

How South Africa became host

At Rio, the South African government was not officially represented; a decade later, post-apartheid South Africa is hosting the 10-year review – a quantum leap in the country's international standing, and an extraordinary privilege few South Africans may yet appreciate. There were many other strong contenders.

Chris van der Merwe relates how it happened.

Clearly, the UN had confidence in South Africa's capabilities, in terms of infrastructure and logistics, to host the WSSD. But there were many contenders at least equally capable in those areas. The decision to award the Summit to South Africa was the result of intensive, protracted and labyrinthine diplomatic effort.

Anyone who understands that would appreciate not only that South Africa is extremely privileged to have been given the Summit, but also that hosting it carries enormous responsibilities.

The Summit ended up with South Africa through a process of elimination. A leading member of the G77 (now numbering over 130 nations), South Africa was in the forefront of Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) negotiations over the Summit right from the start, and was among the countries to come up with guidelines for the process requested by the CSD.

The G77 advocated the idea that the Summit should be in a developing country. The African group at the UN reasoned that, at this stage of the continent's development, it would be to its advantage to have the Summit held in Africa.

Japan had been keen to be the host, and may have generously supported poor countries and NGOs to attend, if it had got the Summit. But when the principle of a developing world host was eventually accepted, Japan withdrew its candidacy. It then turned its attention to having the Summit hosted by a fellow Asian nation.

The regions in contention were Latin America, Africa and Asia. India and China were considered, but declined.

The European Union, which wanted the Summit to go to Africa, made various promises of support. Brazil, the Earth Summit host, was also interested, but many countries felt that it would be unfair if it also got the WSSD. Brazil was persuaded through persistent lobbying to step back in

favour of South Africa.

By the time Brazil made its withdrawal formal, South Africa had formally indicated its interest. South Korea (at that stage for several years no longer a member of the G77), also pressed its candidacy, but its argument that it sympathies still lay with the developing world did not impress sufficiently.

Meanwhile, Indonesia had come to be informally considered (with Japan as a major backer) and in mid-2000 it declared its candidature. By now, South Africa had widespread support both in South America and the Caribbean.

There was a stalemate until the President of the General Assembly personally got involved. Indonesia then agreed to withdraw. If it had not, the matter would have had to go to the vote in the GA – a prospect the G77 countries didn't like.

Indonesia settled for a consolation prize: chairmanship of the CSD Bureau and Prepcop 4, where the final agenda for the World Summit would be negotiated.

A key factor in favour of South Africa's candidacy was the UN's view of South Africa as a country with balanced views on international issues that was typically keen to participate in a constructive manner. It was seen as a bridge-builder.

That is a credential of major importance in the context of a global process aimed at the brokering of a new deal between developed and developing nations. It could be argued that sustainable development is a means of managing conflict, on a national, regional or global scale.

In negotiating an end to apartheid and substituting it with one of the most enlightened constitutions in the world, South Africa acquired an international reputation as something of a miracle worker in conflict management.

A world in one country with both developed and developing world components, widely perceived to be a leading light among African democracies, and a bridge-builder of note, post-apartheid

South Africa has the ear of key national leaders in the developed world and the trust of many countries of the developing world. For several years, it had been championing African Renaissance and a new world order.

Poverty alleviation would be at the heart of the "development" Summit, and the host nation could be expected to take a special and direct interest in helping to shape the agenda.

It could be argued that South Africa is a suitable host for several other reasons. It is able to demonstrate significant progress in implementing *Agenda 21* thinking.

It has a fairly well-established NGO sector – which made an impressive contribution to national documentation in support of South Africa's candidacy.

Finally, hosting an event of this magnitude requires not only competence and international standing: it requires motivation.

The South African Government has several reasons for its enthusiasm to host the Summit. It is keen to seize the opportunity to showcase the nation's ability to successfully host an event of scale (at the same time confounding the Afro-pessimists and promoting South Africa as an investment prospect of choice).

The global event also presents an unprecedented opportunity to put environment and development higher on the domestic agenda, while effecting a similar benefit for its region and for Africa as a whole. That holds the added benefit of reaffirming a role of leadership for South Africa within its region and continent.

As a member of the African group in the G77, South Africa has not been shy to champion regional progress (as it's now doing with the New Partnership for Africa's Development – Nepad).

Yet it has had to do so with sensitivity, as it's also a member of the larger developing world bloc, all of which would like to see concrete developmental benefits coming from the WSSD.

