

From outcome to implementation: fast-tracking Rio+20

Following the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development, there is a sense of optimism among those committed to the green agenda

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Given the unsustainable path that today's world is on, and the increasingly sobering warnings of science, it would be easy for communities, cities, countries and companies to lose heart. They should not.

Over the last year, a number of small but potentially significant steps have been taken that collectively could translate into a big step in the right direction. Such is the nature of politics and human psychology that slow, steady progress can easily be overlooked.

The trigger has been in many ways the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development convened in Brazil in June 2012 and the post-Rio+20 follow-up, which is breaking new records in the multilateral quest to implement the sustainable development agenda. Almost imperceptibly to some, the debate and also the appetite for action have shifted. We no longer have to convince sceptical governments or populations of the need to change. Instead, the focus is on the policies, initiatives and mechanisms that can achieve change now and over the long haul.

Rio+20 may have taken place in the same halls where the historic Rio Earth Summit was held in 1992, but its aim was very different. It was not to generate more treaties, but to focus on ways of implementing existing ones and the sustainable development agenda. The audience was also different. Many more cities were represented by senior mayors; judges, auditor generals, CEOs and other business representatives were among those present.

If you are a poor farmer in Peru or a waste-picker in Ouagadougou, the outcomes of Rio+20 must seem remote and far away. Yet if countries, companies, cities and communities can move forward on the positive elements of the summit's outcome, it may assist in one day realising the *The Future We Want* – the title of the outcome document adopted at Rio+20.

So why is there a sense of cautious optimism that a shift has taken place? First, leaders representing more than 190 countries embraced the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication as one important way to shift societies into a new and more resource-efficient, job-generating gear. Countries agreed that such a social transition could make a real difference when supported by policies that encourage decent employment, social welfare and inclusion, and have as a priority the maintenance of the planet's ecosystems, from forests to freshwaters.

At the 27th session of the Governing Council of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) in February 2013, four UN agencies – UNEP, the International Labour Organization (ILO), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR) – announced that, under the Partnership for Action on a Green Economy, they will assist 30 countries to make that transition while generating new jobs and skills, promoting clean technologies, and reducing environmental risks and poverty.

The decision to evolve the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) into sustainable development goals as part of the post-2015 agenda could also prove significant.

Rio+20 addressed growing concern that the concept of gross domestic product may have outlived its usefulness in a world where natural resource scarcity, pollution and social exclusion are also becoming measures of whether a country's wealth is going up or running down. It requested that the UN Statistical Commission work with other UN bodies and organisations to identify new approaches for gauging progress that draw on a wider range of assessment criteria.



Another potentially significant step forward was the adoption of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with UNEP requested to host the secretariat. It covers several sectors such as tourism and agri-food, government procurement and lifestyles, and in many ways dovetails with the green economy pathways and programmes.

Reducing food waste

In support of this, UNEP with the UN's Food and Agriculture Organization has recently launched the 'Think.Eat.Save. Reduce Your Foodprint' campaign, an initiative aimed at reducing by one-third the food that is lost or wasted – 40 million tonnes in the US alone.

During Rio+20, more than 30 governments and institutions – including Brazil, Denmark, Switzerland and UNEP – announced the new international Sustainable Public Procurement Initiative (SPPI), which is aimed at scaling up the amount of public spending flowing into goods and services that promote a country's social, environmental and economic policies.



A student adds her contribution to the Tree of Life at the Rio+20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012

There is a new and more sustainable wind blowing, and this bodes well for the world's seven billion people

Studies have indicated that sustainable public procurement, which represents between 15 per cent and 25 per cent of GDP, offers a tremendous opportunity for environmentally friendly innovation and sustainability.

The Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), a new international science-policy platform on biodiversity and ecosystems, has also been set up to assist governments and citizens to better understand the state, trends and challenges facing the natural world and humanity in the 21st century. In January, more than 500 delegates from 105 countries attended the plenary IPBES session in Bonn, Germany.

In March 2013, the triennial World's Wildlife Conference closed with robust measures adopted to protect precious timber and marine species from over-exploitation.

Some 170 governments have turned to the Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES) to ensure the legal, sustainable and traceable trade of their precious timber and forest products, with CITES unanimously bringing hundreds of new timber species under its controls, along with a number of tortoises and turtles and a wide range of other plant and animal species. Five shark species and manta rays were also brought under CITES controls. In January, governments also finalised a new legally binding global agreement on reducing releases and emissions of the notorious heavy metal mercury.

Reform of some of the institutions charged with assisting these evolutions also registered on the Rio+20 Richter scale. The decision to strengthen and upgrade UNEP, including

with universal membership, was among the reforms endorsed by the UN General Assembly in late 2012. It is also paving the way to more stable and predictable funding of the institution via the regular budget of the United Nations. Brazil, China and Russia are just three of the countries unilaterally stepping up voluntary support. UNEP's governing council has been renamed as the UN Environment Assembly, in what is an important signal of a new determination.

Independently, these measures and pathways are important. There is a new and more sustainable wind blowing, and if carried over the long term, this bodes well for the world's seven billion people, a figure that will exceed nine billion by 2050.

Collectively, those measures and pathways could be even more profound, if not game changing. Rio+20 played a role in focusing and concentrating minds on The Future We Want. The challenge now, 20 years after the Rio Earth Summit of 1992 and 40 years after the first UN Conference on the Human Environment, is keeping up the momentum. ■