

CLAIMING OUR FUTURE IDEAS – AN ECONOMY FOR SOCIETY

THE RIO DECLARATION ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT – 20 YEARS ON

Rio de Janeiro - June 1992

Almost twenty years ago Government officials from 178 countries and some thirty thousand individuals from governments, non-governmental organisations and the media met in Rio de Janeiro at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The event, also known as the Earth Summit 1992, set an agenda beyond expectations that continues to influence.

The 1992 Earth Summit adopted the concept of ‘sustainable development’ as its key policy framework. The results of the Earth Summit included the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Agenda 21 action plan for sustainable development and the establishment of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity also emerged from independent but concurrent negotiations.

Rio Declaration

The Rio Declaration is made up of twenty seven non legally binding principles for the environment and development. It sets the agenda for sustainable development.

The interconnectedness of society, the economy and the environment underpins the Principles set out in the Declaration. It states that ‘peace, development and environmental protection are inter-dependent and indivisible’ (Principle 25).

The Declaration sets out a number of key approaches to the environment. The polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution (Principle 16). The precautionary approach is established and environmental impact assessment is identified as a key national instrument (Principle 17). States need to cooperate to protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth’s ecosystems (Principle 7) with developed countries holding a particular responsibility. This is because of the pressure their societies place on the global environment and the resources they command. The special situation and needs of developing countries, particularly the least developed and those most environmentally vulnerable, should be given special priority (Principle 6).

Sustainable development is a key focus for the Declaration. The eradication of poverty is deemed to be an indispensable requirement of sustainable development (Principle 5). Environmental protection needs to be an integral part of the development process (Principle 4). States must cooperate to reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption (Principle 8). The participation of women (Principle 20), the creativity of young people

(Principle 21) and the recognition of the identity, culture and interests of indigenous people and their communities (Principle 22) are all identified as important for sustainable development.

Participation is defined as the best way to handle environmental issues (Principle 10). The Declaration states that people should have access to information on the environment held by public authorities and should have the opportunity to participate in decision making processes. International cooperation is emphasised. States need to cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development, to better address the problems of environmental degradation (Principle 12).

Rio de Janeiro June 2012

Work is underway to mark the twentieth anniversary of the Earth Summit with a second Earth Summit to be hosted in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012.

The objectives of the Earth Summit 2012 are to secure renewed political commitment to sustainable development, to assess progress towards internationally agreed goals on sustainable development and to address new and emerging challenges. Two particular themes have been identified for the event – a green economy in a context of poverty eradication and sustainable development, and an institutional framework for sustainable development.

A preparatory meeting in New York agreed that political leaders will issue a focused political document tackling the transition to a global green economy and reform of the international institutions responsible for sustainable development.

There is widespread acknowledgement that the promises of the Earth Summit 1992 have yet to be realised. Now there are concerns that the emphasis on the green economy being developed for the Earth Summit 2012 might steer the focus off root causes of environmental degradation. There are fears that the manner in which it is being addressed might prioritise technological fixes over confronting the poverty, inequality and oppression that drives environmental destruction.

The first Principle of the Rio Declaration states that ‘Human beings are at the centre of concerns for human development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature’. If the Earth Summit 2012 is to fulfil this as yet unfulfilled promise, it will need to a more balanced focus with less emphasis on developing a green economy and more emphasis on achieving a green, equal and just future.