United Nations Conference on Environment and Development

The United Nations (UN) Conference on Environment and Development was convened between June 3 and 14, 1992, in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 20 years after the first global environmental conference in Stockholm. The primary focus of the Rio conference was to reconceptualize the global development agenda to include the sustainable use of natural resources. World leaders attempted to ameliorate the world’s most pressing environmental issues by agreeing on a comprehensive strategy. This strategy aimed to meet current socio-environmental needs while ensuring a healthy and viable world for future generations. The Rio Summit boasted unparalleled representations from 172 governments, including 108 heads of state, and the participation of 1,400 nongovernment organizations (NGOs).

The 1984 Brundtland Commission (named after the chair, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlam Brundtland) laid the foundations of the Rio Summit. The commission published a provocative and widely circulated document titled Our Common Future. Lauded by the international environmental community, it derogated the world’s failure to achieve development goals sustainably and outlined visionary actions for reversing anticipated environmental catastrophes. This document helped propel international support among world leaders for the Rio Summit and generally outlined the topics for discussion.

The main plan of action developed and adopted by the 178 governments at the Rio Summit is known as Agenda 21. It is a comprehensive blueprint for global, national, and local actions by UN organizations, governments, and major environment and development stakeholders. Ten years later, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), held in Johannesburg, attempted to affirm UN commitments to the “full implementation” of Agenda 21, alongside the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals and other international agreements.

One of several other important achievements of the conference was agreement on the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), which aimed at stabilizing greenhouse gas concentrations at a level that would prevent dangerous interference in Earth’s atmosphere. The FCCC later led to the Kyoto Protocol, a legally binding agreement among countries to reduce carbon emissions. Another key agreement adopted at Rio was the Convention on Biological Diversity. It established three principal goals: (1) conservation of biological diversity, (2) sustainable use of its components, and (3) fair and equitable sharing of the benefits from the use of genetic resources.

The Rio Summit was sharply criticized for its failure to include the regulation of businesses, financial institutions, and transnational corporations in Agenda 21 despite their central role as carbon emitters. Furthermore, several accords were left unmet after Rio, largely due to the United States’ unwillingness to sign key treaties.

Presaging a growing civil society influence in UN covenants, 18,000 representatives attended a parallel summit specifically for NGO participants (a number that has swelled at consecutive UN summits). However, civil representation remained geographically unbalanced, and civil society organizations remained ancillary collaborators to states and largely remained distant from the central politics shaping Agenda 21.

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Further Readings


Entry Citation:
