

# Whose Earth? Rio +20

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## Introduction

Twenty years ago the world's biggest ever political meeting energised the world to take action to protect the environment. The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 was one of the first times that world leaders met to discuss the environment. Attendance was unprecedented, with 108 national leaders making the trip to the Brazilian city. Important steps were taken committing action to protect the environment for present and future generations.

Twenty years later, with another summit – The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) or Rio+20 – on the horizon, the challenges are still pressing. The need for leaders to keep their commitments is vital, especially as action to protect the environment is often put on the back burner. It's hoped these talks, taking place from 20 to 22 June in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, will invigorate a new generation to act on sustainable development and its three 'pillars' of environmental, social and economic concerns, and also put meat on the bones of agreements made in 1992.

This paper provides an introduction to the Rio sustainable development talks including what happened 20 years ago, progress to date and what we could expect this coming June.

## What was agreed in 1992?

The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 had three themes: biodiversity, climate change, and sustainable development. Leaders seemed willing and able to make far-reaching commitments during the talks. In contrast to the wrangling and lack of decision making we often see now, they agreed some ambitious and legally binding commitments, including:

- The United Nations Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC). The work by this body led to the Kyoto Protocol, the commitment by most of the world's richest nations to decrease their greenhouse gas emissions and also the annual climate talks (known as COP, or Conference of Parties) that, for the past few years, have been seeking to agree a new legally binding treaty to tackle climate change.

UN definition of sustainable development: meeting the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

- The Convention on Biological Diversity. The main objective of the Convention is to conserve biological diversity and ensure the sustainable, fair and equitable use of the earth's resources for present and future generations.

In addition an 'action plan' (Agenda 21) was agreed for sustainable development. Agenda 21 is a comprehensive blueprint of action to be taken globally, nationally, and locally by organisations of the UN, governments, and major groups in every area in which humans directly affect the environment, for example deforestation and pollution. A high level UN commission on sustainable development was also formed, which has acted as a preparatory committee for summits and sessions on the implementation of Agenda 21.

## Progress since 1992

Despite the ambitious commitments made at the Earth Summit in 1992 and annual meetings to review action, steps forward have been lacking, with a few exceptions.

### Progress on legally binding commitments

- *UNFCCC*: The Kyoto Protocol is the only legally binding emissions target successfully agreed by leaders, and in that sense has proved successful. However, not all industrialised countries have signed up to targets and no successor has been agreed to continue once the Protocol ends this year. Currently, there's an agreement to decide on a deal by 2020. This is generally regarded as being too little, too late, given the continued rise in global emissions and the slow progress in helping communities to adapt to the changes they're already seeing, particularly the poorest and most vulnerable.

- *The Convention on Biological Diversity* made some progress in opening up political space to discuss the issues, with some steps taken to address biodiversity loss. However biodiversity

targets set for 2010 were missed, and the rate of loss is still considered to exceed 'safe' levels.

Progress has been mixed across the three pillars. There has been economic growth, but it has not been evenly distributed, resulting in mixed social progress, with many of the Millennium Development Goals unlikely to be met in many places. The poorest performing pillar is environmental protection: despite some notable successes, the pressure on ecosystems and the loss of forests and biodiversity has continued, albeit at a decelerating rate.

Perhaps the most important outcome of Rio – understanding that economic, environmental and social concerns are all interlinked – has shown the least progress. The convergence between economic and social issues is now better appreciated and, to some extent, acted upon. However the convergence of these two pillars and the third, environmental protection, remains poorly outlined and acted upon.

### Rio+20 – what's it all about?

Recognising global lack of progress, particularly on linking the sustainable development pillars and the current fuel, food and climate crises, a high profile meeting is planned to look again at the issues and create a plan for the coming years.

The politics of who will go is already hitting the headlines. It was hoped that the Rio+20 meeting would replicate the success of the original Earth Summit, with Heads of State and government attending. Over thirty Heads of State have confirmed their attendance, including China, India, Germany and Denmark. Nick Clegg (Deputy Prime Minister) and Caroline Spelman (Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs) are the current UK leads. It appears unlikely that President Obama will attend. Time will tell whether involvement of Heads of State will help or hinder these talks.

The official purpose of Rio+20 is: 'To secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assessing the progress to date and remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and addressing new and emerging challenges'. [www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/](http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/)

The two themes of the Summit are:

1. A green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

2. The institutional framework for sustainable development.

The agenda is broad, with much debate amongst delegates to get 'their issues' included.

### The likely agenda

A 'zero draft' outcome document was circulated in January 2012.<sup>1</sup> This will form the main negotiating text for the summit. The issues that are up for discussion are very broad. Many are concerned that with such wide themes the important issues, needing urgent action, will get lost, especially as leaders will no doubt want to spend time during the summit declaring what they've done around sustainable development.

### Potential discussion topics<sup>2</sup>

- Job creation and poverty alleviation: Recognising that transition to a green and fair economy represents the only long-term sustainable solution to the current economic crisis.
- Sustainable living. Specifically looking at how countries and cities can develop greener infrastructures for transport, water and sanitation, energy supply and use, and food production and consumption
- Sustainable business. To consider how an engaged private sector could play a leading role in promoting and enabling sustainable development at all levels. Within this there are a number of toolkits under discussion, including:
  - + A Global Convention on Corporate Social Responsibility and Accountability
  - + The development of a more holistic measure of development and well-being with more comprehensive indicators for social, economical and environmental welfare. (Beyond GDP)
  - + Environmental taxes and regulation.
  - + Removal of environmentally harmful subsidies, such as those for fossil fuels and agriculture. This could open up opportunities to generate resources for responding to the issues, such as helping to plug the gap between promised and actual climate finance.
- Food. Covering security of food supply and sustainable agriculture.

<sup>1</sup> [www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/370The%20Future%20We%20Want%2010Jan%20clean.pdf](http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/370The%20Future%20We%20Want%2010Jan%20clean.pdf)

<sup>2</sup> For more information on these topics, please visit the Rio website – [www.uncsd2012.org/rio20](http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20)

Other topics that will be considered include: cities, water, energy, ocean resources, global sustainable consumption and production (SCP) frameworks and reducing disaster risk and building resilience. Others wish to see population size addressed, and action taken to reduce environmental degradation, loss of biodiversity and deforestation.

### The 'three pillars' going forward

There has been a growing call for Rio to provide a forum where the links between the sustainable development pillars are established, understood, and acted upon. One avenue for taking this forward is the concept of Planetary Boundaries - nine boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre in 2009 that define a safe operating space for humanity, beyond which planetary and human survival are seriously threatened.<sup>3</sup> Additional issues rising up the agenda and related to the pillars include:

- Creation of holistic Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) - which apply universally to both developed and developing countries - as a central component of the post-2015 framework.
- Creation of a UN High Commissioner for Future Generations to champion intergenerational equity.
- Establishment of a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) to increase funds for sustainable development for the poorest and most vulnerable countries.
- Reinvigoration of the 10 year Framework Programme on sustainable consumption and production (Marrakech Process), which is currently regarded as having failed.
- A rights-based approach aiming to guarantee universal access and delivery of services and resources such as health, quality education, decent work, food, water and energy.

Others wish to see the establishment of a new UN body for sustainable development to drive forward action on all aspects of sustainable development, and also a strengthened United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

### Key talking points

The world faces many sustainable development challenges which require coordinated action, as evidenced by recurring food, fuel, climate and

financial crises. It is hoped that the summit will agree the action required at international level to tackle these interdependent concerns. Given the urgency with which the world needs to address climate change, it's important that there is high-level discussion at Rio +20 on the following:

- Decreasing carbon dioxide emissions globally to avoid catastrophic climate change. The EU could lead the way before the summit by announcing a target of at least 30% reductions by 2020 (on 1990 levels).
- Adding momentum to global efforts to generate climate finance of at least \$100bn a year by 2020 including from international shipping, currently an un-taxed sector. Climate finance should then primarily be channelled through the new Green Climate Fund.
- Eliminating the use of fossil fuel subsidies as promised by the G20 in 2009. Since the pledge was made, global subsidies have increased to at least \$470bn in 2010 according to the International Energy Agency and the OECD.

Another key discussion will be around Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Some parties have been lobbying for SDGs to be agreed at Rio+20. However, attempting to identify and form SDGs within the incredibly short timeframe remaining to Rio would result in weak goals, developed in a non-participatory format. Instead, sustainable development concerns should be incorporated in the successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs expire in 2015, and a global, participatory process to determine a successor framework is already underway. If SDGs are agreed at Rio, the result will be expensive, inefficient, parallel global processes. Moreover, there is a danger that environmental and development issues will remain divided; one dealt with by SDGs and the other by MDGs 'v2'. The links between both areas are so strong that it is absolutely crucial they are finally addressed together, in order to achieve truly sustainable global development.

It is hoped that the following outcomes will result from the SDG discussion at Rio+20:

- No agreed SDGs at the Rio+20 summit. The SDGs must be fully integrated into a global overarching post-2015 development framework and a timeframe for this should be agreed in Rio.
- Agreement that a post-2015 framework for development should be an urgent priority for the

<sup>3</sup> For more about 'Planetary Boundaries' visit: [www.oxfam.org/en/grow/policy/safe-and-just-space-humanity](http://www.oxfam.org/en/grow/policy/safe-and-just-space-humanity) and [www.stockholmresilience.org/planetary-boundaries](http://www.stockholmresilience.org/planetary-boundaries)

international community. The framework needs to address a number of linked global challenges: poverty, environmental sustainability, economic sustainability, gender justice, climate change, unfair distribution of resources and inequality.

- Definition of the vision of Sustainable Development Goals and action to establish the convergences between the three pillars and set out how these links could be addressed.

Given the broad agenda of this summit and difficult political and financial situations in many countries, agreements may be less ambitious than we hope for.

### What next?

It's hoped that this summit will be a place where leaders restate their commitments to sustainable development – as agreed in Rio in 1992 – and a springboard for action, particularly on joining up the development and sustainability agendas.

We should not view this summit as a final point, but as a milestone – a point along the journey – to more action on sustainable development. It will be important to look to future discussions and decision-making for all the themes. For example, focus must continue on the UNFCCC process, to ensure adequate progress towards a fair, ambitious and legally binding deal at this year's COP summit in Qatar. Similarly, we must look beyond Rio for progress on integrating sustainable development into the post-MDG process through the 2013 MDG Summit.

As individuals the issues raised through Rio+20 are a reminder that urgent and far-reaching action is needed. We can all help push for progress both this June and in the future, for example by raising the issues with MPs, taking campaign actions, and praying for world leaders.

### Further reading and sources

- Environmental audit committee evidence, [www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmenvaud/1026/102602.htm](http://www.publications.parliament.uk/pa/cm201012/cmselect/cmenvaud/1026/102602.htm)

- UNFCCC, [www.unfccc.int](http://www.unfccc.int)

- Convention for Biological Diversity, [www.cbd.int/](http://www.cbd.int/)

- The Rio website, [www.unccd2012.org/rio20/](http://www.unccd2012.org/rio20/)

- UK Parliament research briefing, "The Rio+20 UN conference on sustainable development" [www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06246.pdf](http://www.parliament.uk/briefing-papers/SN06246.pdf)

*For copies of the following items, please contact [sarah.hulme@tearfund.org](mailto:sarah.hulme@tearfund.org)*

- Beyond 2015: discussion paper on the links between MDGs/SDGs

- and a briefing on poverty and the environment

- paper on the Sustainable Development Goals

- Tearfund's briefing for parliamentarians

**Tearfund** was the first UK development organisation to get involved with climate change negotiations and continues to play a leading role in NGO advocacy on the issue.

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The *John Ray Initiative* promotes responsible environmental stewardship in accordance with Christian principles and the wise use of science and technology. JRI organises seminars and disseminates information on environmental stewardship.

Inspiration for JRI is taken from John Ray (1627-1705), English naturalist, Christian theologian and first biological systematist of modern times, preceding Carl Linnaeus.

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