

FROM THE UN

RIO+20: 20 YEARS AFTER THE EARTH SUMMIT OF 1992

How will we cope with the increasing stresses on our planet ?

We must develop a sustainable way for meeting the needs of the current generation without endangering the needs of future generations!

Earth Summit in Rio 2012

What are the prospects?

Many heads of states are expected in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. June 20-21. 2012. In the two decades that have elapsed since the 1992 meeting, some of the issues marked for improvement in 1992 are worse than ever. The richer versus poorer debate (i.e., North-South debate) has not been resolved. The rich countries are not likely to provide much funding given the world economic crisis. The forthcoming summit has the daunting task of eradicating poverty, placing growth on a sustainable path and developing measures to stimulate the green economy. There is recognition that poverty and the environment are linked. For example, desertification is not mainly due to the expansion of existing deserts, but by overexploitation of dry land, production and overgrazing. These issue alone undermine productivity and are clearly connected with poverty. Delegates will once more discuss and debate the world-wide increase in global stresses and environmental hazards and examine and evaluate what has been achieved in these areas, and which recommendations have been followed and honored since a similar meeting 20 years ago, in 1992. It should be pointed out that delegates have been instructed for some time in advance of the meeting.

What global stresses must be addressed?

Among the many problems resulting from human activity is climate change and its dire consequences, shrinking forests and increasing desertification, loss of biodiversity including varieties of animals, plants, their habitats and the genes on which so much of life depends. It is estimated that the current species extinction rate is 1000 times higher

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than it would be if not for environmental hazards. Another concern is how to provide for the rapid rise of megacities as well as the need for increasing food supplies to a still growing world population.

What has been achieved since Earth Summit 1992

Although expectations were high in 1992, the outcome has been disappointingly low. In the upcoming Earth Summit meeting in Rio delegates will review progress. The delegates are expected to make definitive plans for moving forward especially because of the poor showing in the past twenty years. The Earth Summit in 1992 was a major environmental event attended by many world leaders. It put sustainable development on the world agenda. Consciousness was raised to acknowledge that current consumption and production patterns are not viable in the long run and that global attention is needed. It increased the influence of the environmental movement. The underlying tension at the conference was between developed and developing nations. While all countries have a responsibility to protect the environment, rich countries got rich by using dirty energy like coal. The poorer developing countries use dirty energy since it is the cheapest. The poorer countries argue, justifiably, that since they did not cause the pollution problem but are most at risk, the richer and more developed nations should foot some of the bill. However, the more affluent countries have backed out of their responsibility.

Despite many disappointments, there was good news

The 1992 meeting resulted in agreements on climate, biodiversity and desertification. The rich countries promised to provide money. The results of the agreements proved extremely disappointing with the exception of one item; ozone control a major potential health hazard. As of 2009 the consumption of 98 percent of all ozone depleting substances has been phased out. Rich countries did not deliver on their promises.

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However, there has been a very successful international environmental agreement for phasing out ozone-depleting substances. Chlorofluorocarbons (CFCs) were shown to be damaging the ozone layer in the atmosphere and increasing the amount of ultraviolet radiation

Where are we today?

Governments are allergic to making binding commitments but at the local level there are many environmental initiatives. According to a survey by the International Council for Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) there have been more than 6000 initiatives in over 100 countries. The UN gives the Equator prize biannually to acknowledge and advance community sustainable developments. There were 25 winners of the prize in 2012. They range, for example, from communities in Morocco's high Atlas mountains, to deforested areas in northern Ethiopia to Nicaragua's northwest. (For more details go to www.equatorinitiative.org.)

The world population is currently estimated at 7 billion, based on current numbers is expected to level off at 9 to 10 billion around 2050. Global food production will have to increase by 45%. Genetically modified crops have the potential to solve many of the world's food needs as well as helping to protect and preserve the environment by increasing yield and reducing reliance on chemical pesticides and herbicides. There is controversy in this area, however, because science tends to frighten the general public. This is due in large part because scientists do not explain their scientific data in simple layman terms. We must not ignore a technology that has potential benefit.

The Rio 2012 conference is expected to be tumultuous with much protest. Many grassroots activists warn a fudge is in sight. Over 30,000 people are expected for an alternative conference. Brazil is mobilizing 2000 personnel including 1000 troops to provide security. Ultimately

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what is needed is a shift from current consumption and production patterns to a more sustainable one. Some governments and businesses are aware of this. In fact, they are investing many billions in renewable energy. For example, China has been pushing full speed ahead with investments and this excludes research and development of about \$50 billion in 2010. China is looking at the future. Germany has invested \$30 billion and the US about \$30 billion. Currently China still generates 80 percent of its electricity from coal. It is also building dozens of new coal-fired power plants.

It is time to recognize that future development must be different from the past. The current business-as-usual approach is not feasible.

Albert Einstein said, -"the definition of insanity is doing the same thing over and over and expecting different results"

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