

A World of Difference? The Earth Summit 2002 process

"The Earth has enough for everyone's need but not for everyone's greed"

Mahatma Gandhi

"As the cities become bigger, the sum total of practical ecological sensitivity in the population diminishes, until we are at last asking what is economically impossible of the planet." Theodore Roszak 1979

"It was a beautiful, harmonious, peaceful-looking planet, blue with white clouds, and one that gave you a deep sense...of home, of being, of identity. It is what I prefer to call instant global consciousness." Edgar Mitchell, Apollo XII astronaut

Earth Summit 2002 (Rio+10)

Ten years after the Earth Summit in Rio, the **World Summit on Sustainable Development** will take place in Johannesburg, South Africa, September 2-11 2002. It will review progress made on implementing the commitments made in Agenda 21, the international action plan that captured the world's attention. A clear message has already emerged, there is no need to rewrite Agenda 21; however, there is a need for greater political will and commitment from everyone to put it into practice.

In 1992, the **UN Conference on Environment and Development** (the Rio Earth Summit) delivered a range of international agreements, including the Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and Agenda 21. This clearly states that sustainable development involves many different sectors (stakeholders) working together to protect and improve the environment, to ensure economic security and to promote social equity. It also highlighted the need for local action on key issues. Agenda 21 is not legally binding but to many national governments it is a political and moral obligation. For example, within the European Union, the Fifth Environmental Action Programme, 'Towards Sustainability' (prepared in parallel with Agenda 21) provides the formal framework for meeting the Rio commitments.

Where are we heading?

The Rio+10 process is important because, even today, we are still searching for elusive practices and patterns of sustainable living. Agenda 21 highlighted that "The major cause of the continued deterioration of the global environment is the unsustainable pattern of consumption and production, particularly in industrialised countries." (Chapter 4) The gap between this knowledge and our actual practice remains as wide as ever. The signals of a world out of balance are all around us – rising levels of waste, insidious pollution, and climate change through global warming. We may have advanced technology, but we lack political will. As a result, 20% of the world's population still lacks access to safe drinking water, 50% lacks access to safe sanitation, and polluted water contributes to the death of 15 million children under the age of 5 every year.

Words to action

The UN Commission on Sustainable Development (UN CSD) was established in 1992 to monitor progress in implementing Agenda 21. It is a body whose decisions are based on consensus; they are not legally binding. However, the CSD has gained sufficient authority that member states do pay substantial attention to its debates and decisions. National governments submit regular reports to the CSD review process. The Earth Summit marked a turning point for non-governmental organisations,



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(NGOs) and civil society involvement, as these groups, along with other stakeholders, have lobbied to get their voices heard in these documents. Specific mention should be made of the recognition given in Agenda 21 to the role women can play, if given the opportunity, in developing a more sustainable society.

The Rio +10 Process

The World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) gives the global community another chance to revisit the commitments made in 1992 and to judge just how far (or not) we have gone along the road to sustainability. Success, both at the Summit, and for individual countries' programmes depends upon whether processes are open to all actors or stakeholders. Rio+10 is a catalyst for reminding decision-makers, communities and individuals of the substantial commitments made to humanity, and to future generations. Implementing what has already been agreed upon is imperative. Human frailty is not an excuse for leaving the action up to someone else.

Rio+10 must be more than a 'talking shop' for world leaders. Building on the 1992 experience, the review is designed to be a highly participatory process. There will be national reports, regional reviews, dialogue processes with many different 'stakeholders' and inter-governmental debates. Topics for debate at Rio+10 are still in negotiation and will be drawn from the results of each country's review process. They are likely to include actions to tackle poverty, the single largest threat to sustainability. Keeping a focus is important if clear outcomes are to be achieved, but new issues with a deep and rippling impact upon much of the world's population, such as globalisation, will need space on the agenda.

Rio + 10 seeks voluntary commitments from business and NGOs to substantially follow up action (e.g. building on the UN Global Compact, an initiative launched by Secretary General in July 2000 to allow business to demonstrate good global citizenship by embracing 9 principles covering Human Rights, Labour Standards and the Environment (DETR 2001)). Developed countries are behind schedule or failing to meet other obligations, for example, on financing for development and on climate change (the US has signed, but not ratified the Convention on Biological Diversity). Fears of more obligations being placed on developing nations are raised by Brazil's position "we will not allow that Rio+10 results in new commitments for developing countries that are not matched with compatible commitments on the part of developed countries" (UNED November 2000). Poverty remains a major problem without sustained efforts to tackle inequity. The global commitment to action is for everyone, governments North and South.

Only time will tell if we rise to the challenge posed in Mongolia's thought-provoking statement to the 55th UN General Assembly November 2000: "Do we have sufficient political will and sense of solidarity to forge the genuine partnerships needed to erase the staggering discrepancy between commitments and action?"

Getting involved

The Rio+10 process will require significant personal involvement and commitment by thousands of people worldwide if it is to be useful, relevant and comprehensive (UN CSD).

Nationally, independent review processes will take place during Spring 2001 within local governments, professional bodies, business and industry, trade unions, the youth and women's movements, faith communities and other key sectors of civil society. These debates are open to all and will feed into Regional meetings of Governments and other groups during 2001. But action on the ground, in our own communities, is the real touchstone for turning the promises and declarations into action. Find out what groups are doing locally, either on Local Agenda 21 programmes or their equivalent, to help deliver a better quality of life and an improved environment to local people.

Community participation underpins the Agenda 21 process. Community-based organisations play an important part in raising people's awareness about development and environment issues. Local action brings a global perspective to people's local community activities and policies. It can promote mutual understanding, create opportunities for friendship, and break down prejudices and cultural divides. But without information it is hard to participate. Electronic communication technologies have opened many opportunities, creating better access. Eventually, what happens in one part of the world will affect people's lives in other countries. Links between North and South are crucial to working towards a sustainable global future.

Glossary

Sustainable Development: "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (Brundtland Report, 1987) also "development which improves people's quality of life, within the carrying capacity of the earth's life support system." 2nd World Conservation Strategy (UNEP)

Sustainability: Working towards sustainability involves:

- Social development: increasing social equity
- Environmental protection: protecting and improving the environment
- Economic development: developing economic security for everyone

Stakeholders: Groups or organisations who have influence in a particular area of policy or are affected by policies. Agenda 21 identified 9 Major Groups: women, children and youth; indigenous peoples; NGOs; local authorities; trade unions; business and industry; science and technology, and farmers. This is not an exhaustive list; at any stage in a process there can be other specific stakeholder groups.

Helpful links and information sources

Official UN website RIO+10: www.un.org/rio+10

UN CSD: www.un.org/esa/sustdev/csd.htm

UNED Forum Central information resource with document downloads (UN etc), newsletters, briefing material, national reports plus links to the Road Map of how all the processes fit together: www.earthsummit2002.org

References

DETR (2001). Achieving a better quality of life: Review of progress towards Sustainable development UK Government Annual Report. London

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Roszak, T. (1979). Person/Planet – The Creative Disintegration of Industrial Society. Victor Gollancz. London

UNED Forum – various material and briefings incl. Network 2002 November 2000.

UNEP (1999) Global Environmental Outlook 2000. Earthscan. London.

Also see

This short Briefing Sheet is one in a series specially prepared by UNED Forum for Life II. It aims to outline key issues covered within the topic and to act as a sign-posting service to further information sources and official documentation. Many issues are cross-cutting so we encourage you to investigate the other material available. Other sheets include:

- **Cities as Symbols of Hope: The Habitat and Istanbul+5 Process**
- **Making Women Count: The Beijing Process**
- **Investing in the Future: Financing for Development Process**
- **Promoting Development with a Human Face: The Social Summit Process**
- **Whose Decision it is Anyway?**
Decision-making Processes at the national & international Level
- **Promoting Involvement in the Search for Sustainability -**
We are all Stakeholders Now
- **Resource Sheet - more Background Information and Inspiration**
- **Frequently Asked Questions**

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