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RIO DECLARATION

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, produced a short document titled *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development*. This document was to be named the *Earth Charter*, but developing nations objected that such a name focused too much on the earth and nature, and not enough on people and development, so the tide was changed. It was renamed the *Rio Declaration* for the lack of any consensus about a title with more explicit reference to its contents. The declaration states twenty-seven principles, most given in a sentence or two, while a few form short paragraphs. Although it was only six pages long, there were lengthy arguments during the proceedings over nuances of phrasing. Toward the close of the conference a document was produced, and this has since been signed by almost every nation. The United States signed, with some protests about possible misinterpretations of the language of the declaration.

Even before the conference started, developing nations had already made it clear that they did not want an earth charter. In the discussion, a First World country delegate suggested an earth charter, a short creed, that "should be framed and put in the room of every child of the world." The retort from a Third World delegate: "Not every child has a room, maybe not even a bed!" Representatives of developing nations argued that direct concern for nature was an elitist luxury of First World nations, an inhumane overlooking of human poverty. "Ecologists care more about plants and animals than about people," complained Gilberto Mestrinho, governor of the Brazilian state of Amazonas. Or concern for saving the Earth was insincere, critics objected, unless accompanied by large donations from the wealthy nations to those in developing nations being asked to preserve nature.

"Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development," so the *Rio Declaration* begins in principle 1. It goes on to say that people are entitled to "a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." Alternative language, which was rejected, read, "Human beings are entitled to live in a sound environment, in dignity and in harmony with nature for which they bear the responsibility for protection and enhancement." Principle 4 reads, "In order to achieve sustainable devel-

opment, environmental protection shall constitute an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it." Development is clearly the dominating motif, with environmental conservation subsidiary to it.

Principle 7 reads, "States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command."

Environmental ethics with any direct concern for animals, plants, species, or ecosystems was essentially stripped from the draft language for the declaration. Its ethics was much more subdued than had been anticipated, because the rich-poor controversy became so unexpectedly intense. "Changes in life styles of the rich to those that are less polluting and wasteful is essential to reaching sustainable development." So proposed the developing nations in a draft text that the developed nations rejected. The objection was not so much to eliminating waste and pollution as to the suggestion that poverty in the South (the developing nations) was the fault of overconsumption in the North (the wealthy nations).

There were widespread complaints that world population growth was insufficiently addressed in the *Rio Declaration*, as well as overall at the Earth Summit, due to ideological and religious objections. The motivations suppressing attention to population control were as often implicit as explicit: that population reduction is an effort to reduce the number of non-Western (or non-Northern) people in the world, or that population control is an easier route than sharing unequally distributed resources, or that population control violates human rights or national sovereignty, or that the large populations of the poor really consume less than the limited but extravagantly consuming populations of the wealthy nations. The *Rio Declaration* mildly says, "States should... promote appropriate demographic policies" (principle 8). Developing nations were much more anxious to thrust blame on the developed countries for their overconsumption.

The *Rio Declaration* contrasts, tellingly, with a much earlier UN document called the *World Charter for Nature*. This charter begins, "Every form of life is unique, warranting respect regardless of its worth to man" (United Nations General Assembly 1982). A total of 112 nations endorsed this charter, though the United States vigorously opposed it. This statement was largely aspirational; few took it to require any serious changes in policy. In contrast, the *Rio Declaration*, coupled with the massive *Agenda*

21, which accompanied it, was expected to produce changes in behavior. The diplomatic negotiations formulating the document became a kind of morality play of developed nations versus developing nations, North versus South, rich versus poor, development versus conservation.

Disappointment in the *Rio Declaration* led original advocates of an *Earth Charter* to continue their efforts, and such efforts continued during the decade following the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. A version was completed in March 2000 at The Hague, Netherlands, and efforts to gain subscribers continue. Thousands of organizations have endorsed it, including the United Nations Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), but not yet the United Nations General Assembly. The first principle of the *Earth Charter*, "Respect Earth and life in all its diversity," states, "Recognize that all beings are interdependent and every form of life has value regardless of its worth to human beings." The latter phrasing recalls that of the *World Charter for Nature* and was inserted with an eye to the adoption of the *Earth Charter* by the United Nations General Assembly.

The *Rio Declaration* contains some key themes that are working their way into law: the principle that the polluter pays, responsibility for spillover damage from one country to another, intergenerational equity, public participation, a precautionary approach, environmental-impact assessments, differential responsibilities, healthy environments. Despite its shortcomings, the *Rio Declaration* serves a useful purpose as a negotiated multinational instrument that can serve as an icon for environmentally responsible development.

SEE ALSO *Convention on Biodiversity; Earth Charter; Earth Summit; Ecology: III. Ecosystems; Population; United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization.*

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