

World Summit on Sustainable Development – The Case for a Minerals and Metals Perspective

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From August 26 to September 4, 2002, Johannesburg, South Africa, will host the world at the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD). More than just an event to mark the 10th anniversary of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Earth Summit), the WSSD also holds the potential to raise activity related to mining, minerals and metals to a higher level.

For many years, there has been a concern about the lack of a high-level intergovernmental policy forum where issues related to minerals and metals could be discussed in a sustainable development context. Regional issues are being effectively addressed through such fora as the Mines Ministries of the Americas (CAMMA), the Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Expert Group on Mineral and Energy Exploration and Development (GEMEED), and an emerging network of mining ministries in southern Africa. Sector-specific considerations, such as production, product stewardship, and science, research and development issues, are being addressed through such mechanisms as the multi-stakeholder Nonferrous Metals Consultative Forum on Sustainable Development, supported by the three commodity study groups. The Intergovernmental Forum on Chemical Safety (IFCS) addresses risk assessment and environmentally sound management of chemicals, but is not mandated to cover the social and economic aspects of sustainable development.

While each of these initiatives is positive, even when taken together they do not provide a holistic, sustainable development approach to the mining and metals sector. There are few linkages among them. In some cases, recommendations emanating from these fora are not enacted because there is no responsible body for follow-up. And while mines ministries may be fully involved in the discussions, the information is often not available to other ministries. The result is that governments lack a means of moving forward on important issues at a global level – a limitation that

is becoming more and more significant in our increasingly globalized world.

Mining and metals have significant international implications. While mining remains important in many developed countries, it is increasingly moving into developing countries. Metals use is still primarily a factor in developed countries, but is also growing rapidly in developing countries.

There are also global social and environmental considerations associated with minerals and metals. These can be found at both the production (mines) and product levels, and can affect the developed and developing worlds in different but related ways. In addition, products using metals are internationally manufactured and traded with resulting global implications. To date, there has not been a way for governments to address these issues at a global level with the full participation of all interested and affected stakeholders.

The WSSD presents a unique opportunity to remedy this situation. The WSSD will shape the global sustainable development agenda for the coming years. It will both review progress made since the 1992 Earth Summit and identify priorities for further action in new areas or on emerging issues. The WSSD is not intended to re-open Agenda 21, the program of action adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit. Rather, it will focus on the specific actions needed to accelerate progress towards sustainable development. From a metals perspective, one positive outcome would be for Heads of Government at the Summit to acknowledge the importance of metals to society and to issue a call for governments to explore how mining, minerals and metals can contribute to sustainable development.

HOW COULD THE WSSD IMPACT ON MINERALS AND METALS?

The proposal is a two-stage approach. First, it seeks endorsement from the highest level of government to address mining and metals issues at a global level and in a sustainable context. This high-level commitment will help raise the profile of metals and sustainable development on the world stage and provide momentum for continued action.

Minerals and metals are just one of a range of issues that could be addressed at WSSD. Since it would not be possible for leaders to fully explore all aspects of the issue in the limited time available at the WSSD, a more useful outcome would be for leaders to establish a process that would facilitate in-depth examination at a later time.

The second phase would come after the WSSD. It would bring together interested governments and other stakeholders to identify approaches for future cooperation.

Participants would be asked to consider creating a forum or building on an existing body to enable governments to work together to address global mining and metals issues. If there were agreement to establish such a forum, the discussion would then move on to how it should be structured and organized, as well as to the types of issues that should be addressed.

Without pre-supposing the outcome of such discussions, there are a number of features that would be desirable in any such forum:

- It should be a government forum, with stakeholder participation, since many of the issues affecting minerals and metals require action by governments, or by governments working with other stakeholders.
- It should be based on all three pillars of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social) in order to ensure balanced outcomes.
- It should consider the full life cycle from mining to metals and recycling.

THE WAY FORWARD

The agenda-setting process for the WSSD includes a series of regional meetings in the fall of 2001 aimed at identifying regional priorities. The results of these meetings will then be reviewed during a series of global preparatory meetings, between January and May 2002, that will identify the themes and/or develop the documents to be adopted in Johannesburg.

Several regional meetings identified mining and metals as priority areas for action at the WSSD. Industry will also be seeking to have its Mining, Metals and Sustainable Development (MMSD) report acknowledged at the WSSD. Canada will be working with other interested governments throughout the preparatory process to support having minerals and metals addressed at the WSSD.

At the Earth Summit in 1992, the relationship between sustainable development and minerals and metals was not well understood. At that time, minerals and metals and related compounds were dealt with in the context of chemicals management and hazardous waste. But this treatment did not recognize that the management of inorganic chemicals, such as minerals and metals, should take into account criteria that are different from those applied to organic chemicals. The 10-year review of Agenda 21 in Johannesburg gives governments an opportunity to build on what they have learned in the last decade and to launch a process of dialogue and information sharing that will allow for real progress in the minerals and metals sector.