) that although civil society is increasingly involved in the global arena, civil representation remains unbalanced both geographically and socio-spatially (Clark et al., 1998).

Although the definition of a global civil society remains contested – particularly in light of the dominant nation-state framework – we maintain that for a global Stake-

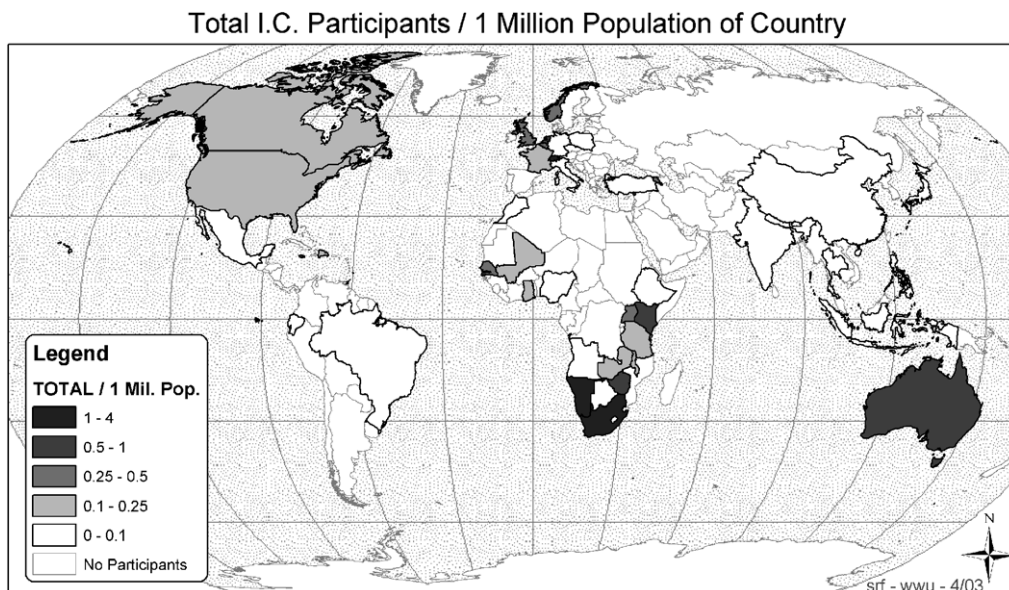


Fig. 1. Implementation conference participation based on country population.

Table 2  
Top ten countries represented at IC and corresponding world population

Country	Participants at conference*	Population (in millions)**	Percentage of world population	Percentage of IC participation
South Africa	104	42.7	0.7	31
US	35	287.7	4.6	11
UK	26	59.9	1.0	8
Kenya	20	31.2	0.5	6
India	16	1034.2	16.6	5
Switzerland	15	7.3	0.1	5
Australia	9	19.5	0.3	3
Netherlands	9	16.1	0.3	3
Brazil	8	179.9	2.9	2
France	8	59.9	1.0	2

\* Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data.

\*\* US Census Bureau, International DataBases 2002.

holder Forum to be truly representational, participation would be proportional to country population. However, as seen in Tables 2 and 3, representation of stakeholder participation corresponds unevenly with country populations. For example, China and India, the two most populous countries in the world, were represented by a total of 21 participants. China, which accounts for about 20% of the world's population, represented merely 1.5% of the conference participants. India was somewhat more equitably represented with 4.8% representation at the IC, relative to its 17% proportion of the world population. Less represented still were Pakistan, Russia, and Bangladesh; despite representing 6.6% of the world population, these countries sent no representatives to the IC. The United States and the United Kingdom, on the other hand, were both over-represented at the IC relative to their share of the world's population: the US, with only 4.7% representation of the world population, accounted for 10% of the conference delegates, and UK delegates, representing a country with only 0.5% of the world population, comprised 6% of the IC delegation.

The inequitable relationship between population-base and stakeholder representation led us to explore how

Table 3  
Top ten countries by population and corresponding IC participants

Country	Population (in millions)*	Participants at conference**	Percentage of IC participation	Percentage of world population
China	1279.2	5.0	2	21
India	1034.2	16.0	5	17
United States	287.7	35.0	11	5
Indonesia	231.3	10.0	0	4
Brazil	179.9	8.0	2	3
Pakistan	147.7	0.0	0	2
Russia	145.0	0.0	0	2
Bangladesh	135.7	0.0	0	2
Nigeria	130.5	3.0	0	2

\* US Census Bureau, International DataBases. 2002.

\*\* Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data.

Table 4  
Top ten countries GDP and corresponding IC participation

Country	Total annual aid (Billions of USD)	Participants at conference	Aid allocation as a % of GDP	GDP (Billions of USD)
United States	17.6	35	0.17	10143
Japan	12.2	2	0.30	4146
Germany	8.6	2	0.47	1846
United Kingdom	4.8	26	0.34	1424
France	9.0	8	0.69	1302
Italy	3.2	5	0.29	1088
Canada	3.1	3	0.44	689
Spain	1.8	0	0.31	581
South Korea	Not available	0	Not available	418
Netherlands	3.0	9	0.8	380

Source: OECD 2001.

(and if) a country's economic strength correlates to IC participation. We explored the possibility of GDP as a rough indicator of societal influence in world politics and wondered how (if at all) this would correspond to IC representation. Indeed it did; but interestingly, even here the distribution was unequal. Table 4 illustrates the world's top ten countries based on GDP (2001) and corresponding IC participation. Nearly one-fifth of the IC stakeholders were comprised of participants from both the United States, which leads the world economy with a GDP of US\$10,143 billion and the United Kingdom, which claims the fourth largest global GDP with US\$1,424 billion. Interestingly, the financially powerful countries of Japan and Germany had minimal representation at the IC with only two stakeholders representing each country.

The imperfect correlation between financial ability (as measured through GDP) and IC representation indicates that other factors, such as foreign aid policies, geo-political agendas, and level of NGO and academic development also influence civil representation. While the latter measures are complex and difficult to quantify, we can easily measure the former with data available to us. Nations of higher GDP paid more in absolute foreign aid dollars. Yet some of the less populated countries among the list donated a much greater share of their GDP (e.g., The Netherlands, Canada, and France) to international aid than did the two most populous countries (US and Japan). These countries had relatively strong representation at the conference, particularly The Netherlands with 9 delegates.

Another factor we measured was whether nations of high GDP per capita, regardless of overall GDP, would have a strong representation at the IC. Relative to a nation's overall population, higher GDP per capita allows for larger proportions of national budgets to be allocated to international aid. Still, since countries with large total GDPs tend to have great absolute wealth and a large constituency, whereas countries with a high GDP per capita may have neither, we anticipate that the latter will remain

Table 5  
Top 10 countries by GDP per capita and corresponding IC participation

Country	GDP per capita in USD	IC participation	GDP as share of global GDP	Indicator of IC participation relative to global share of GDP*
United States	36,300	35	32.7	1.1
Switzerland	31,100	15	0.7	21.6
Norway	30,800	2	0.4	5.1
Canada	27,700	3	2.7	1.1
Austria	27,000	0	0.7	0.0
Germany	26,200	2	6.9	0.3
Netherlands	25,800	9	1.3	6.8
France	25,400	8	4.8	1.7
Hong Kong	25,000	3	0.6	5.4
UK	24,700	26	4.7	5.5
Australia	24,000	9	1.5	6.2

Source: Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data and World Development Report, World Bank (2002).

\* 1.0 = one participant per one percentage point GDP as share of global GDP.

a weaker predictor of participation than the former. Of the top ten GDP per capita countries as observed in Table 5, only three had substantial representation (15 or more representatives) – United States, Switzerland and the United Kingdom. Switzerland was the only one of these three with relatively small populations. Conversely, nations with small populations and high GDP per capita, Norway, Canada, and Germany, had fewer than 5 participants while Austria, with the fifth largest GDP per capita, sent no representatives to the IC. The anomalous case of Switzerland must be contextualized by its position in global politics due to its historically neutral position and its hosting several UN and international organizations essential to the WSSD. Consistent with this, Switzerland sent a preponderant number of participants relative to their GDP per capita, with an index of 21.6, compared to the US's index of 1.1. Similarly, The Netherlands, another nation with traditionally strong international presence and links to the UN, had disproportionately strong representation relative to its GDP per capita.<sup>1</sup>

Unlike the inequitable distribution of stakeholders by region, gender representation remained integral with the IC's application of civil society goals (Table 6). Consistent with world population distributions, there were slightly more female stakeholders than male stakeholders (170 to 160) represented at the Johannesburg IC. In fact, females were slightly more represented in every group, except for the fresh water group. We are unsure why men greatly out-

<sup>1</sup> While an in depth discussion of the causes of geographical heterogeneity of representation is a (important) subject for another paper, consistent with our analysis of place, a host of national and local reasons could explain lack of representation. For example, lack of CSO participation from Central Asia could be attributed in part to oppressive regimes.

Table 6  
Gender and stakeholder groups

Gender balance	Food security	Health	Fresh water	Energy	Total
Female	51	42	49	28	170
Male	34	37	69	20	160
Not reported	0	1	0	1	2
Total	85	79	118	49	331

Source: Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data.

numbered women in the water sector, the sector advertised as one of the more crucial themes at the WSSD. Women did, however, clearly outnumber men in the health and food security groups.

Despite a numerically equitable representation of women at the IC, we question the level of emphasis that the organizers placed on gender. For example, out of the twenty-five subgroups, only one specifically addressed gender issues (gender and integrated water management). This minimal emphasis on gender was also pervasive at the WSSD. Although Agenda 21 and other UN documents clearly note that women are essential players in poverty eradication and natural resource management and that gender equality is imperative in order to reach sustainable development, gender has been largely ignored at UN mega-conferences. Pearl (2002, p. 1) from the Women Environmental Development Network reflected that women at the WSSD had to focus much of their lobbying energy on merely “holding the line”, especially in the realm of reproductive health and women's human rights. Although references to gender in the Plan of Implementation are promising, gender was not made central to sustainable development. “Despite some important gains, such as the landmark recognition of women's right to inherit land and the setting of sanitation targets, the Summit fell short of expectations” (Grossman, 2002, p. 4). This was also apparent at the IC, where gender issues were largely not recognized as separate topics, rather infused within other agenda items. For example, one of the members of the Access to Land group spent a large proportion of her time upholding women's rights as it related to access to land issues (although her capacity was working for a NGO reforestation project, and was not officially representing a woman's group). Despite the participant's lobbying efforts, gender was minimally mentioned in the group's final report.

In sum, the IC failed to achieve equal stakeholder representation in a number of ways. The inequity in regional representation, the tendency of economics to partially determine participation, and the effects of distance-decay and international politics all appeared to play a part in undermining the efforts of the IC to achieve an equitably representative civil society. Equitable representation of male and female participants was promising, however the lack of formal representation of gender issues within the IC, and ultimately the Plan of Implementation, was disappointing. The next section, Stakeholder Autonomy, further

explores the distribution and limitations of stakeholder participation at the IC.

## 6.2. Stakeholder autonomy

The influence of global resource dependence structures on labor and resource flows, as well as external control over local organizations, is clearly documented (see for example, Pfeffer, J. and Salancik's seminal text *The External Control of Organizations* 1978). For stakeholders to operate freely from international donor agencies and governments, the majority of the delegates should come from non-governmental sectors (which are free only to varying degrees from government influence) (Table 7). In this regard the IC may be considered quite successful. Less than one-tenth of the delegates represented the government sectors (9%). The large NGO participation (37% of delegates) relative to grassroots groups such as farmer and trade unions, and women's groups suggests even more equitable distribution could be achieved by increasing the representation of these groups in future meetings (Table 7).

If the IC were truly representational of a global civil society, not only would representation be proportionate to world demographics, it would also equitably reflect regional sustainable development concerns. While such classifications are necessarily qualitative, some would appear quite obvious. South America, for example, would have representatives concerned with tropical deforestation, and the Middle East and North Africa would send delegates concerned with water security (United Nations, 2007). By questioning whether states can maintain regional priorities while operating within a global scale, we are also exploring whether, as Taylor (2004) posits, the structural preconditions exist for a global civil society and if 'trickle-up' politics maintain their integrity at this scale. Specifically, we explore the question of stakeholder autonomy by investigating the relation between stakeholder participation and regional sustainable development priorities (Table 8).

The distribution of participants from Africa appeared consistent with regional needs, with food security (41 participants), health, (53) fresh water (53), and energy (14) all well represented. Challenges to sustainable development in southern Africa are myriad: high population rates, notable problems with diseases such HIV/AIDS and malaria, severe environmental degradation (in particular soil erosion and water pollution), and rapid and unplanned urbanization (United Nations, 2005b). Considering the very immediate health and natural resource issues facing Southern Africa, it appears reasonable that the lowest priority for the region was energy. Northern Africa, with noticeably fewer participants at the IC than southern Africa, was not as well represented relative to their sustainable development needs (United Nations, 2007).

Western Europe was represented evenly with five delegates each in the food, health, and energy sectors. Fresh water was the most represented group with 11 participants. This greater attention to water could possibly reflect the overall interest of water at the WSSD and the role of many of the Western European stakeholders as representatives from funding agencies. The three Eastern European countries with IC representation (Armenia, Poland, and Turkey) were equally and sparsely represented in the ICs four sectors.

No members of Central Asia attended the IC. Although stakeholder distribution in the four sectors is consistent with the region's diverse environmental issues, the region as a whole was grossly underrepresented, suggesting that Central Asia was not a priority for international sustainable development efforts (and outreach) relative to other regions.

Similar to Western Europe, Canada and the United States were disproportionately represented by delegates in the Fresh Water sector. This focus on water is consistent with the WSSD prioritization of water and the rising concerns of water worldwide (Gleick, 2007). Their participation in the water sector is likely linked to their own domestic concern for access to freshwater. Canada, for

Table 7  
Stakeholder groups by sector and group

Stakeholder sector	Food security	Health	Fresh water	Energy	Total	Percent of total
Government	6	16	5	3	30	9
IGO	5	11	5	1	22	7
Local Gov	3	2	21	1	27	8
NGO	27	31	41	25	124	37
Business	11	7	8	4	30	9
Research/academia	20	11	10	4	45	14
Donor (non-Gov)	0	1	3	1	5	2
Media	7	0	0	0	7	2
Farmers	5	0	0	0	5	2
Trade unions	1	0	7	0	8	2
Women	0	0	2	7	9	3
Youth	0	0	2	0	2	2
Public sector business	0	0	14	0	14	14
Not reported	0	0	0	3	3	3

Source: Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data.

Table 8  
Distribution of group participation by region

Region of origin	Food security	Percent of total	Health	Percent of total	Fresh water	Percent of total	Energy	Percent of total
Africa	41	48	53	67	53	45	14	29
Europe	23	27	18	23	24	20	11	22
North America	13	15	6	8	13	11	8	16
Asia	6	7	2	3	12	10	11	22
Latin America and Caribbean	1	1	0	0	9	8	4	8
Australia	1	1	0	0	7	6	1	2
Total	85	26	79	24	2118	36	49	15

Source: Stakeholder Forum for Our Common Future UN data.

example, who in years past had a rather ‘blasé’ attitude towards water issues, has become increasingly cognizant of water issues. The national tragedy of Walkerton, Ontario, where a deadly outbreak of *E-coli* bacteria killed seven civilians and sickened thousands of others in 2000, brought acute awareness to the importance of securing freshwater sources (Bakker, 2007). Canada’s recent emphasis on securing water supplies is also linked to the mounting threat of water becoming an export commodity (especially in light of international pressures to export to their thirsty US neighbors) (Pentland and Hurley, 2007; Geddes, 2000). In the US, increased population pressures and agro-industrial demands are placing increasing pressures on diminishing freshwater supplies (particularly groundwater). In particular, the southwestern US faces severe water shortages and is actively looking for alternative ways to meet the increasing demands. It is unsurprising, then, that stakeholders from Canada and the US were keenly interested in participating in the water sector.

Unlike its populous North American counterparts, Mexico was not represented in the water sector despite increasing issues surrounding access to clean water (particularly along its borderlands) (Berry, 2000; Brown and Mumme, 2000; Mumme, 1999). In fact, Mexico only sent two representatives to the IC – representing food security and health. This lack of representation was similar to its Latin American counterparts.

Those that did participate from Latin America were largely represented in the fresh water sector. Although the region harbors 30% of the world’s fresh water—mainly concentrated in the Amazon – the water is not equitably distributed throughout the region, with two-thirds of the region’s territory classified as arid or semi-arid (UNEP, 2000). Increased population needs, irrigated agriculture and growing industrial demands all place mounting pressure on the region’s demand for water. In particular, contamination due to mining activities and agro-chemicals continue to pose a threat to many freshwater systems. Overall, the scant representation from Latin America relative to its share of the world’s population and of sustainable development concerns is incongruous with the IC’s civil society goals. Latin America had only one representative in the health sector, despite the region’s high rural

infant mortality rate and a long struggle with water-borne illnesses, and illnesses associated with exposure to solid waste, air pollution, and exposure to agro-chemicals (UNEP, 2000).

The stakeholders from Asia (South and East Asia and the Pacific (EAP)) largely prioritized energy and access to water. High population densities and relatively rapid rates of economic growth is characteristic of the EAP region (World Bank, 2001). Over the past 25 years, no other region has grown at a faster rate than the EAP (World Bank, 2001). High participation in the energy sector is therefore consistent with the needs of the Asian region to greatly increase energy output to keep pace with economic growth.

In sum, IC representation appeared to reflect regional needs relating to sustainable development, in some instances, such as sub-Saharan Africa. However, many regions were so underrepresented that meaningful inferences regarding equitable representation relative to IC sectors is difficult, as in the case of Central Asia and Latin America. Western Europe and North America (Canada and US) were heavily represented in the fresh water sector, reflecting an emphasis on this issue at the WSSD, as well as their own domestic concerns for access to fresh water. This regional analysis of distribution of participation is also limited, however, because diverse socio-environmental issues were essentialized into four sections (and then sub-divided into 25 categories). Some crucial sustainable development concerns, such as population growth and distribution, and pollution were treated only cursorily within the discussions. This essentialism, although a strategic means of moving issues forward, can also be problematic – particularly in terms of disconnecting issue from place, the topic of the last section in this analysis.

### 6.3. Geographical representation and fidelity to space and place

As participants negotiated priorities and language for their respective action plans, was the nested complexity of space and place sufficiently represented in the final documentation? Forty-nine countries were represented at the Johannesburg IC. In the process of framing their visions

to fit into WSSD Type II Action Plans, was the diversity of the stakeholders embodied or was local place overly “essentialized” in working with overarching issues in a global forum? While we are aware of the potential tautological irony in our critiquing “essentialization”, we feel that the topic is of sufficient importance to treat here and we attempt to do so with sensitivity as to not replicate the same paradigms we aim to investigate.

Maintaining diverse interests in final negotiations proved challenging. Even in groups where the representation was more regional than global, significant challenges existed to representing diverse interests. For example, in the Access to Land Group, which primarily consisted of participants representing sub-Saharan Africa, issues surrounding varying land tenure systems transferred with difficulty between countries. Groups’ focus on land access varied significantly depending on the current government’s current prioritization. For example, despite international criticism, Zimbabwe is maintaining a strong position on access to land and land reclamation. Through the process of developing appropriate statements for the global community, the highly controversial land policies in Zimbabwe hardly surfaced in the final reports of the IC stakeholders. Similarly, in Uganda, where the emphasis was on reforestation – and largely on supporting women and reforestation projects – much of the detail was lost in the final reports.

While the stakeholder consensus process drew on the stories of individual stakeholders and their respective communities, it did not directly address details facing each distinct situation. Inevitably, to remain integral to the plurality of interests of all stakeholders, sustainable development themes such as “eco-agriculture” and “land availability” were essentialized – to sell its importance to donors and constituents. During the IC’s three-day sessions, groups spent numerous hours discussing the language of their respective action plans. The groups’ vigilance of donor communities’ “buzz words” affected the decision-making process. In the access to land group and the eco-agriculture group (sub-groups of food security), for example, the groups’ concern for fitting language into a suitable package acceptable to donors often deterred from the act of formulating action plans.

We conclude that during consensus-building, regional heterogeneity was weakened. It is unclear whether or not such essentialization, both by individual players and international donors, was detrimental to the effectiveness of the civil society process. It does appear clear, however, that the process allowed for the timely acceptance of 14 of the IC’s Action Plans as official WSSD Type II initiatives. This acceptance represents a significant step towards stakeholder recognition and environmental implementation. The long-term litmus test will be if the generalized action plans provide sufficient guidance for the heterogeneous realities within individual countries. It will also be of interest to probe further the implications of place discourse for the power of international civil society. Will for example representatives not reject but instead reify essentialism as a strategy to lobby for local concerns?

## 7. Discussion

With the next World Summit scheduled for 2012, ample time remains to reflect on the successes and failures of the first civil society forum at an Earth Summit. With the aim of beginning such a discussion, we explored the relative degree of civil society participation at the World Summit on Sustainable Development’s Stakeholder Implementation Conference (IC). The establishment of a civil society forum at the WSSD had practical goals beyond the noble aim of broadening constituent inclusion in WSSD deliberations. The IC attempted to correct the lack of implementation of accords from Rio. It is premature to evaluate this mission of the IC. However, a key means to that end is the equitable selection of a stakeholder body. We conclude this paper with a summary of results and a discussion of where representation might better reflect the stated civil society goals of IC organizers and the implications of this for future efforts in general.

We observed that stakeholder representation fell short of achieving the balanced representation desired by the IC organizers. Inequity in regional representation was marked and appeared correlated with relative cost of transportation to the conference venue in Johannesburg and with a nation’s aid allocation. In other words, those who could most easily afford travel to the conference, southern Africans, and delegates from the world’s wealthiest nations dominated the IC’s deliberative body. Similarly, delegates from countries influential in global sustainable development projects through high capital investments were also disproportionately represented. Future civil society fora might consider selecting more stakeholders from countries who are in need of receiving aid and fewer from countries who give aid.

More can be done to achieve the IC’s goals of geographical representation. Advertising the next IC years in advance, contacting appropriate stakeholders, and applying for grants to defray transportation costs for delegates from underrepresented regions such as Latin America and Central Asia are several of many possible efforts that could help rectify underrepresented areas. The results suggest most clearly that special care should be taken to recruit delegates from underdeveloped regions that are furthest from the conference venue and which are less able to afford transportation to the conference. For instance, the combination of distance and lack of affordability may have played a role in the sparse representation from Central Asia. In terms of equitable gender representation, we suggest that further research needs to explore how issues surrounding gender and the environment are included – or excluded – in global civil society fora. This investigation should help insure that future conferences do not merely “hold the line”, rather are integral to both the negotiating process and the outcomes.

We found mixed results in our analysis of stakeholder autonomy. Relative to IC stakeholder affiliation, few delegates represented the government and business sectors.

Nevertheless, NGO participation eclipsed by several fold the participation of grassroots groups such as farmer and trade unions, and women's groups, suggesting that more equitable representation could be achieved by boosting the participation of these underrepresented groups.

Representation of stakeholder priorities was much stronger in Africa than elsewhere. While African delegates appeared to reflect regional sustainable development needs of food security and health care, Central Asian and Latin American constituencies were so widely underrepresented as to render seemingly meaningless any inference pertaining to IC sector representation relative to those regions' sustainable development needs. In the case of Western Europe and North America, representation was weighted toward participation in the fresh water sector, which is consonant with a WSSD emphasis on this theme despite it not being a priority for sustainable development in those nations.

The autonomy of the IC stakeholders was largely defined by the power of donor nations and influenced by the themes of the WSSD. We observed that a substantial amount of time was invested in constructing the "appropriate" language and vigilantly structuring action plans according to multinational and state guidance. We believe that future civil society assemblies might achieve more balance in matching regional sustainable development priorities with constituent representation. Regional priorities as outlined at the WSSD and further elaborated in forthcoming preparatory meetings could serve as a guide to constituent selection. Potential delegates could then be contacted based on this distribution.

Relative to our third topic of analysis, we found that places were inevitably reduced to simplified versions of their complex reality during consensus building. This essentialization allowed for diverse interests to be neatly represented and moved forward to the WSSD as Type II initiatives. It remains unclear whether or not such conceptual homogenization will damage or improve the civil society process.

Despite some of the shortcomings observed here, the IC process allowed many of the Action Plans to serve expeditiously as official WSSD Type II initiatives, intended to enable stakeholders to advance concrete implementation strategies for the official outcomes of the WSSD covenant. This is a significant step forward for civil society participation at the scale of a global summit. More broadly, this process was a significant step in actuating a global civil society forum.

In addition to the findings presented, recent correspondence between the authors and stakeholder delegates reveal several themes for further research. The conference groups have had difficulty maintaining connections after the conference. Most stakeholders have heavy responsibilities in their home countries and it is often difficult to maintain momentum in larger projects when localized efforts remain under time and financial stress. Further, most of the planning and organization of the IC came from a non-profit

group in London, rather than from collaborative efforts from stakeholders worldwide. Thus, the question of whether a global civil society can truly exist without the structure of a nation-state is pertinent (e.g. McAdam et al., 1996). In the case of the IC, where the UK served as the host-nation for organizational purposes, the UK held an asymmetrical amount of power in the planning and execution of the summit. Although the purpose of the IC was to create and foster a global civil society, this ideal fell short in practice. Lastly, participants have voiced concerns that the practicalities of maintaining meaningful and sustainable connections post IC, were not realistically identified or held to task by the organizers.

## 8. Conclusion

In conclusion, although this was a laudable first attempt at engaging civil society at a global scale and widening the dialog for stakeholders at mega-international conferences, structural changes need to occur if the IC and other subsequent foras are to meet their goals. For example, the participant representation at the conference did not reflect the geographic diversity that was expected at a global civil society event. Institutional capacity within these under represented regions poses challenges for future conferences where equitable representation is desired. Furthermore, it is unclear as whether the process – engaging in strategic essentialism – effectively captured the diversity of voices.

Simply, the long-term impacts of the IC remain uncertain. However, for the short term at least it appears that active civil society participation will continue to be part of the sustainable development movement. Whether IC stakeholders efficaciously mobilize their actions plans will be contingent on the international community's willingness to accept them as essential players in the sustainability movement and on local people's empowerment in participating in such movements. The success of any agreement, however, ultimately relies on the motivation and goodwill of all stakeholders, representing constituencies and coffers large and small, to adhere to the accords developed at the WSSD. The IC is merely an attempt to improve the means to this end. Nonetheless, the success of the IC-type movements will remain largely contingent on the level of equality of global stakeholder participation. The analysis presented here is a first attempt to analyze that representation.

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