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BACK TO THE FUTURE: IS RIO+20 A 1992 REDUX OR IS THERE CAUSE FOR OPTIMISM?

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Rio+20, set for June 2012, offers an opportunity to review the current state of global environmental summitry. What can be expected of this latest round of global dialogue on sustainable development? The experiences of 1992 may prove telling on this question, as many impediments to paradigmatic development shifts remain entrenched. This NTS Alert notes the striking similarities between the discussions in the run-up to Rio+20 and that of the 1992 Earth Summit, and suggests that Rio+20's greatest contributions may lie in multi-sector collaborations at national and subnational levels facilitated by the broad-ranging participation of governmental, non-governmental as well as private sector actors.



The 1992 Earth Summit was at the time among the largest international conferences ever convened. The presence of national delegations, over 100 heads of state, and thousands of civil society actors helped move environmental issues to a new echelon of international policy attention.

Credit: UN Photo / Michos Tzovaras.

Contents:

- Introduction
- The 1992 Earth Summit: The environment reaches high politics
- 1992 to present: The sustainability record
- Rio+20: Stagnation or progress for sustainable development?

Introduction

The upcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20,¹ will be the latest in decades of global discussions seeking to balance economic, social and environmental considerations through international policy strategies. The overarching goal of Rio+20 will be to codify environmental economics within intergovernmental statutes, which the conference will pursue through the dual themes of a 'green economy' and an 'institutional framework for sustainable development' (UNCSD, 2012a). Rio+20 is further organised along the seven critical issues of disasters, oceans, food, water, cities, energy and jobs; providing the conference with a formidable mandate that says much about the breadth of content and participation at Rio+20.

- **Conclusion: The value of Rio+20**

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Sustainable development necessitates nothing short of paradigmatic shifts in the ways that political, social and economic systems are organised from local to international levels. The Rio+20 process, meanwhile, is an expansive pluralistic international dialogue in which interests from governments, civil society, private sector actors and international organisations are all brought to bear. In this respect, Rio+20 is the progeny of four decades of global environmental summitry and should be explored for evidence of the future trajectory of international environmental management.

This NTS Alert lays the foundation for such explorations by reviewing the events of the original Earth Summit, held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, and evaluating the legacy of that conference for contemporary sustainability efforts. It then looks forward to Rio+20 to question where it converges with preceding efforts, what important factors continue to impede progress and what avenues of the conference show the greatest promise. The NTS Alert makes two key assertions through this review. First, Rio+20 is unlikely to reconcile the most fundamental fracture points that have impeded progress in bridging environmental and economic concerns at the international level. This argument is predicated upon the presence of a number of daunting obstacles, and the reality that 'greening' economic activities includes a series of difficult trade-offs. Second, Rio+20 will make modest normative contributions and act as an incubator for ideas and strategies in ways that could facilitate progress on sustainable development at sub-

international levels. The NTS Alert concludes by conjecturing about the importance of such progress.

[^ To the top](#)

The 1992 Earth Summit: The environment reaches high politics



Gro Harlem Brundtland, Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission), is pictured here addressing the 1992 Earth Summit. The work of Brundtland and her colleagues made formative contributions to sustainable development concepts.

Credit: UN Photo / Michos Tzouvaras.

The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, or 1992 Earth Summit) built upon the work of the landmark 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission),² and became a watershed event for international environmental dialogue. The report, reflecting the increasing attention given to the environment since the early 1970s,³ had described humankind's nascent capacity to affect ecological systems in the late 20th century and advocated a realignment of global priorities around 'sustainable development' concepts (World Commission on Environment and Development, 1987; see also Figure 1). These concepts loomed large at the 1992 Earth Summit, with UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali praising the Brundtland Commission for its 'widely noted' theoretical advancement of environmental thinking, and Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil, President of the 1992 Earth Summit, expressing similar sentiments (UNGA, 1992). The 1992 Summit's primary significance was that it provided an arena for bringing

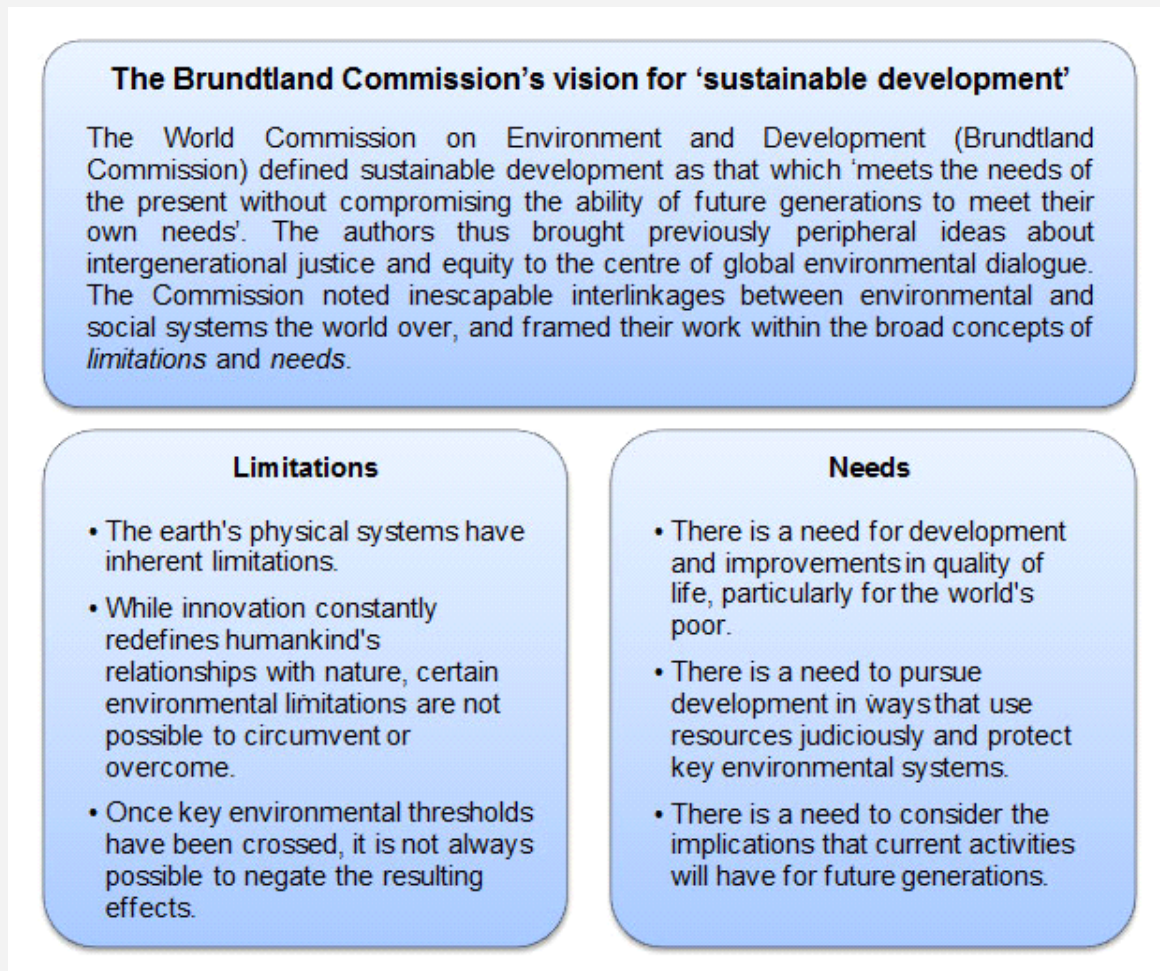
the Brundtland Commission's findings, key among which was the importance of sustainable development, to a large and influential audience.

The 1992 Earth Summit hosted 171 national delegations, over 100 of which were led by heads of state, with industry leaders and a large number of environmental non-governmental organisations (NGOs) also in attendance. Boutros-Ghali (1992) spoke to the landmark scope of the Summit when he declared that its convening would come to symbolise a 'great epistemological break' when viewed by future generations. The scale of the Summit lent its sustainability agenda a considerable public platform. According to C. Anthony Giffard (1996), the Earth Summit was the largest international conference ever held and the first major international conference of the post-Cold War era. Tens of thousands of people and hundreds of NGOs attended the Summit and its parallel Global Forum. Over 7,000 journalists from local and global media outlets covered the Summit, releasing hundreds of reports for international syndication (Klein, 2004; Giffard, 1996).⁴ The Summit's high-level political representation, wide-ranging non-governmental participation and extensive media coverage had the cumulative effect of accelerating the movement of environmental issues into a higher echelon of international dialogue.

The movement of environmental issues up the international relations hierarchy is evidenced in large part by the continuation of large-scale

environmental summitry, and growing domestic and international political attention to environmental issues. This is not to suggest that subsequent international environmental regimes have successfully achieved their stated objectives. The 1992 Earth Summit's tangible legacies are telling on this point. The Summit's plan of action led to, among other things, the formation of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the establishment of the Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) and an action plan for sustainable development named Agenda 21. Measuring the efficacy of such efforts, however, has its difficulties. As Elizabeth DeSombre (2007) points out, monitoring international environmental regimes is made problematic by ambiguities regarding natural and anthropogenic changes, the amount of time it takes for results to flow from any regulation, and the futility of constructing additional measurements of how degraded a given natural resource would be if no regulation or less effective regulation had been pursued. Despite such limitations, some review of the 1992 Earth Summit remains appropriate on the cusp of its successor conference.

Figure 1: The 'sustainable development' concept.



Source: Adapted from the work of the World Commission on Environment and Development (1987).

[^ To the top](#)

1992 to present: The sustainability record

Subsequent environmental summitry and current empirical realities both reveal difficulties with actuating the 1992 Earth Summit agenda. The CBD has not realised its goal of addressing the rapid extinction of plant and animal species resulting from human settlements, land-use changes, agricultural activities, pollution, poaching and other socioeconomic drivers. Conversely, the 20 years since the 1992 Earth Summit have seen anthropogenically driven biodiversity losses amplify significantly (Zalasiewicz et al., 2010; Kolbert, 2010). These goals were revisited when the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD, or 2002 Earth Summit) advocated a significant reduction in the current biodiversity loss by 2010, a goal that also failed to be realised (Schreurs, 2012). In addition to these tangible shortcomings, the CBD has never found a consistent global institutional character, and biodiversity issues have largely been taken up through ad hoc strategies across multiple forums.

Agenda 21 was the 1992 Earth Summit's broadest brushstroke and outlined a range of areas for action on sustainable development. These actions sought to integrate thinking related to environmental degradation, development, poverty, equity, governance, participation and so forth (Schreurs, 2012). By extension, Agenda 21 goals included combating deforestation, protecting oceans, promoting human rights, improving human health, altering consumption patterns, and a litany of other ambitious agendas. The greatest success of Agenda 21 was that it spurred the formation of sustainable development commissions in roughly 150 countries, albeit with highly varying results. Like the

CBD, however, Agenda 21 failed to lead to significant institutionalisation and progress on sustainability at the international level.

The UNFCCC is the most significant institutional legacy of the Earth Summit by a wide margin. It has achieved a mature level of institutionalisation, actuated a number of complex policies and mechanisms and annually holds internationally relevant high-level conferences. However, UNFCCC processes have been rife with difficulty (Ewing, 2012; Park et al., 2008). Most notably, the UNFCCC has thus far fallen short of meeting its declared goal of stabilising atmospheric greenhouse gas levels 'at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system' (UNFCCC, 1992). UNFCCC processes continue and significant climate change mitigation progress is possible, but at present the international climate change dialogue remains mired in uncertainty (Ewing, 2012).

[^ To the top](#)

Rio+20: Stagnation or progress for sustainable development?

The outcomes that have flowed from the 1992 Earth Summit are germane to the prospects for Rio+20. The degree to which current discussions of sustainable development mirror those leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit is striking, with the language simply shifting to include the 'green economy' and concepts associated with 'green growth'. In the words of a UN concept document for Rio+20, '[t]he green economy approach seeks, in principle, to unite under a single banner the entire suite of economic policies and modes of economic analyses of relevance to sustainable development' (UNGA, 2010:15). This suite of policies is reflected in the encompassing scope of the green economy discussions outlined in the more recent UN draft on the goals of Rio+20. This document, known as the Zero Draft, advocates that policy options for the green economy include 'regulatory, economic and fiscal instruments, investment in green infrastructure, financial incentives, subsidy reform, sustainable public procurement, information disclosure, and voluntary partnerships' (UNCSD, 2012b:6).

On a more thematic level, the UN Environment Programme (UNEP, 2011:1) has cited disillusionment with prevailing economic systems and suggested that there are movements towards a 'new economic paradigm – one in which material wealth is not delivered perforce at the expense of growing environmental risks, ecological scarcities and social disparities'. Such assertions on the green economy by multiple UN bodies are reconstitutions of the decades-old sustainability discourse that took shape most formatively through the Brundtland Report. This does not mean that the concepts are necessarily stale or without value, but does suggest that the impediments to sustainable development that have been observed during past decades should be soberly recognised.

Much green growth and sustainable development logic is predicated on the possibilities of so-called win-win strategies for economic growth, environmental health and social progress. A statement by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA, 2011:v) exemplifies one aspect of this notion when it states that the green economy 'has the potential to ensure the preservation of the earth's ecosystem along new economic growth pathways while contributing at the same time to poverty reduction'. Such pathways certainly exist. New technologies associated with the green economy, from clean power generation to pollution reduction, have shown the capacity to create jobs, improve productivity and offer new avenues for economic activities. Moreover, greater efficiency in resource usage, whether by individuals, communities, business or states, can have clear economic and environmental co-benefits.

However, the degree to which aspects of sustainability still come into conflict with systemic economic trends should not be underestimated. Competition for resources through geopolitical rivalry, economic policies focusing solely on resource availability and price, and paradoxes surrounding the curbing of consumption for environmental reasons and its encouragement for economic growth are all impediments to the green economy paradigm (Brand, 2012). These trends were present in 1992 and have amplified since. Globalised systems of production and consumption now see comparative advantages sought in different economic sectors the world over. In practice, this means that many countries and economic actors will make seemingly rational decisions (in the sense that they will maximise financial benefits), in areas such as resource extraction, industrial and agricultural policy, and labour force organisation, that are in fact socioeconomically and environmentally untenable in the longer term. Ultimately, there will be trade-offs in shifting to a 'greener' or more environmentally 'sustainable' economic future. These may come in the form of higher commodity prices, increasingly difficult land-use



Despite increasing international attention and the focus given to environmental issues following the 1992 Earth Summit, forest losses have continued at a significant pace as new lands have been developed for human use. Deforestation such as that seen here in Brazil can have serious implications for biodiversity and a range of ecological and social systems.

Credit: UN Photo / Pemaca Sudhakaran.

choices (Ewing, 2011), and significant transitional challenges in the management of labour and livelihood. The trade-offs are at least in part unavoidable, and should not be masked by visions of smooth transitions and symbiotically beneficial relationships between the environment and economies.

[^ To the top](#)

Conclusion: The value of Rio+20

The fracture points between environmental and economic considerations are not cause for abandoning sustainable development approaches nor do they negate the potential value of Rio+20. Judiciously developing resources is a long-term social imperative, particularly if intergenerational equity is considered. It is also an avenue from which immediate and near-term progress can be made on issues of development, quality of life and political stability.

However, these benefits will require that difficult decisions be made and creative compromises found that assuage the concerns of parties with a multitude of competing interests. It is here that the deliberations of Rio+20 can have their greatest impact, even if these impacts are not readily evident from the formalised outcomes. The meetings will facilitate what Andonova and Hoffman (2012:60) have termed 'collective wondering' about new pathways for solutions to problems spanning environmental and economic spheres.

As Andonova and Hoffman (2012:58) state, it has been the 'somewhat unintended' result of global environmental dialogue that 'innovation and experimentation outside the formal, multilateral processes' have expanded mightily. Creative and potentially effective policy mechanisms in areas such as the valuation of environmental and social externalities, payments for ecological services, and transboundary environmental justice have had their genesis in collaborative international meetings. The goalposts have shifted as a result of such connections created through diligent international dialogue, and Rio+20 will again bring together multi-sector stakeholders with a wide array of skills and ideas. The legacy of the impending discussions will be written and judged on the tangible agreements and mechanisms that are proffered at the international level, and sending effective signals from this lofty perch is no doubt necessary. However, it is likely that effective mechanisms for managing environmental problems will come less from top-down agreements than from coordinating innovative approaches among national and subnational actors. In this sense, inclusive meetings such as Rio+20 remain invaluable.

Notes

1. The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20–22 June 2012.
2. The chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Brundtland Commission), Gro Harlem Brundtland, addressed the 1992 Earth Summit. Also, then-UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali discussed the Commission's report explicitly in his address, as did Conference President Fernando Collor de Mello of Brazil and Conference Secretary-General Maurice F. Strong (see: UNGA (1992)).
3. The early 1970s saw emerging interest in international environmental issues, which was exemplified and amplified by the 1972 Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm. This is not to suggest, however, that the Stockholm Conference represented the origins of international institutional activities aimed at addressing environmental degradation. Elizabeth DeSombre (2007) points to early-20th century international cooperation regarding wildlife, such as the Convention between the United States and Other Powers Providing for the Preservation and Protection of Fur Seals (the Fur Seal Treaty of 1911), as preliminary success stories in environmental collaboration. She states, however, that the 'modern era of international environmental cooperation is generally traced' to Stockholm in 1972 (DeSombre, 2007:8).
4. C. Anthony Giffard (1996) records 167 reports by *Reuters*, 69 by the *New York Times News Service*, 102 by *Associated Press* (AP), and 85 by *Inter Press Service* (IPS) in English, over the period 13 May – 14 June, which represents the two weeks prior to the 1992 Earth Summit and the Summit itself.

[^ To the top](#)

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