

Rio In Retrospect

This paper has a short and single purpose, to give a snapshot of some of the principal achievements of the Rio Conference and text. It is not an analytical piece to assess the Rio Outcome Document, review what might have been included but was not, to respond to critics who have labelled the text “weak and unambitious,” or to compare it with the outcome of the original Earth Summit of 1992. The information presented is largely devoid of editorial comment and is intended to give an alternative look at the Rio text to the people who have never and may never read the document itself but who have heard only the media feeding frenzy of, “failure, non-event, disappointing.” My own research has disclosed that while now treated with reverence and nostalgia, the outcome document of the original Earth Summit, was not received with media acclaim in 1992. Similarly, in time, Rio+20 will also be respected and regarded as having broken new ground and created, what Hilary Clinton has described as “a real advance for sustainable development.”

The Earth Summit of 1992 established **sustainable** development in the global development agenda, popularised its now universal definition, identified people and future generations as being central to development planning and created a three pillared bridge across society, economy and environment. The Summit birthed three new conventions – The UN Convention to Combat Desertification and Drought, The UN Framework Convention on Climate change and the Convention on Biological Diversity.

The outcome document spans 45 pages and covers 283 paragraphs. This snapshot of some of the principal contents and achievements of the Rio+20 text and how it broke new ground and advanced the international development platform will be presented from two perspectives – the conference itself and the consensus text it produced. For easy digestion, the information will be presented in bullet point format.

The Conference

- ✚ Rio+20 was the first UN conference to introduce social media into multilateralism. In the weeks leading up to the conference the government of Brazil initiated a global online dialogue on issues relating to sustainable development which was

led by universities from all over the world; anyone with online access could participate. At the end of weeks of dialogue, the public voted online for the best ideas and recommendations generated.

- ✚ A “People’s Summit” which allowed for open discussion also took place and attracted tens of thousands of people.
- ✚ The “Dialogue Days” were four days of discussion hosted by Brazil for civil society on urgent development issues such as decent work and sustainable economies was another new feature.
- ✚ The promotion of green accounting pilot projects by the World Bank in 50 countries and the Bank’s leading a joint meeting for ministers of finance and economic affairs with other multilateral banks and the UN on sustainable development issues
- ✚ The launch of the Secretary General’s Zero Hunger Challenge which will bring together governments, civil society, business and development partners with the aim of ensuring better access to nutritious food for all, ending childhood malnutrition, promoting sustainable food systems, increasing smallholder productivity and stopping the loss and waste of food.
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- ✚ The attendance at various Rio business fora of some 4000 business people discussing sustainability in the context of society, environment, the economy and profitability was unprecedented.
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- ✚ With estimates of some 60,000 participants from all sectors this was the largest conference the world has seen.
- ✚ At a time of global financial crisis countries and companies committed to inject capital investment and grants of about \$700 billion into sustainable development programmes ranging from energy and transport to climate change.

The Rio+20 Outcome Document

The text contains, promoted or agreed to:

- ✚ The development of a list of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a process for the full elaboration of the list.
- ✚ Support for the green economy as a possible tool for sustainable development, economic growth, poverty eradication, natural resource protection and enhancing business opportunities. (This is the first multilateral agreement on the green economy).
- ✚ Support for a mechanism within the UN system to follow up and implement the Rio outcome
- ✚ New forum and structures within the UN system to address sustainable development issues in a more meaningful way
- ✚ The strengthening and universal membership of UNEP
- ✚ Enhanced engagement with the private sector on issues of sustainability
- ✚ GDP+ as a measurement which includes social and natural capital, or what some people call a social development index (SDI) and natural capital accounting
- ✚ Some kind of mechanism for finance and technology needed by developing countries to transition to the green economy
- ✚ The adoption of a 10 year framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production (SCP)
- ✚ Cross sectoral approaches to oceans, water, energy, and food security, none of which was tackled in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
- ✚ Strengthening of governance through increased involvement of NGO and civil society stakeholders
- ✚ Support for the equality, empowerment, social and economic enfranchisement of women and the production of gender sensitive data as the basis for understanding women's status as well as policy formulation to advance their cause and concerns.
- ✚ Formal recognition of the role of science to underpin policy making at the national and international level

- ✚ Protection for small island developing states (SIDS), least developed countries (LDCs) and land locked least developed countries (LLDCs) and Africa.
- ✚ Sharing of best practices by corporations which relates to both CSR and corporate reporting.
- ✚ Support for sustainable agriculture
- ✚ Achieving a “land degradation neutral world” (this was the first UN document to contain this language and commitment).
- ✚ Recognition of the right to food and a commitment to food and nutrition security for all
- ✚ Further thematic areas were addressed – specifically, “poverty eradication, water and sanitation, energy, sustainable transport, sustainable tourism, sustainable cities and human settlements, health and population, promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all and social protection, oceans and seas, disaster risk reduction, climate change, biodiversity, forests, desertification, land degradation and drought, mountains, chemicals and waste, mining, education, finance, technology, capacity building and trade.”
- ✚ A new feature of the conference text was a Compendium of Commitments as an addendum to the text, which also includes a mechanism for accountability in relation to performance and implementation. These were voluntary commitments by NGOs, IGOs, CBOs, civil society, citizens, communities, companies and countries. In addition to the accountability mechanism, two further features are of note. The final list of commitments numbered just under 700 with nearly a full half of them dedicated to the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative. The area of sustainable energy attracted the largest commitment of financial resources and the second largest number of commitments overall.

No consensus text could have satisfied every interest group or government. What the text does is reinforce the notion of shared responsibility and lays the foundation for new and increased levels of engagement amongst all stakeholders. All international agreements are words on a page. It is the stakeholders who are affected by the very existence of the agreement and the quality of its implementation, who must ensure that the agreement is given a meaningful life which allows them to derive from it, the benefits intended at the time of its conception. How Rio is viewed in retrospect is therefore not just up to governments but up to us all.

H. Elizabeth Thompson

UN Assistant Secretary General

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Executive Coordinator Rio+20