

SUMMARY

Understanding the Rio+20 Conference

Building a fair green economy
and democratic governance of
the planet in a framework of
sustainable development



RIO+20

United Nations Conference
on Sustainable Development

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The Rio+20 Earth Summit, United Nations Conference on sustainable development will be held in June 2012. Its main themes will be the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and the institutional framework of sustainable development. The conference comes at a time when humankind must address issues of considerable significance and resolve the shortcomings of meetings that had preceded it.

1. BACKGROUND OF THE ORGANISATION OF THE RIO+20 CONFERENCE

This conference will be held amidst a number of paradoxes:

- Issues relating to the environmental management of the planet, such as climate change and the degradation of biodiversity, are becoming increasingly serious;
- Differences in development between the richest countries and the poorest countries, as well as within States, continue to widen, whilst emerging countries experience economic take-off;
- Developed countries are experiencing one of the most serious economic and financial crises in their history;
- Multilateralism is in crisis, while over the last decade the ability to reach collective decisions on an international level has clearly deteriorated.

In order to overcome these difficulties, the implementation of a new process is required. Hence the decision to adopt the “Rio+20” formula, which not only seeks to assess the results of previous years, but also to drive analysis and action in the field that we must undertake in order to have “the future we want”.

To understand the issues addressed at Rio+20, one must consider the Conference in the context of the results of earlier efforts and as part of an approach to sustainable development future conceived for humankind.

2. THE DIFFICULT PATH TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

• *The slow construction of a compromise between economic and social imperatives*

The Industrial Revolution resulted in a considerably rapid increase in the creation of wealth, with economic growth in the countries that experienced the revolution growing by a factor of 5 to 10, a change unprecedented in history. It was at this point that the burning issue of the distribution of this wealth arose. For more than a century, economic leaders and social actors were engaged in a head-on confrontation on the distribution of the fruits of growth in industrialised countries. Over time the two sides reached a compromise, with access to better living conditions, the right to strike, the introduction of social protection systems and pension systems for more people. A new vision of development thus emerged, which was symbolised by mass consumption and brought together the economic and the social in an ongoing compromise. Thus was created the first integration leading to sustainable development. However, globalisation of the economy is now jeopardising these hard-won social gains. The increasingly frequent competition induced between European workers and workers in developing and emerging countries is resulting in a steady erosion of social protection systems that will be hard to reverse.

• *The emergence of environmental issues*

A new order has emerged since the 1970s, with an acknowledgement of the degradation of the environment and the finite nature of resources, starting with oil. We have also had to develop an awareness of the limits of the planet’s resources and the pressure of human activity on the environment.

Initially, these environmental concerns clashed with the needs of sectors of the economy characterised by fierce competition. Concern for the environment was associated with a threat to jobs: some economic and social actors feared that incorporating environmental issues would reduce economic growth and call the hard-won compromise between economic and social imperatives into question. And yet, the most vulnerable groups in the population are also those who suffer most from environmental and health impacts.

Two responses emerged from this particularly sensitive heated antagonism of the 1970s and 1980s. First, the industrial countries that paid most attention to environmental issues and energy efficiency - Germany, Japan and Scandinavian countries, in particular – began to sell more reliable and cleaner equipment, increasing their respective market shares, hence their industrial success. This was followed in 1987 by the United Nations’ Brundtland Report, which demonstrated that the degradation of the environment and the dilapidation of resources would hinder economic and social development, in particular in the most vulnerable countries.

This was followed by the emergence of the concept of sustainable development, which gives concrete expression to the desire for a three-way integration of economic development, better social conditions for all peoples and the permanence of living conditions on Earth, through the preservation of our environment. This is the definition of sustainable development contained in the Brundtland Report. It has now become essential that we reconsider its evolution in light of the events of the last 20 years.

3. 1992-2012: THE WORLD HAS CHANGED SO MUCH

- *Progress made by the Rio Conference of 1992*

There can be no doubt that the Rio Summit of 1992, which embodied hope for a revival, produced considerable advances, in particular by providing a structure for international law for the protection of the environment, establishing strong principles, and facilitating a veritable growth in awareness of the importance of environmental issues and the link between development and the environment at international and subsequently local levels. For the first time, the long-standing antagonism between development and the environment was overcome, and the protection of the planet and the fight against the anthropic effects on ecosystems were considered prerequisites to development that is now considered lasting and “sustainable”.

The Rio Conference of 1992 was followed not only by the adoption of three Framework Conventions (climate change, biodiversity, and desertification), but also by a series of international thematic conferences on rights, women, cities, health, social cohesion, etc. And yet, at the end of the 1990s there was a significant reduction in the commitment and involvement of the international community in development issues. It was an awareness of this fact that provided the impetus for the Millennium Development Goals, and made them a flagship item on the United Nations agenda. This enabled funds to be raised from most donor countries to support these priority actions for some time. Observations have been made and issues raised, but implementation has floundered and delays are getting longer.

- *Globalisation*

Nowadays, we are facing great upheaval. The globalisation of the economy is encompassing growing numbers of populations in industrial society, and destabilising social protection systems. To this can be added the globalisation of communications, which has resulted in an increase in information flows and exchanges. Quasi-instantaneous financial transactions that ignore all exchange rates or tax frontiers continue to exacerbate the crisis. Finally, there is the third form of globalisation, that of the imperative need for a joint management of the resources of the planet and the environment.

- *The environmental constraints of a finite world*

Thus, at a time when the economy of the planet is coming together in a globalised system of exchange, humankind is obliged to face the limits of that planet, limits to certain mineral and energy resources and limits on the capacity of the environment to support the activities of a population that will be 10 times larger in 2050 than it was in 1800. The verdict is straightforward: a planet with inevitably finite physical resources cannot support an exponential growth in demands on the environment *and* allow equitable access to these resources for all, in a long-term sustainable manner. There is only a partial awareness of this as yet: reserves of various raw materials are still unknown, and predictions as to the time when such resources will become scarce once more vary, as do predictions of increases in the cost of accessing these resources and forecasts of future human requirements. However, it is evident that for a number of resources, starting with oil, the middle of this century will be critical.

Humankind can no longer consider its impact on the planet a secondary concern. The changes it has wrought on its environment – be it the most visible forms of pollution with direct effects on health or those forms of pollution that, while less visible, are detrimental to the global environment – are now having serious effects on populations. The most serious manifestations of these effects are climate change and the erosion of biodiversity. These two phenomena demarcate a boundary that humankind shall now have to strictly observe.

Indeed, given that the Earth's climate is a single, indivisible unit that pays no heed to borders, it is the first global issue on which global solidarity is an absolute must. Moreover, on average half of a country's greenhouse gas emissions are generated by the day-to-day activities of its inhabitants: domestic heating, transport (in particular by car), food practices and consumption habits. Therefore, the issue of climate change cannot be resolved without

All people becoming involved. Thus, this issue is the first "overall" political issue in human history, in that it requires the involvement of actors in all levels, from the individual to global governance. Less visible,

the accelerated erosion of biodiversity is a process just as serious as climate change, as global in scope and probably even more irreversible.

4. FUNCTIONING EFFECTIVELY IN A SUSTAINABLE WORLD?

The economic and financial crises experienced by developed countries since 2008 has influenced the agenda of the Rio Conference of 2012. While it is part of an international framework on sustainable development, the theme highlighted is that of the green economy. The choice of term here is not insignificant and has been the object of debate since the beginning, as it can have opposing connotations. The economy should be a means, not an end in itself, and for many the meaning attached to this term “green economy” will depend on the vision it will portray of our societies.

• *Conditions for progress towards a green economy*

The concept of the green economy was first referred to during the formulation of economic recovery plans after the crisis of 2008. Two schools of economic thought have taken hold of this concept.

- The green economy (promoted in particular by the OECD and the UNEP), in which the environment is a factor of production that can promote green sectors such as renewable energies, high environmental quality buildings and the appropriation of more land, forests, species, genes, etc. as part of an expansion of the market economy to living systems. It is hoped that the effect of this approach will be to make the green economy a new engine for growth.
- The ecological economics, which is put forward as an alternative to the current economic model. Based on the existence of limits to the planet’s resources and excessive pressure on the environment, this approach is reaffirmed as being at the service of a society that is sustainable on all levels: environmental, social, financial and economic, but also in democratic terms. This requires a departure from the current liberal economic model to reinforce modes of regulation.

Other questions arise: is this green economy accessible to developing countries? Will these countries receive support from developed countries in terms of technology and official development assistance? Or could this economy be used to justify protectionism through exclusive standards? Therefore, the content of this concept must be explained. The green economy should enable countries to:

- Review modes of production and consumption, and lead to a move away from fossil fuels (coal, oil, and gas) in the decades to come;
- Develop renewable energies produced directly or indirectly from solar radiation, and which by their nature are inexhaustible;
- Recycle mineral raw materials and materials;
- Search for high-quality buildings adapted to the climate;
- Promote agroforestry and sustainable agriculture;
- Promote simple ways of life;
- Adopt a balanced diet, with a reduction in meat consumption in the most developed countries;
- Return organic material to the soil for agricultural land;
- Protect biodiversity and natural ecosystems;
- Disseminate the eco-design of products and services;
- Encourage short distribution circuits;
- Support a circular economy and mix urban functions to reduce the need for transportation;
- Promote long-stay tourism, in order to reduce travel;
- Establish modes of production as part of a social and solidarity-based economy that encourages the integration of workers and respect for social norms and equity in the distribution of wealth;
- Promote users’ rights in property law within the framework of an economy of functionality;
- Put planning tools in place to take collective objectives into account (including the reduction of greenhouse gas emissions);
- Set prices for rare and polluting resources;
- Introduce new indicators that reflect the creation of wealth, quality of life and the optimisation of the use of resources;
- Institute means of economic regulation at all levels to ensure that principles of general interest prevail over individual interests and the rules of competition.

Despite varying conceptions of the green economy, one point is clear: international relations are increasingly shaped by the geopolitics of raw materials, with rising prices and strong growth in demand. Over time, this situation will only become more acute. Therefore, it is important to embark on an approach that respects the principles of equity and plurality in modes of development. This should be the ultimate aim of the Rio Conference.

• *The international governance of sustainable development*

The international institutional architecture is obsolete in the face of current issues. There is consensus on the need to reform the current institutional framework for sustainable development.

Many States have observed that the dialogue between the three components of sustainable development is almost non-existent, often to the detriment of the environment, and that the Commission for Sustainable Development has not succeeded in gaining involvement at the highest political level. This issue needs to be addressed not only at an international level, but also in its national and territorial implications. Sustainable development should be governed on three levels: political, regulatory and operational. The main options under discussion before the conference are:

- The creation of a Council for Sustainable Development;
- The strengthening of the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC);
- The creation of a new World Environment Organisation (or United Nations Organisation for the Environment);
- Greater representation of civil society and local authorities within United Nations institutions;
- The definition of the mandate of a Global Ministerial Environment Forum with a view to a more global perspective of sustainable development; and
- The creation of a High Commission for Future Generations

Needless to say, the field is vast and reaching agreements is a difficult process; it is a question of alternatives that each contain several possible legal solutions. However, we must ensure that reform, irrespective of the option chosen, allows for greater coherence and transparency and results in a political commitment at the highest level, real involvement of civil society and a greater presence on the ground. Institutional change alone will not guarantee the effectiveness of action: it will be essential to ensure there are a strengthening of capacities, sources of innovative funding that are channelled away from sectors of the economy that are harmful to the environment, and the implementation of administrative provisions for the effective and rapid operational implementation of programmes and actions.

The outcomes of negotiations also reflect the low level of trust between countries and the total absence of a shared vision of the future to be built. The food, energy and health needs of all populations can be met in an equitable and sustainable manner while at the same time preserving the environment, provided that there is a profound change. The 21st century must herald a change in civilisation, with this new civilisation to be based on solid principles: solidarity, fairness and sustainability – principles that in themselves are the product of the need for responsibility. Resolving these global issues requires the prior and unanimous recognition of the “universal responsibility” of all. This universal responsibility should be part of a charter extending the fundamental texts of the United Nations, such as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

5. OBLIGATIONS AND DEMOCRATIC OPPORTUNITY

Traditionally, sustainable development is based on three components: the economy, the environment, and society. And yet, this description is insufficient once individuals are called upon to change their own behaviours. Indeed, since the Rio Conference of 1992 there has been a recognition of a fourth fundamental component of sustainable development: democracy. The emphasis on this aspect is the result of three findings.

First of all, there can be no international agreement on the management of the environment without the promise of access to development for the poorest countries. This relates to the central issue of equity. Secondly, the reduction in the extraction of resources and pressure on the environment requires improvements in the behaviour of individuals (in particular in rich countries). And yet, such improvements cannot be secured over the long-term without a great effort to educate the population or a deep commitment from individuals; in other words, without direct involvement from populations in making decisions that determine how they live. In this regard, the Curitiba Charter of 1992 set in train the realisation of Agenda 21, which consisted of programmes for action in favour of sustainable development on all territorial levels, in particular on a local level.

Finally, efforts to resolve environmental challenges cannot succeed without the creation of international decision-making bodies, which would see commitments made by countries in fact fulfilled. Without this, the doubt that exists as to the real nature of actions taken by other countries will overshadow the motivations of the majority. This key issue of the fulfilment of obligations made, and therefore of the possibility of proportional sanctions on an international level, must be on the agenda.

6. THE URGENCY OF A NEW MODE OF DEVELOPMENT

The issues demand that both the international community and territories assume responsibility. The latter will have a crucial role to play in terms of education, ongoing training, the strengthening of capacities and, in particular, democratic functioning.

Thus, humankind will see arrive at three major milestones in around 2050: the end of population growth, the need to halve global greenhouse gas emissions, and a decline in certain resources.

A new vision of the world is emerging, one of humankind that, for centuries and perhaps even millennia, will have to ensure its development by finding a balance with its planet, protecting it, overcoming dramatic differences in development inherited from the 20th century. Their destinies are inextricably linked. Humankind will have to live on finite resources, economise, and recycle.

Moreover, the financial and economic crisis has indicated the need for global regulation that oversees the economy, reinforces social rights and organises the collective management of the planet, which the market economy is unable to do directly.

The task ahead of us is immense. It involves making the most of our resources and giving preference to renewables, both in terms of natural resources and renewable energy, thus opening up the path to sustainable development for all, an obvious condition for social cohesion and peace in the world.

• *Sustainable Development Goals*

To produce a commitment to these objectives, a debate emerged within negotiations in the autumn of 2011: that on setting Sustainable Development goals (SDGs). These objectives were part of the same approach to tangible commitments and the monitoring of progress made in the move to action as Millennium Development Goals (MDG). In early 2012, there was a growing consensus on SDGs, which later became more controversial as they were raised at the same time as deadline for the MDGs in 2015, with an awareness that MDGs only apply to developing countries and that SDGs tend to extend this approach to sustainable development to all countries, including developed countries.

They target several quantified priority themes that are voluntary and universal and have a deadline, based on indicators that will be adopted nationally.

While the principle is a rallying point for a number of countries, the exact contents of these themes and their conditions of implementation have not yet been specified. Access to renewable energy for all is a theme on which great emphasis has been placed as a possible SDG. Rio can launch the drafting process for these themes and define the appropriate mandate.

• *Transversality, the strengthening of capacities and measures of progress other than GDP*

The transversal nature of sustainable development is also reflected in the text currently being prepared which addresses 21 themes and areas, ranging from health to oceans, reaffirming education as the priority issue at the heart of international cooperation or, on the other hand, relaunching the debate on funding for climate challenges.

Emphasis is still on development assistance, unless developed countries contribute 0.7% of their GDP to this item of expenditure as they promised in 2000. This demand is counterbalanced by an explanation of the background characterised by crisis. Very poor references are made to the need for innovative funding. The controversial role of the private sector is raised. The other major theme of this section is that of the development and transfer of technologies, which has been the object of extensive debate and refers to issues of intellectual property rights.

The consensus text recognises the limitations of GDP as an indicator of well-being and sustainable development. States have decided to go further in the development of methods to measure social well-being and health and the identification of indicators to measure progress. Rio can launch a framework on a United Nations level.

7. TOWARDS A RELATIONAL SOCIETY

The four components of sustainable development described above are not enough.

The view of sustainable development disseminated to date sees new obligations borne by public authorities, business and citizens to ensure a balance with the environment and the conditions for development of future generations. This essential expectation does not yet include a promise to individuals, a vision of what a successful life for everyone in this new context could be like. Thus, the concept of sustainable development can be seen as intellectual and cold, even if the political discourse is omnipresent.

To overcome this weakness, a 5th component needs to be added. While resources are becoming increasingly scarce, there are no limits to human relations: “Thus, there is one infinite element in a finite world”: the relationships between people.

Over the course of his or her life this century, a child, with mobile phones and the internet, will have access to more people, more knowledge and more cultural expressions than any previous generation. A new horizon is opening up. Communication, culture and access to others are the new pathway to development, the new area for discovery in human endeavour. It is a transformation that will completely revolutionise humankind.

Thus, the sustainable development of the 21st century consists of moving away from a particularly predatory consumer society to the planet to a society of human relationships, a society that is lighter but which opens up new possibilities for personal enrichment through human relationships, knowledge and personal expression.

8. THE RIO+20 CONFERENCE: OUTCOMES

The most recent talks, which were held in early June, were marked by profound disagreements between countries. In the draft declaration, there was agreement on 75 paragraphs where agreement was achieved, and disagreements that could not be resolved on 249 paragraphs, despite months of negotiations.

• *The Rio Declaration 2012*

Since November, negotiations have been in progress on a Rio Declaration between countries within the framework of the United Nations. First and foremost, it reaffirms the principles of previous summits.

Nevertheless this conference will not result in new, legally binding international agreements.

This declaration will put forward guidelines that it will then be necessary to achieve in concrete terms:

- The inclusion of the eradication of poverty within a framework for sustainable development with a view to an equitable green economy;
- The strengthening of the framework for governance of sustainable development within the United Nations;
- The strengthening of the implementation of the Millennium Development Goals and the preparation of new objectives for after 2015;
- The formulation of Sustainable Development Goals that should involve all countries as part of a process to be agreed upon. These will be guidelines whose implementation will form part of a framework for voluntary commitments undertaken by countries. They may be recorded in a register.

• *Defining a roadmap*

This declaration will have to be reinforced by a Rio+20 road map that sets out processes and stages.

9. THE DUAL GOVERNANCE OF THE WORLD

The Rio Conference will be assessed on two levels:

• *Pyramid structure governance*

The structure of international relations is based on the possibility of agreements being reached between States within the framework of various political, economic and sectoral institutions.

The United Nations system, the G8 and the G20 are at the top of the pyramid.

This structure, which includes all countries, becomes paralysed from the moment there is not unanimous decision. Indeed, the current rules of international law are based on the principle that all countries may, at any time, withdraw from a treaty or international agreement in the event of a disagreement deemed unacceptable.

This is one dilemma that the Rio Conference cannot solve. It is torn between the absolute need to include all countries in the process and the need to achieve ambitious decisions that are commensurate with the issues, and a roadmap that will allow all parties to agree to move forward in terms of method and timing.

The success of this process is severely handicapped by past failures and the current paralysis of developed countries, which are facing one of the most serious economic crises in their history.

• *Horizontal structure*

However, alongside this traditional structure of power another structure is also emerging, based on direct relationships between businesses, local structures, professional, social and cultural organisations, NGOs and individuals. New communication technologies are increasing and enriching the ability to build direct relationships and give this dynamic a character that is unprecedented in history.

A dense web is being spun around the planet, sustained by contributions from a multitude of actors, covering all subjects and enabling everyone to participate and access ever-increasing content.

This horizontal structure accessible via mobile phone, social networks and the internet not only enables discussion: it also provides access to information, is a vehicle for training and, increasingly, fuels action and gives rise to initiatives.

- ***The role of local and regional authorities in progress towards this new development model***

For cities, the challenges above require a capacity to invent a new form of governance

that can address these challenges. The world is changing; cities must change as well. And local authorities will play a central role in the construction of a new mode of development:

- They are the decision-makers on investments that have the longest lifespan: buildings, transport infrastructure, major networks;
- They distribute activities across the territory, and therefore have the key to reduce constraints on transport and organise spatial planning;
- They are in touch with the social needs and the organisation of solidarity;
- Finally, and above all, they are in direct contact with citizens.

The involvement of autonomous regions is essential in order to clear the path with economic actors and citizens towards sustainable development and fight climate change.

Thus, a multiform event such as the Rio+20 Conference is not only a meeting of negotiators from countries aimed at making political decisions. Above all, it is a forum for the exchange of ideas, practices and innovations that will often lead to long-term partnerships within and between civil society, trade unions, businesses, communities and citizen's mobilisations.

10. KEY DATES

- The last "Prepcom 3" preparatory meeting (13th –15th June 2012)
- "Sandwich days", civil society days organised by Brazil to prepare for the official conference (16th –19th June 2012)
- The official conference (20th – 22nd June 2012), which will adopt the Rio Declaration and a road map
- The People's Summit (15th –23rd June 2012) for social and environmental justice.