

Rio +20 Conference Summary

What is Rio +20?

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), also known as the Rio+20 Conference, was held from June 20-22, 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. It marked the 20th anniversary of the original 1992 Rio Earth Summit that framed the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) through the Agenda 21 outcome document.

Goals:

The conference was set to allow the international community to assess progress, identify gaps, and recommit to implementing sustainable development strategies at the international, regional, national and subnational levels. The conference was especially timely as multiple interlinked global challenges began to emerge. These broad-spanning problems include climate change, biodiversity loss, resource pressures, endemic poverty, and income inequality. The goal was to identify methods for addressing these particular issues while ensuring that thematic areas (food, water, energy, oceans, agriculture, and natural disasters) were dealt with as well.

Two major topic areas were identified for Rio +20: the green economy and the institutional framework for sustainable development. In the pre-conference negotiation sessions, many discrepancies emerged. These differences included the extent of reforms for environmental and sustainable development governance, the definition of the “green economy”, the idea of planetary boundaries and finite limits, the provision of financial resources and technology transfer, sustainable consumption and production, mainstreaming of Rio Principle 10 (public participation) and the endemic developing/developed country divide. It became evident that there was a need to establish some sort of common framework and understanding of the issues at hand, before moving forward to address the problems themselves.

Outcomes:

The final outcome document “The Future We Want” can be found online at:

<http://www.uncsd2012.org/thefuturewewant.html>

After months of preparatory meetings, the conference ended on an anti-climatic note. Although many of the outcomes of this event are quite discouraging, there were achievements:

1. The concept of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): originally proposed by Colombia, with the intent of integrating at the highest political level, the social, environmental and economic dimensions of development into a set of universal goals. The outcome that emerged called for the establishment of a multi-stakeholder process to develop these goals for the United Nations General Assembly’s consideration next year. (*The Future We Want*, pg. 46-48)
2. The United Nations Environment Programme is now slated to have universal membership, greater funding and the enhanced ability in Nairobi to coordinate the work of various

international environmental initiatives including the multitude of multilateral environmental agreements. (*The Future We Want*, pg. 18)

3. \$500 billion in voluntary commitments by a variety of stakeholders were submitted to the conference secretariat in an effort to show that different communities all over the world are engaged and desire to implement sustainable development plans. These will all be compiled in an Internet-based registry (*The Future We Want*, pg. 53)

The final document has been criticized for missing many critical pieces:

1. An international corporate accountability mechanism; this is seen to be necessary by many, as the private sector responsible for much of ecological damage we see today.
2. The acceptance for Rio Principle 10 on public participation to be mainstreamed by all countries.
3. Commitment to a timetable for eliminating fossil fuel subsidies

The weak outcome can be attributed to a variety of causes:

1. The text itself is filled with countless phrases that begin with either “encourage,” “reaffirm” and “recognize.” Rarely are the words “we will” or “mandate” found in the text. This lack of urgency and clear timetables for action, as well as emphasis on voluntary national level efforts, severely hinder the global cooperation necessary to address the severity of problems today.
2. Due to the current global economic crisis, no new financial commitments to fund project implementation have been pledged.
3. The link of the sustainability crisis being a product of volatile financial and economic systems has not been recognized.
4. Technology transfer remains a highly contentious and unresolved issue, with developed countries strongly in favor of intellectual property rights to stimulate innovation while developing countries see such unconditional transfer as necessary if they are to effectively contribute to the global effort to transition towards a green economy.
5. Civil society highlighted that there is no mention of planetary boundaries, tipping points and a planetary carrying capacity, crucial concepts that define the ecological pressures we are placing on our planet at the moment.

Additional Commentary:

An in-depth analysis of the outcome document, completed by the International Institute for Sustainable Development: <http://www.iisd.ca/vol27/enb2751e.html>

A critical take on Rio+20: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/georgemonbiot/2012/jun/22/rio-20-earth-summit-brazil?fb=ative&CMP=FBCNETTXT9038>

Bill McKibben, Schumann Distinguished Scholar at Middlebury College & Founder of 350.ORG, speaks on the results of Rio+20: <http://secondnaturebos.wordpress.com/2012/07/11/thoughts-on-rio20-students-and-leadership-by-college-universities/>

