

RIO+20

A SUMMIT THAT LEFT NO ONE FEELING HAPPY

Lukas Lingenthal / Marc Bürgi

Between 13 and 23 June 2012, once again everyone with an interest in sustainable development, social justice or environmental and climate protection turned their eyes expectantly towards Rio de Janeiro, 20 years after the first global summit that took place there in 1992. Or at least that should have been the case. In reality, the results of the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro were relatively modest. The summit was overshadowed by other issues and events on the international political agenda. A predominance of controversial topics, inconvenient timing and Brazil's somewhat unusual approach to negotiations resulted in a final conference declaration that was lacking any real ambition. However, the many initiatives and voluntary commitments that were announced during the course of the conference did generate a certain amount of hope. For example, more emphasis was placed on the important role that cities and regions can play in overcoming the challenges of climate change.

THE SUMMIT OF STATE REPRESENTATIVES

Heads of state and government, together with their official delegations, met in Rio de Janeiro from 20 to 22 June for the actual Rio+20 United Nations summit. Brazil, as hosts and the country responsible for leading the negotiations, published the text of the final outcome document on 19 June, the day before the official opening of the conference. This was a decision that had clearly not been agreed by the delegations of the various state and government representatives present and was therefore a source of irritation and annoyance amongst the various parties to the negotiations. President Dilma Rousseff gave the first



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press conference on this issue in Los Cabos, Mexico, where she was attending the G20 summit in the days immediately leading up to the United Nations conference. She was quick to suggest that the fact that there was a final agreement at all was an obvious reflection of the success of the Brazilian negotiating team. However, she did not go into any detail about the content of the document. This prelude to the summit in Rio de Janeiro itself goes a long way towards explaining both the outcome of the conference of heads of state and government and the atmosphere that was obvious throughout.



Brazilian President Dilma Rousseff at the opening ceremony of the Rio+20 summit. She received both praise and critique for the outcome of negotiations led by her country. | Source: Roberto Stuckert Filho/PR (CC BY-SA).

In summing up, the secretary general of the conference, Sha Zukang, suggested that the conference had left all parties unsatisfied, and a glance at leading German and international media makes it clear that many commentators share his view. The mood after the biggest United Nations event of all time is somewhat muted. Environmental protection and aid organisations, in particular, were quick to criticise the outcome. The environmental protection organisation Greenpeace declared the summit a failure, and organisations such as the WWF and Oxfam took a similarly negative view. The verdict is a little less

cut-and-dried among the various state and government representatives, the United Nations and the hosts, Brazil. Many who attended the conference were at pains to stress positive aspects: for example, Peter Altmaier, the German Minister for the Environment spoke of a mixed picture. While the “high expectations” of the conference had not all been met, there had been some progress made in the midst of the disappointments.

TRICKY SUBJECTS: THE GREEN ECONOMY AND INSTITUTIONAL REFORM

Sustainable development was high on the agenda of the summit in Rio de Janeiro. This was to be the fourth major United Nations conference on this issue. The meeting in Stockholm in 1972 can be viewed as the starting point for global environmental policy. The 1992 conference in Rio de Janeiro was a further important milestone, which included the agreement on Agenda 21, the blueprint for sustainable development. Rio was also the starting point for international negotiations on climate protection and biodiversity. At the 2002 conference in Johannesburg, the main focus of the participating nations was on negotiating how they would implement the agreements made in Rio.

The 1992 conference in Rio de Janeiro included the agreement on Agenda 21, the blueprint for sustainable development.

At this year’s summit in the Brazilian city there were two key issues on the agenda: the so-called green economy and the need for institutional reform in order to address the challenges of sustainable development. A third, unofficial topic was the idea of developing a series of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These would expand on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) formulated in 2001. There were other sub-topics on the agenda as well, including energy, water, protection of the marine environment and the role of cities.

The issue of a green economy is highly controversial. There is no clear consensus on exactly how an economy based on conservative use of natural resources should work. There is a great deal of debate about the role of the private sector, for example, or what weight should be given to issues such as poverty vis-à-vis environmental protection. Many emerging nations believe that such a concept could pose

a risk to their economic development and argue that they lack the financial and technological means to achieve a sustainable economy. Even the Sustainable Development Goals are the subject of dispute. According to a proposal by Columbia and Guatemala, various goals should be agreed that will lead the international community as a whole to a sustainable economy, and which should complement the eight existing Millennium Development Goals. However, developing nations in particular fear that this will mean problems such as hunger and poverty taking a back seat to environmental protection.

UNSUCCESSFUL PREPARATIONS

Because of these differences of opinion, the preparations for the conference proved to be very difficult. There were a number of meetings over a two-year period, including two official rounds of negotiations in New York. However, by the time the conference itself came around there had been little in the way of agreement. The round of negotiations in Rio de Janeiro in the week leading up to the summit also ended unsuccessfully.

There were two major factors that contributed to these difficulties. The crises in Europe and in the Arab region made it difficult for the summit to be the main focus of people's attention. Many heads of state and government, especially

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from European countries, stayed away from the summit. The hosts, Brazil, also adopted a strange approach. Because there had been no agreement during the preparatory meetings, Brazil decided to produce their own conference outcome document. The delegations from other countries were simply consulted. The text of the final declaration was already published the day before the summit meeting officially started. Three days later, the document was passed by the conference virtually unchanged. Many observers believe the very modest outcome was a result of this approach to the negotiations, and some delegations felt they had been snubbed. The fact that the text of the final declaration had been published before the start of the meeting itself met with strong criticism. Brazil clearly sought to avoid a situation where the conference ended without a concrete result, as was the case at the 2009 UN

Climate Change Conference in Copenhagen. The final declaration document was kept as vague as possible; controversial passages were quite simply deleted, because Brazil aimed to ensure that all countries would be in a position to agree to it.

MODEST CHANGES

The final declaration document¹ entitled “The Future We Want” contains very few clear definitions. Concrete goals and commitments are completely absent. It defers all decisions and there are only passing references to the key issue of financing. While there is a call to strengthen the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) institutionally, the list of suggested changes amounts to no more than a request to the UN General Assembly to implement this proposal at some point in the future. The various state and government delegates were unable to arrive at a binding agreement on this issue.

The document contains a section on the protection of the seas beyond territorial waters, an issue that was given little attention during earlier summits. Countries are now keen to combat over-aggressive fishing methods and pollution and yet all the declarations made on this issue are non-binding. Environmental protection groups were hoping for the establishment of clear rules on the protection of the marine environment. It is also worth mentioning the section on Gross Domestic Product (GDP). Countries now want to see new methods used to measure economic performance in order to take greater account of the environmental costs. The UN statistical authorities have been given the task of coming up with an alternative measure to GDP. The document mentions the introduction of SDG, but once again the decision is non-binding. According to the document, the UN General Assembly should, at some point in the future, pass a resolution to nominate a balanced group of 30 representatives from different countries in the various regions and give them the task of formulating SDGs that will be valid after 2015, the target year for the MDG.

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1 | UN, “The Future We Want”, A/CONF.216/L.1, 19 Jun 2012, http://un.org/disabilities/documents/rio20_outcome_document_complete.pdf (accessed 24 Jul 2012).

Even the major issue that gave the conference its unofficial name, the green economy, is only discussed in very vague terms in the final declaration document. The developing nations in particular are very sceptical of this concept. They

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are concerned that they will be subject to an economic model that will be too restrictive and will hinder their economic development and attempts to combat poverty. The cautious way this concept has been formulated can be seen in the first two points of its definition, which expressly state that the idea of a green economy must be compatible with international law and safeguard countries' national sovereignty. Other issues also need to be taken into consideration, including combating poverty, equality, protecting the rights of indigenous peoples and other traditional groups as well as social inclusion. The concept should also include the transfer of technology between industrialised and developing nations; international financing for projects in developing countries; and it should not be used to justify discriminating trade barriers. Import regulations for products that are based on environmental criteria should, wherever possible, be agreed on the basis of international consensus. While all these points are understandable, especially from the point of view of the developing countries, what is missing are concrete criteria on what constitutes an environmentally sound and sustainable means of managing an economy. The only explicit reference is a suggestion that sustainable consumption and production should be encouraged. There is no mention at all of energy efficiency or clean electricity production, of reducing greenhouse gas emissions or the efficient and economical use of finite or scarce resources, or of the recycling of re-usable materials.

However, on the question of how to finance sustainable development, the signatory countries to the final declaration document were able to agree that an intergovernmental process under the supervision of the UN General Assembly should be initiated. 30 experts selected from the various regional groups within the United Nations are to be appointed to work on developing a concrete strategy for the international financing of sustainable development concepts. Their work is to be completed by 2014. The group's report will be assessed by the General Assembly, who will

then be expected to pass the necessary resolutions to allow the recommendations in the report to be implemented. However, the final part of the jigsaw, the actual concrete implementation of the recommendations, is once again non-binding.

The final declaration document is considered particularly weak in terms of actual concrete promises. Only three of the 283 paragraphs in the report begin with the words "We agree...". The other 280 paragraphs contain solely non-binding recommendations.

PARALLEL EVENTS AND VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS

The final declaration document provides the focus of attention, but as a result many of the conference's fringe activities involving 45,000 participants often tend to go overlooked. In the week leading up to the summit of heads of state and government, there was a whole series of parallel events organised by non-governmental organisations, trade associations, academics and other civil society representatives. Numerous initiatives were launched and agreements concluded or announced. However, not all the parallel events were successful. Many of them did not have enough international participants and so lacked a broad consensus of opinion. One reason for this might have been the high prices in Rio de Janeiro. The city has always been considered an expensive destination, but hotel and flight costs rocketed still higher during the conference.

Between 13 and 23 June Cúpula dos Povos took place – a People's Summit. Tens of thousands of people attended the lectures, discussions and cultural activities. The organisers were critical of the official conference and saw their event as an alternative. But even this People's Summit did not produce the kind of successes that might have been expected from such a gathering of civil society representatives. Their own final declaration document,² which was officially presented to the meeting of heads of state and government on the final day of the UN conference, appeared to be a patchwork of criticisms and demands from all sorts of different

2 | "Declaração final Cúpula dos Povos na Rio+20", 22 Jun 2012, <http://cupuladospovos.org.br/2012/06/declaracao-final-da-cupula-dos-povos-na-rio20-2> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

groups. The document referred to movements promoting the rights of women, indigenous peoples, blacks, young people, smallholders, workers, traditional peoples, those who had escaped from slavery, advocates for the right to housing as well as supporters of various religions from all over the world.



Tens of thousands of visitors attended the manifold events of the Cúpula dos Povos, here i.e. the march of global acting. | Source: Joka Madruga/Terra Livre Press (CC BY).

The document was especially critical of capitalism and the concept of a green economy, which was seen as little more than established capitalism under a new guise. While there were references in the document to protecting the environment, this particular topic was somewhat diminished by the other issues. In the concluding summary of rejections and demands, environmental protection was not even specifically mentioned. It was only indirectly referred to in calls for the abolition of pesticide use in agriculture and the banning of genetically modified plants as well as in calls for the development of new models for energy production and distribution. Otherwise, the only other place where the issue of the environment surfaced was in demands for historical social and ecological deficits to be recognised.

This particular final declaration document was dominated by social issues, but failed to establish clearly enough the links between these issues and the environment. There was a much greater emphasis on the rights of women, homosexuals, transsexuals, indigenous peoples and workers. Two of the document's conclusions can be viewed particularly critically. Firstly, the declaration demonised major corporations, rejecting them out of hand and urging that they should be opposed. The idea that creating a sustainable economic system and way of life might be better served by constructive cooperation between producers and consumers, rather than by battling against major corporations, did not seem to occur to them. The last of a total of 16 proposals called for the establishment of an international general strike day. The fact that this was the final proposal, and the only one written in capital letters, begs the question as to whether the aim of the People's Summit was actually to propose alternatives to help create a more sustainable and just world or whether it was just to present a list of demands to the assembled nations and announce a call to arms against big business.

There was no call in the final declaration for all sections of civil society to contribute to a more sustainable way of life through their own individual actions, for example. As a result, the final declaration of the People's

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Summit turned out to be the only declaration made during the Rio+20 Conference that failed to include a section on personal commitment, or indeed even a suggestion that people can make a significant contribution to more sustainability through their own personal behaviour. The call for solidarity with peoples and countries that are suffering under military or institutional coups is an expression of the way attendance at the summit was largely limited to Brazil and Latin American countries. Indeed, Paraguay was the only country given as an example. There was no reference at all to what has been happening in North Africa and the Arab world – events that must surely be mentioned when making a true global analysis and calling for more democracy and public participation.

Representatives from the business world also played a very active role during the conference. The private sector was represented in Rio by the Business Action for Sustainable

Development (BASD), an alliance of 13 different business organisations.³ This umbrella organisation represented the position of the private sector in the official negotiations and focused on promoting the role that private enterprise would like to play in a green economy model.

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Business associations also organised a series of events around the conference: for example, 2,770 delegates attended the three-day Corporate Sustainability Forum. There were over 60 seminars addressing issues such as energy, climate change and water supplies.⁴ Numerous companies made a commitment in Rio de Janeiro to running their businesses in a sustainable way. One of the world's leading software companies announced its decision to be CO₂-neutral in the future, seeking to compensate for its energy-intensive data centres by buying emission certificates. A major international fashion company committed to using only recycled or sustainably produced cotton for its products, while one of the world's largest sports article manufacturers agreed to stop using dangerous chemicals in its production processes from 2020 onwards. Altogether, there were around 200 voluntary commitments of this nature made by the private sector.

Many countries also announced their own initiatives. Australia and the Maldives, for example, announced that they would create large protected areas off their coasts. The USA is going to finance new solar, wind and hydroelectric projects in Africa to the tune of 20 million U.S. dollars, with the programme's budget being increased by hundreds of millions more dollars over time. According to the United Nations, 719 voluntary commitments were made in Rio by various countries, the private sector and civil society. These commitments add up to a potential investment of 513 billion U.S. dollars.

3 | Business Action for Sustainable Development (BASD2012), 20-22 Jun 2012, <http://basd2012.org> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

4 | UN, United Nations Global Compact, Rio+20 Corporate Sustainability Forum, 15-18 Jun 2012, <http://csf.compact4rio.org/events/rio-20-corporate-sustainability-forum/event-summary-251b87a2deaa4e56a3e00ca1d66e5bfd.aspx> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

INCREASED EMPHASIS ON THE ROLE OF CITIES

One group was particularly prominent during the Rio+20 Conference. The summit placed a great deal more emphasis on the important role to be played by cities and regions in overcoming the challenges of climate change. Between 17 and 19 June, the days immediately before the meeting of heads of state and government, representatives from cities in the C40 group came together. This group now incorporates 58 cities from all over the world that are working together on the issue of sustainable urban development and lifestyle.

Today, half of the world's population live in cities. By 2030, this will have gone up to 60 per cent as world population numbers continue to grow. Around two-thirds of global energy consumption and 75 per cent of global CO₂ emissions are accounted for by cities.⁵ The 58 cities of the C40 alone account for 14 per cent of greenhouse gas emissions and are home to one-twelfth of the world's population. They also produce 18 per cent of global GDP.⁶ Almost 90 per cent of metropolitan areas are close to the sea and therefore potentially at threat from rising sea levels.⁷

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However, cities also have the right conditions for addressing the challenges of climate change and population growth. Initiatives and concepts for sustainable living can generally be implemented much more quickly at city level than at national level. Successful pilot projects can be easily evaluated and copied by other cities once they have been adapted to local circumstances. With intelligent urban and zone planning, cities have the potential to reduce the pressure on rural areas and important nature reserves caused by continuous population growth.

5 | Cf. UN, "Sustainable Cities", <http://un.org/en/sustainable-future/cities.shtml> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

6 | Cf. C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), *C40 Cities*, <http://c40cities.org/c40cities> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

7 | Cf. C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group (C40), "Why Cities? Ending Climate Change Begins in the City", <http://c40cities.org/ending-climate-change-begins-in-the-city> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

Increased recognition is being given to the important future role of major cities. While the C40 contribute to many of the worlds environmental problems, they also offer a potential solution to some of these problems.

For this reason, at international level increased recognition is being given to the important future role of major cities. The United Nations Human Settlement Programme (UN-HABITAT) has instigated a "cities and climate change" initiative⁸ and the OECD,⁹ along with the World Bank,¹⁰ also recognise the growing importance of this issue. During the C40 conference the cities were keen to suggest that, while they contribute to many of the worlds environmental problems, they also offer a potential solution to some of these problems. They were able to convince observers that they not only have a whole range of concrete goals and initiatives to offer, but that they also take very seriously the opportunity to exchange experiences with other cities. For example, they are aiming to reduce CO₂ emissions by 1.3 billion tonnes by 2030. This is the equivalent of the annual emissions of Canada and Mexico combined (reference year: 2008).

In order to achieve this, they intend to adopt a whole series of concepts and ideas they presented during the three-day meeting. São Paulo and Rio de Janeiro believe that local public transport in particular has an important role to play. The bus fleets in both of the Brazilian mega cities are going to be fully converted to biofuels and electric traction and there will be more bus lanes. The various traffic concepts proposed also include an expansion of existing underground and tram systems. Rio de Janeiro itself sees the Olympic Games in 2016 and as a key target date for these infrastructure projects.

In addition to public transport, many cities see waste recycling and burning waste to generate electricity as important cornerstones of their sustainability concepts, along with smart, energy-efficient buildings. Environmental education

8 | United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT), <http://www.unhabitat.org/categories.asp?catid=550> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

9 | Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), *Cities and Climate Change*, 12/2010, <http://www.oecd.org/gov/regionaldevelopment/citiesandclimatechange.htm> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

10 | Weltbank, "New Report Sees Cities as Central to Climate Action", 3 Dec 2010, <http://climatechange.worldbank.org/content/new-report-sees-cities-central-climate-action> (accessed 23 Jul 2012).

projects also feature highly in the concepts put forward by many cities. In Brazil, as in some other countries, responsibility for (primary) school education lies with the local authorities.

CONCLUSION

The United Nations conference was a major disappointment for many. In spite of its ambitious title “The Future We Want”, the official final declaration document contained little in the way of concrete ideas as to what this future should actually look like. Many were hoping for a different outcome, although in the run-up to the conference there had been little indication of a sense of euphoria or optimism. This was no doubt partly a result of the lack of positive results from the climate conferences in Copenhagen, Cancún and Durban. However, because the problem of climate change in particular is becoming ever more pressing, expectations of the conference in Rio de Janeiro were naturally very high.

The official final declaration document contained little in the way of concrete ideas as to what this future should actually look like.

Over recent times it has become increasingly difficult to find consensus amongst the representatives of almost 200 countries and to persuade them all to sign off on what has been agreed, especially as the balance of power in international politics is shifting. Emerging nations, such as the BRICS countries, now have more influence than ever before. The needs and demands of these countries are different from those of the industrialised nations that have dominated in the past. Therefore, it was always unlikely that a major coup in terms of finding an effective solution to a complex problem like climate change would be on the cards. However, international summit meetings such as this can at least be the driving force behind important change processes. The final declaration document for Rio+20 does at least contain some important suggestions, such as the proposed sustainability goals.

Also, the increasing lack of leadership provided by national governments as a result of growing multipolarity has meant that actors from civil society, the private sector and local government have the opportunity to take on greater responsibility. This was reflected in some of the parallel events organised during the Rio+20 Conference. This is

one of the reasons why these events are such an important element of major UN conferences, as they provide a positive answer to the question as to whether there is any point to these major summits. However, these parallel meetings also require an enormous amount of preparation and good leadership if they are also to avoid losing sight of their main goals. The People's Summit is a good example of what can go wrong, while the meeting of the C40 group of cities offers a much more positive example.

Creating awareness is also an aspect that should not be underestimated. In the 20 years since the first global summit in Rio, all sections of society have become increasingly aware of the importance of a sustainable economy and way of life – something which can be seen in the voluntary commitments made by major corporations, who have reacted to changing consumer demands by introducing more environmentally and socially responsible products. The mere size of such a summit can help to draw a great deal of attention to the main topics on the meeting's agenda. Awareness of issues such as environmental and climate protection has never been as high in Brazil as over recent months. Even if this may have created a somewhat misleading impression that the majority of people in Brazil is already sensitive enough to the key issues, these issues have now penetrated a considerable part of society. Perhaps a critical mass has been mobilised so that the issue of sustainability will not simply be forgotten as soon as Rio+20 fades from memory. Perhaps the population of Latin America's largest country will experience a shift in consciousness, as occurred in Germany 20 years ago. In the end, a potential spill-over effect from Brazil to the rest of the region could lead to Rio+20 being a much greater success than it seems today.