



## Rio+20

*They Delivered What They Could Deliver  
And It Was More (And Different)  
Than You Might Have Thought*

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### Abstract

*This reflection on Rio+20 examines many of the major social institutions and how they fulfilled their functions during the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development at Rio. The institutions are: 1. Nation-states as a collective. 2. Individual nation-states. 3. Vanguard institutions (some NGOs). 4. Action and convening NGOs. 5. Global media. 6. Governments of nation-states acting domestically 7. Individual governments in bilateral and multilateral situations. 8. Similar institutions in different countries acting together. 9. Businesses. 10. Global science. Each is considered within the assumptions of what the society expects them to deliver (in general), what is possible for them to deliver, and what they did deliver at Rio. In approaching Rio+20, our account differs considerably from much of the reportage by the mainstream media.*

If you read the mainstream media reportage you would have concluded that Rio+20 was a “failure”. The government delegations did not produce a strong declaration, full of commitments, of reducing poverty, stopping climate change, and developing economies sustainably. But my personal sense was different from what I read. I was there for 7 days of the conferences and meetings. I also read about 50 media accounts of the event. That reportage, to a large degree, wasn’t what I experienced.

It seemed to me that this “reportage” was built mostly around the expectations of the leaders of organizations that I call below the “confrontational NGOs.” In short, these NGOs had “expectations” or more appropriately, “wishes” that were out of line with what one could realistically expect (given what social science knows about political behavior). One could predict with considerable certainty that they would be extremely disappointed. Thus, one of the filters through which many of the media framed their stories was through these expectations and the resultant “failure” to meet them.

But that wasn’t the whole story of Rio+20. Not by a long shot. Rather than engage in a tit-for-tat critique of the mainstream reportage, I will describe what I saw and what perhaps we can begin to make of it.

One of the ways to look at an international conference like Rio+20 is through the lens of the major institutions of global civilization such as governments, businesses, NGOs,

the media, etc. Together, they form the human ecosystem of institutions that humans have created. Together, they delivered what they could deliver. We can step back and ask: “What did they deliver with respect to sustainability (both for the planet’s ecosystems and the continued thriving of humanity)?”

## **1. What was Rio+20?**

Official name: The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil on 20–22 June, 2012. Themes: “The Future We Want” and “The Green Economy”. The “+20” marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the Earth Summit held in Rio in 1992 during which the international treaties ‘The Convention on Biological Diversity’ and ‘The Framework Convention on Climate Change’ were signed and ‘Agenda 21’ was formulated.

## **2. What Happened?**

50,000 people came to Rio de Janeiro to dialogue. Almost 4,000 of them were journalists. 100 were heads of states. The government officials met for 3 days and produced a document called the Rio Declaration. Almost 10,000 non-governmental organizations were registered. They convened around 6,000 side-events lasting an average of one and a half hours each. At least, 2,000 business leaders were there for five full days of major business side-events. A “People’s Summit” from civil society met in a park which was a considerable distance from the convention halls. Scientists had several-day meetings ahead of the official government meetings.

## **3. The Mood**

Upbeat. Everybody worried, but hopeful about the future. All with a proliferation of ideas to put human civilization on a more positive course. In 30 or more pavilions and tents in several large clusters, some more permanent than others. Scattered around the city. Government negotiators were in one pavilion. The major stakeholder groups in two others. The press had a third. All these were clustered around a food court pavilion. Across the street from the convention center was yet another field full of large tents and pavilions given over to the nations of the world – a kind of mini world’s fair.

## **4. The Outcomes: Governments Working Together**

In the media around the world, the spotlight was on the 180 nation-states and what they could put together in an international consensus process. And what the nations acting together could deliver is a 49-page Declaration mostly filled with suggestions – to each other and to other institutions – but few commitments.

Some people fantasize that nation-state leaders can decide anything they want to at any time, and do anything. Not so. I will list some of my assumptions about the behavior of institutions.

**Assumption One:** Nation-states can only agree to do on the international stage what their domestic politics and their national power (soft and hard) permit.

**Assumption Two:** Sometimes, under unusual sets of circumstances, they can act together and create new global institutions (in this case read: treaties of which the two signed in 1992 are examples). Rio+20 was not such a situation.

These two assumptions that come out of observations of governments trying to make treaties and other agreements provide us with quite different expectations. The governments working together on the Rio Declaration delivered what one could expect from these expectations. It should be noted that 180 countries working together this year at Rio+20 were able to agree on three modest actions to strengthen international institutions.

Firstly, the UN Environmental Programme was made a “universal membership” body (all nations are now members). This gives it a stronger foundation and mandate within the UN special agencies.

Secondly, the UN Commission on Sustainable Development was upgraded and proposed to have a status equal to the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), and thus can report directly to the UN General Assembly. These are to be formally approved at the UN General Assembly meeting beginning in September 2012.

A third outcome of the Declaration was a consensus on setting a process for creating Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030. These are an upgrade to the Millennium Development Goals that expire in 2015. The governments agreed on a two-year timeframe to develop the SDGs (2014) and to identify the means of implementation.

Noting a shift in the framing of the international dialog, Conservation International said: *“Of greatest importance was the fact that for the first time we saw both governments and businesses explicitly recognizing that natural capital (bio-diversity and ecosystem services) is the essential core element of sustainable development and that healthy ecosystems must be the foundation of human well-being. This is an extraordinary and transformative change in mindset, as it finally moves the environment from a marginal issue to a central component of future development strategies.”*

## **5. The Outcomes: Confrontational NGOs**

**Assumption Three:** Human societies need vanguard institutions (some with international scope and scale), usually called NGOs, whose job is to monitor the boundaries and frontiers of global civilization’s future and to assess, forecast, warn, cajole, plead, shout, protest in anger or otherwise attempt to move societies in different directions.

So, one would expect that the failure of the actions of the 180 countries acting together would greatly frustrate the leaders of these NGOs. Their job is to deliver criticism – particularly in the case of businesses and governments – on the speed and effectiveness of the other institutions moving to a sustainable future.

It was the NGOs’ expectations (read: disappointments) which were featured in many of the media accounts of the conference. So, we heard statements from Friends of the Earth International saying, “Once again, corporate polluters have held UN decision-making hostage to furthering their economic interests, at the expense of people’s well-being and the planet.” Kumi Naidoo, the global head of Greenpeace, said the organization was so “disappointed”

by what Rio+20 could deliver that they decided to move to a “war footing” with the financial sector of global business. I thought to myself, “Just doing their job in the ecosystem of institutions we all live among.”

## 6. The Outcomes: Media

**Assumption Four:** Taken together, the global media organization is also an institution. Its job is to report what is happening, often by being stenographers for the rhetoric of the leaders of other sectors. Because they have to depend on attracting readers, the media tend to focus their stories on conflict and the most outrageous behavior of people in the other institutions.

The journalists, print, TV, and film, who were at Rio+20 (mostly) provided headlines such as these:

“A colossal failure of leadership and vision” (quoting World Wildlife Fund).  
“Environmental summits lose value as past pledges go unmet” (Toronto Globe and Mail).  
“Diplomats agree on ‘weak’ text for Rio +20 green summit” (Reuters).  
“Rio+20 declaration talks fail almost before they begin” (New Scientist).  
“Rio+20: Progress on Earth issues ‘too slow’ – UN chief” (BBC).

Thus, the media, for the most part, delivered the news in fragments focusing as much as possible on the sharp edge of the debates and the most audible critics.

## 7. The Outcomes: Initiator NGOs

**Assumption Five:** Many NGOs can use their institutional flexibility and influence to convene, organize, and institutionalize large initiatives that governments and businesses find difficult to get off the ground.

Some NGOs gathering together with governments and businesses made major announcements and commitments along these lines. They showed what they could deliver. One of these is a major reforestation initiative.

USAID’s Deputy Administrator, Ambassador Donald Steinberg, announced that the U.S. Government and companies of the Consumer Goods Forum are forming a new partnership to work together to reduce deforestation by “greening the supply chain” and, within 100 days, would hold a global partnership dialogue. With all due respect to my colleagues who have been in the room negotiating, I don’t think these are side events. This is the main event. For me, this was the most succinct summary of Rio+20.

*“The Consumer Goods Forum, representing more than 400 companies and brands operating with combined annual revenues of over US\$3.1 trillion, has pledged to achieve zero net deforestation in its supply chains by 2020.”*

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Summing up the conference, Sha Zukang, a Chinese diplomat and Secretary-General of the summit, reported that 692 side commitments by governments, businesses, and NGOs were made at Rio valued at \$513 billion.

## 8. The Outcomes: Individual Governments

**Assumption Six:** Governments of nation-states are major institutions and have somewhat more flexibility in what they can accomplish acting separately than they can have acting together with other governments.

Individual governments are also major institutions in the world. A number of individual governments made announcements of significance. Notable among these, for example, was British deputy prime minister Nick Clegg's announcement that the British government will require all companies listed on the London Stock Exchange to report their greenhouse gas emissions publicly.

The Brazilian state of Pará that covers a large part of the Amazon committed publicly to get to zero net deforestation by 2020.

South Africa, Denmark, France, and Brazil said they would implement UNEP's global reporting of environmental country footprints for their companies.

Countries like Kiribati and Cook Islands in the Pacific and the Maldives, which had been leaders in the group of "Small Island States" announced that they were creating the world's largest marine reserves incorporating the ocean around their more than 2000 km islands. They also noted that they were becoming the first "Large Ocean States".

**Assumption Seven:** Individual governments can also make bilateral and multilateral agreements and join with other NGOs and businesses to start new initiatives (that are easier to accomplish than coming to consensus with the other 180 nations).

That happened at Rio+20 – in a big way. Here are some examples of that.

The US government announced a \$2 billion commitment to a clean energy development program of aid for Africa. And the US Agency for International Development announced a conference within 100 days to implement the Consumer Goods Forum's pledge to have zero net deforestation by 2020. A large number of big international companies are part of this including Coca-Cola, General Mills, Kraft, and Colgate.

I noted in Axiom One that national governments are limited by what their domestic politics will permit (i.e., you cannot do anything if you are not reelected). The corollary to that axiom is that nation-states do have more flexibility to act within their own borders, again, domestic politics permitting. A few months prior to Rio+20, a group of parliamentarians calling themselves Global Legislators Organization (GLOBE) released a report that showed significant movement at the domestic level among many governments. Their report said:

*"Legislation is being advanced, to varying degrees, in all of the countries studied [16].*

*Most of the legislative activity has taken place over the last year and a half – contrasting sharply with the difficulties experienced by the international negotiations*

*over the same timeframe. This demonstrates that the shape of the debate is changing from one about sharing a global burden – with governments naturally trying to minimize their share – to one of a realisation that acting on climate change is in the national interest. It is particularly encouraging that the large developing countries of Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa – who together represent the engine of global economic growth – are developing comprehensive laws to tackle climate change.”*

GLOBE President, Rt Hon. John Gummer, Lord Deben wrote, “*The study illustrates that the shape of the debate on climate change is shifting from being about sharing a global burden – with governments naturally trying to minimise their share – to a realisation that acting on climate change is in the national interest.*”

What this says to me is that a growing awareness has been arising over the last 20 years since the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and is being translated into possibilities for action within nations. And as the awareness of sustainability and climate-change challenges increases what individual nations can deliver, the way of change is itself changing.

## **9. The Outcomes: Coalitions of the Willing**

**Assumption Eight:** Institutions in different countries find themselves having similar interests, goals, and capabilities that can translate into coordinated action.

Eight of the world’s big development banks are shifting their transportation investments (\$175 billion – not new money) from road and highway construction to urban transport, including buses, trains, and bicycle lanes.

A “Natural Capital Declaration” put together by the Global Canopy Programme and the UN Environment Programme engaged 57 countries, banks, companies and investors to pledge to measure wealth in terms of natural capital. This puts a “green accounting system” into national and company accounts. The World Bank and 86 private companies signed on to ecosystem services (the value that air, water, forests, and ecosystems provide to the human economy). Signatories included China Merchants Bank, Puma, Dow Chemical, Unilever, and Mars.

Ban Ki-moon’s ‘Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL)’ initiative kicked off at Rio as well, with more than 50 governments planning together to achieve the three goals of the initiative: to ensure energy access for approximately two billion people who have no electricity, double the share of renewable energy and double energy efficiency. Key stakeholders, including governments, businesses, banks, civil society pledged \$50 billion to achieve these goals by 2030.

Another group was there: the justices and prosecuting attorneys of many countries who were concerned about sustainable development, poverty, and human rights. I did not attend these sessions. But among the topics introduced was the possible criminalization of peacetime “ecocide” in the same treaty that already exists for wartime massive destruction of ecosystems. As far as I can tell, there was no agreement, and, indeed, no recommendation on making ecocide an international crime against humanity — not this year.

## 10. The Outcomes: Business

*Assumption Nine:* In the global economy, businesses have great scope and scale in delivering goods and services and, in many cases, greater flexibility and capability to deliver rapid change to the sustainability and climate change situation than governments or NGOs.

Businesses deliver around 60 - 70% of global GDP. They too were showing an increasing awareness of how the future would have to change. And they had the willingness to take action on climate change and sustainability. Here are three (of the hundreds) such announcements made at Rio.

Microsoft committed to going carbon neutral in its operations in over 100 countries.

Infosys, the big Indian computer and outsourcing services company, committed to reducing energy consumption by 50% and sourcing 100% of its electricity from renewables by 2018.

Bank of America has announced a ten year \$50 billion fund for environmental investment.

The insurance companies of the world are beginning to realize their common interests and goals. At Rio+20, they got together as a group and released a set of principles of sustainable insurance. It is clear that insurance companies and reinsurance companies are carefully looking at the issues of climate change and sustainability with an intense focus on pricing risk. They will be reassessing annual insurance premiums for property damage and liability. And they have influence in the global economy. They control, some say, up to 7% of global assets.

It may be that we will look back on this public shift in business strategies as the major outcome of the Rio+20 conference.

## 11. The Outcomes: Science

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*“Science delivers, with notable exceptions, dense, specialized, sometimes pretty obscure findings that are barely comprehensible to people in other social institutions.”*

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*Assumption Ten:* Science in our civilization has the responsibility for observing, conceptualizing and reporting major processes and trends on the physical, social, economic, and cultural aspects of the planet. It delivers, with notable exceptions, dense, specialized, sometimes pretty obscure findings about the immense complexity of the planet that are barely comprehensible to people in other social institutions.

It was science that got this whole enterprise going in the first place. Rio+20 was initiated and energized as a result of what science has been discovering and saying for the past 40

years. And the scientists, meeting a few days before the meeting, did not disappoint. For the most part, they gave us complex, lengthy appraisals of the physical situation, clouded with caution about uncertainties and unknowns and notice of the “need for further research.”

Well, these are our human institutions. They were all present at Rio+20. They were all there delivering what they could deliver – not more, not less.

So, Rio+20 gave us an opportunity to see what human institutions, as now constituted, could deliver in the face of perhaps the greatest challenge ever to face humanity and an accelerating, potential global disaster. As the Declaration said, “*We reaffirm that climate change is one of the greatest challenges of our time, and we express profound alarm that emissions of greenhouse gases continue to rise globally. We are deeply concerned that all countries, particularly developing countries, are vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, and are already experiencing increased impacts including persistent drought and extreme weather events, sea level rise, coastal erosion and ocean acidification, further threatening food security and efforts to eradicate poverty and achieve sustainable development*” (para. 190).

Greater awareness was present at Rio+20. What is hard to assess coherently is the overall level of global awareness that might lead to continued effective action.

## 12. Another Lens – Perhaps a Global “Movement” Slowly Coalescing

Speaker after speaker assured their audiences — as if in a ritual — that sustainability was the most important thing for those gathered to agree upon.

And the whole audience nodded. The message was repeated in panel after panel.

And almost all speakers exhorted the assembled that the most important thing to do was to “collaborate.” And, it appeared to me, the audience nodded. At one point, I thought that “collaborate” was the most-used word at the conference, almost beyond the endless repetition of the word “sustainable.”

What was happening here? What is to be made of such rituals?

**Assumption Eleven:** We are a groupish species. We need to know that our closest community agrees with us and us with them.

And any major change in our group direction needs to have lots of this kind of agreement. We need to hear our group leaders say what they (and we) are thinking about our purposes and goals. And, after that we can get busy on the actions we are able to take responsibility for.

I am struggling here to find the right words to describe what seemed to be happening among the 50,000 people assembled. There was a growing sense of identity, of “we” are all in this together. But what do we “call” ourselves? Are we a “movement?” Do we have

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*“There was a growing sense of identity of “we” are all in this together. But what do we “call” ourselves? Are we a “movement?” Do we have the potential power of a global movement?”*

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the potential power of a global movement? Huge numbers of the 50,000 people assembled represented whole organizations that were part of this “we.” Some of the business executives there lead organizations with a hundred thousand workers and more. There was a wider sense of “shared identity” happening.

But, one of the things largely missing from the gathering is something that Rio, the city, is known for – the elements of the carnival. What was hard to find at Rio+20 were massive art works – like the floats and huge beautifully costumed dancing, singing groups. What was missing was that kind of ritual that bonds people together in another way than rhetoric from panel discussions and speeches. What was missing was a signature song, like “We shall overcome” that served the American Civil Rights Movement so well. We were like fans at a football game without a crowd cheer.

All this is the kind of thing that is hard to assess – even at a meeting like Rio+20. How big is the movement? How fast is it growing? How much agreement is actually there? What is its shape — in scope and scale? How powerful is it? How powerful could it become? How do we forecast the progress it will make? Will the movement achieve its goals within the timeframe that scientists have sketched out for planetary civilization? Those are questions I did not hear discussed at Rio+20.

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