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EARTH SUMMIT

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), popularly known as the Earth Summit, was convened in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 1992 in the hopes of securing a number of environmentally responsible international agreements. The conference brought together the largest number of world leaders that had ever been assembled: 118 heads of state and government and delegations from 178 nations. There were 7,000 diplomats and their staff. As Thomas Kamm wrote in the *Wall Street Journal*, this "mother of all summits" was "the biggest gathering of world leaders ever held" (1992, p. A1). Through media coverage from the 7,000 journalists who were present, UNCED gained world attention for major environmental issues. The chief official for UNCED was Maurice Strong, a Canadian businessman and environmentalist.

THE CONFERENCE AND ITS PUBLICATIONS

Parallel to the official summit was a Global Forum. Here, by one count, there were 3,738 nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) from 153 countries that had something to say about the environment, and about 30,000 participants in total. The Global Forum featured hundreds of displays in outdoor booths and had hundreds of speakers, including many celebrities.

The conference produced the *Rio Declaration* (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992b), a short statement of principles on environment and development. It also produced *Agenda 21* (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 1992a), at over 500 pages long perhaps the most complex and comprehensive international document ever attempted. Initially, there was hope for four international conventions—(1) Forests, (2) Biotechnology, (3) Biodiversity, and (4) Climate—though only the latter two survived the negotiating process, both in greatly weakened form. The principal stumbling blocks on biodiversity and biotechnology conventions revolved around access to genetic resources and technology transfer.

UNCED did adopt a more schematic statement of principles for the sustainable management of forests.

A widely read preparatory study, *Our Common Future* (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987), commonly called the Brundtland Report after its chair, Norwegian Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland, set the tone for much of the debate. The study opened with a memorable aphorism: "The Earth is one but the world is not." On the one home planet, with its plural and often divisive peoples and their national interests, the principal focus must be on sustainable development. "Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (World Commission on Environment and Development 1987, pp. 27, 43). That statement set future generations on the horizon of the present but also opened up questions of distributive justice in the present time, whether current patterns of wealth and poverty would contribute toward sustaining such a future,

UNCED and the Global Forum turned out, to the surprise of some, to be a global morality play, where the developing nations could gain equal hearing with the developed nations. "The summit must establish a whole new basis for relations between rich and poor, North and South, including a concerted attack on poverty as a central priority for the 21st century" (Maurice Strong, quoted in Allen, 1992, p. A8). At both UNCED and the Global Forum, much concern was expressed about the North, the rich, American and European lifestyles, the G-7 nations, and paternalistic do-gooders. The event became almost a guilt trip, with, at the same time, many world leaders inclined to pin responsibility on someone else and to duck strong measures that could hurt them economically or politically.

One lesson from Rio is the excruciating difficulty of getting past the political barriers facing any attempt at a concerted international effort to achieve reform that is in every human being's long-term interest but runs contrary to many countries' short-term priorities. National sovereignties tended to constrain the effectiveness of the conference when it sought to protect the global commons. Concern was ample, but cooperation was elusive because nation-states defended the interests of their citizens, and this cast nation against nation, and often the developed nations against the developing nations. The question of responsibility to Earth was addressed only subsequently, when it was discussed at all. More frequently, the developing countries were demanding what they claimed to be their rights and the developed countries were defending what they claimed to be theirs.

A VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Nevertheless, UNCED produced memorable visions of responsibilities to life on Earth. Boutros Boutros-Ghali, speaking as the United Nations secretary-general, closed the Earth Summit: "The Spirit of Rio must create a new mode of civic conduct. It is not enough for man to love his neighbour; he must also learn to love his world" (Boutros-Ghali 1992a, p. 1). "We must now conclude an ethical and political contract with nature, with this Earth to which we owe our very existence and which gives us life" (Boutros-Ghali, 1992b, vol. IV, pp. 66-69). Such an environmental ethic enlarges its vision from a social contract to a natural contract between one planet and many peoples in search of an urgent world vision. The summit was a watershed because two principles of international order were solidified; an equitable international economic order and sustainable development with requisite protection of the environment.

The United Nations (UN) set up a Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) for effective follow-up. In 1997 at the New York headquarters, the UN General Assembly held a five-year review of progress on Earth Summit, commonly called Rio+5. The assembly found uneven progress, with widening inequities in income and continued environmental deterioration. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (called Earth Summit 2002) was held, after ten years, in Johannesburg, South Africa, in 2002; it was boycotted by the United States. The UN simultaneously sponsored an intensive analysis, the *Millennium Ecosystem Assessment*, and a statement of millennium development goals.

SEE ALSO *Biodiversity; Brundtland Report; Convention on Biodiversity; Global Climate Change; Nongovernmental Organizations; Rio Declaration; Sustainability; Sustainable Development; Technology.*

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Holmes Rolston III