

It's 20 years since the Rio Earth Summit (The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development) – 1992) started a process that gave us the Earth Charter, the Convention of Bio-diversity and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change - path breaking international agreements.



Twenty years on, the international community is set to meet again for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) from 20th to 22nd June 2012) to check on the progress since then and pave the way for the future. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/>.

The big buzz is now “Green Economy” which focuses primarily on the intersection between environment and economy – basically government and business working together. ‘[Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication](#)’ is a 700 page report that was launched in February, 2011 by the UNEP and is considered the principle base document for the summit. [http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/greeneconomyreport/ tabid/29846/default.aspx](http://www.unep.org/greeneconomy/greeneconomyreport/tabid/29846/default.aspx) [Synthesis for Policy Makers](#) [Summary of Conclusions](#). The report also has the backing of the World Bank and the World Trade Organisation (WTO).

The Road to Rio..

The Green Economy approach, with its focus on growth, techno fixes and marketisation of nature has the full support of a large section of the business sector and governments. The EU environment Commissioner Potocnik summed up the thinking, “We need to move from protecting the environment from business to using business to protect the environment”. The [Rio+20 campaign](#) website speaks of this approach as the solution to problems/issues such as jobs, energy, cities, food, water, oceans and disasters and then calls for an [Institutional Framework](#)

It is for this reason that the Business Action for Sustainable Development (BASD) has been re-established. They seek to coordinate the participation of the private sector at Rio+20 and enhance its contribution to “sustainable and inclusive markets”. Companies view sustainability issues from both, a risk management perspective, and the increasingly evident and appealing benefits and opportunities – particularly associated with green growth and poverty alleviation. (<http://www.guardian.co.uk/sustainable-business/globalisation-business-case-sustainability-basd>). As Krish Gopalakrishnan (of INFOSYS), who heads the Business Action for Sustainable Development (BASD), “Our aim will be to create a real change in the outcome of these political negotiations. Part of this will be to recognise that it is the private sector, not governments, that provides the solution to many of problems of sustainable development.”

There is also the Green Economy Coalition (www.greeneconomycoalition.org) of civil society, academic institutions and business. They have come out with a programme to accelerate a [transition to a new green inclusive economy](#). The Delhi based NGO Development Alternatives led by the very influential Dr. Ashok Khosla is an active member of this coalition.

The Big Zero

Rio+20 does not have any major international conventions or agreements on the table. Just a “[zero draft](#)” titled ‘The Future We Want’. It promotes green economy as the only route for a sustainable future and eradicating poverty. Article 25 of the zero document states, “We are convinced that a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication should contribute to meeting key goals – in particular the priorities of poverty eradication, food security, sound water management, universal access to modern energy services, sustainable cities, management of oceans and improving resilience and disaster preparedness, as well as public health, human resource development and sustained, inclusive and equitable growth that generates employment, including for youth. It should be based on the Rio principles, in particular the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, and should be people-centered and inclusive, providing opportunities and benefits for all citizens and all countries”. <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/interactive/2012/jan/10/rio-earth-summit-agenda>.

As Olivier Hoedeman of the Corporate Europe Observatory observes, Rio + 20 will be more like a trade fair and “challenging the corporate co-option of the UN should be a major priority in the run-up, as Rio+20 is set to be a very important ideological battleground”. <http://www.tni.org/article/rio20-and-greenwashing-global-economy>



While business and the corporate sector have welcomed the zero draft as an excellent starting point, others are critical of its over emphasis on green economy and the underlying corporate agenda. A coalition of peoples movements and mass organizations backed by the WSF, the Occupy Movement and Global Alliance for Rights to Nature(GARN) plan to hold a People’s Summit at Rio + 20 which will bring together people who have put forward an alternate vision. (see <http://rio20.net/en/>) They propose that, ‘recognizing rights of nature’ offers a viable framework for sustainable development on our planet.

The Future We don’t Want

One of the lead authors of the UNEP report is Pavan Sukhdev, (a former banker) who calls himself ‘Nature’s Banker’ and passionately argues for what he calls ‘Putting Value on Nature’. (see video **Put a Value on Nature, Pawan Sukhdev** <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A-QpKiU-NHo>). Sukhdev also authored the [Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity Report](#). (see [Lecture at LSE](#), at [Think/Tehelka](#)).

The People Summit is fundamentally opposed to the ‘attempt to fragment nature into “environmental services” with a monetary value for market exchange’. <http://pwccc.wordpress.com/2011/12/19/proposal-of-bolivia-to-rio20/>. The issue about the green economy is -- when value is reduced to “price”, it will be then tradable in a financial market. Thus biomass, biodiversity and the functions of ecosystems –such as storing carbon, pollinating nature or filtering water will be “monetized” and perhaps meet the same fate as carbon credits due to over-issue or undervaluation.

Rio+20 will to a large extent determine the terms on which the international community will negotiate the future of the ravaged planet in the decades to come. As Vandana Shiva puts it, “The ‘green economy’ agenda for Rio+20 can either deepen the privatisation of earth, and with it, the crisis of ecology and poverty, or it can be used to ‘re-embed’ economies in the ecology of the earth”.

There are a whole range of information and issues, sub-websites, NGO websites on Rio+20. Reading of all could be confusing, repetitive and misleading. Take for example the report “Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing by the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability.” http://www.un.org/gsp/sites/default/files/attachments/GSP_Report_web_final.pdf.

According to Ashish Kothari of Kalpavris the report admits that the “current global developmental model is unsustainable”, and makes the right noises on poverty, human rights and suggestions like the spread of relevant technologies, the greening of finance, with environmentally destructive subsidies (like India's for chemical fertilizers). It stresses that governments must fulfill their responsibilities in all this, while seeking “stakeholder” participation.

But while the report talks about the need for democratic governance, it does not stress that this should mean devolution of powers to each local settlement, to decide on their issues. It does not advocate even partial delinking of the local from the global. It does not explicitly challenge the obscene power of the private corporate sector, nor even demand that this sector be strictly regulated; rather, it talks of involving businesses more in a voluntary way. As if the corporations ripping off the planet are suddenly going to become moist-eyed on reading this report and suddenly become ecological heroes.

Concomitant with this, the report gives a great deal of space to financial and market solutions to the multiple crises, even though there is so much accumulated evidence that these often don't work, and certainly don't work to empower the poor.

As we approach Rio, and the mainstream media by and large ignores or trivialises these critical issues. CED hopes to generate discussion in our mailing lists, and our website. To enable teachers to be able to encourage students to do their projects on a live issue, we will keep you posted. Activists from organizations and NGOs will also find it useful to create critical awareness of these trends which are likely to overshadow the development rhetoric in the coming decades.


UNITED NATIONS
HUMAN RIGHTS
OFFICE OF THE HIGH COMMISSIONER

Extract from Letter

To all Permanent Missions in New York and Geneva

The 1992... Rio Declaration .. *was thoroughly infused with human rights considerations essential to sustainable development. . . Without explicit human rights safeguards, policies intended to advance environmental or development goals can have serious negative impacts on those rights...explicit attention should be given to protecting the human rights to food, to water and sanitation, to health, to housing, to education, and to participation in public affairs, in the context of a green economy...*

Thus far, I regret that these considerations have not been well reflected in the evolving “zero draft” negotiating text for the Rio+20 outcome.

Navanethem Pillay
High Commissioner for Human Rights
30th March 2012

ohchr.org/Documents/Issues/Development/OpenLetterHC.pdf