

Background Information

Sustainable Development and the G-7

Sustainable development is a longstanding and increasingly important issue at the annual Summits of the Group of Seven (G-7) industrialized nations.

At the 1975 Summit in Rambouillet, France, leaders were concerned about energy shortages and focused on conservation as a way to preserve energy resources and save money. In 1980, in Venice, Italy, the G-7 moved on to deal with issues related to protecting the environment, such as population. The next year, in Ottawa, G-7 leaders made their first direct statement about the core principle of sustainable development. The 1981 communiqué affirmed: "In shaping our long-term economic policies, care should be taken to preserve the environment and the resource base of our planet."

The 1985 Summit, which was held in Bonn, Germany, confirmed the G-7's commitment to maintaining both global development and the environment. That Summit declared the G-7's primary responsibility to be "the future of the world economy and the preservation of natural resources." It produced a communiqué with the first-ever, separate section on environmental policies, which covered acid rain, motor vehicle pollution, climate change, the ozone layer, toxic chemicals, freshwater and the seas, among other issues.

At the 1988 Summit in Toronto, G-7 leaders endorsed the report of the World Commission on Environment and Development. This commission, commonly known as the "Brundtland Commission" after its leader, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, made the term "sustainable development" known around the world. Its report, released in 1987, concluded that the environment and economic growth are not only compatible, but interdependent.

Last year in Naples, Italy, the G-7 communiqué confirmed that the environment is a "top priority" for international co-operation, noting especially technological co-operation, energy efficiency and pollution cleanup. The Naples statement also urged multilateral development banks to be more ecologically sensitive, and encouraged more local participation in the programs of these institutions. This concern reflects the social (or "people") dimension of sustainable development, as well as the ecological dimension.

Sustainable development is clearly of critical importance to all G-7 members and of particular interest to Canada, given that our economy depends heavily on our natural resource base. We also have extensive interests in promoting sustainable development in less developed countries.

The Hamilton meeting will address three broad topics which concern all of the Ministers involved:

- Environment-economy integration, what governments can do
 - greening government policy
 - greening government operations

- International institutions for sustainable development
 - international environmental institutions: present and future
 - international financial institutions and the environment

- Taking stock: progress on major issues
 - climate change: beyond Berlin
 - biological diversity: beyond Nassau
 - global management of toxic substances.

The challenge of sustainable development is one of the most difficult the world will face in the next century. Meeting this challenge is essential to our collective survival, and G 7 countries have an important role to play

(Également disponible en français)