

## The UN and Sustainability

A summary of the UN's work on Sustainability

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Concerns about the environment and the sustainability of global development have been evolving within the UN system for over 40 years, and were formally put on the agenda in 1972. In that year the [United Nations Conference on the Human Environment](#) in Stockholm brought the industrialized and developing nations together to delineate the 'rights' of the human family to a healthy and productive environment. A series of such meetings followed, for instance, on the rights of people to adequate food, to sound housing, to safe water and to access to means of family planning. The recognition of the need to revitalize humanity's connection with nature led to the creation of a number of global institutions within the UN system.

In 1980, the [International Union for the Conservation of Natural Resources](#) (IUCN) published the World Conservation Strategy (WCS) which provided a precursor to the concept of sustainable development. The Strategy asserted that conservation of nature cannot be achieved without development to alleviate poverty and misery of hundreds of millions of people and it stressed the interdependence of conservation and development in which development depends on caring for the Earth. Unless the fertility and productivity of the planet are safeguarded, the human future is at risk.

In 1982, at the 48th plenary of the General Assembly, the WCS initiative led to the approval of the World Charter for Nature. That Charter stated that *"mankind is a part of nature and life depends on the uninterrupted functioning of natural systems"*.

In 1983, the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) was created and, by 1984, it was constituted as an independent body by the United Nations General Assembly. WCED was asked to formulate 'A global agenda for change'. In 1987, in its report *"Our Common Future"*, the WCED advanced the understanding of global interdependence and the relationship between economics and the environment previously introduced by the WCS. The report wove together social, economic, cultural and environmental issues and developed global solutions. It reaffirmed that *"the environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions and needs, and therefore it should not be considered in isolation from human concerns. The environment is where we all live; and development is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable."*

In 1987 also the [Montreal Protocol](#) that phased out the gasses that were depleting the Ozone layer, with developed countries providing funding for developing countries assisting them to make their changes.

In 1988 the [World Meteorological Organisation](#) (WMO) and the [UN Environmental Program](#) (UNEP) formed the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#) (IPCC). The task of the IPCC was to review and assess the most recent scientific, technical and socio-economic information relevant to the understanding of climate change.

In 1989 the General Assembly resolution [44/228](#) established the [Conference on the Environment and Development](#) (UNCED) which became the Rio Earth Summit in June 1992. This was a massive event, involving 172 countries, 108 heads of state and 2,400 NGO organisations, with a concurrent "Global Forum" with 17,000 attendees. Out of this summit came:

- [Agenda 21](#), a programme of action for sustainable development for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century.
- The [Rio Declaration on Environment and Development](#) which defined principles of development, including sustainability.
- The [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) which entered into force in Dec 1993
- The [Forest Principles](#) agreement that addressed the engagement of developed countries in supporting the protection of forests in developing countries.

- The [Framework Convention on Climate Change \(UNFCCC\)](#) to address the political and technical responses to climate change, based on the scientific findings of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC). This became the centre of the development of the climate change agenda with a continuing [series of meetings](#).

UNCED for the first time mobilized the major groups and legitimized their participation in the sustainable development process. For the first time also, the lifestyle of the current civilization was addressed in Principle 8 of the Rio Declaration and the urgency of a deep change in consumption and production patterns was expressly and broadly acknowledged by State leaders. Agenda 21 further reaffirmed that sustainable development was delimited by the integration of the economic, social and environmental pillars.

The spirit of the conference was captured by the expression "*Harmony with Nature*", brought to the fore with the first principle of the Rio Declaration: "*Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature*". A highlight of the conference was the [appeal](#) of 12 year old Severn Cullis-Suzuki for adults to honour their responsibilities to preserve the planet.

This conference laid the groundwork of a broad range of programs. Many of these came under the management of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs ([DESA](#)), which has a Division for Sustainable Development ([DSD](#)), managed by the Commission for Sustainable Development ([CSD](#)). Other sections of the UN are also involved as shown by the page on "[Sustainable Development, Human Settlements and Energy](#)". Also, the Global Environment Facility ([GEF](#)), which had been developed as part of the World Bank (WB), was restructured as an independent institution. The GEF serves as a financial mechanism for the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification. The GEF also addresses sustainable forest management, international waters, and ozone layer depletion.

During the 1990s there were [conferences on a wide range of subjects](#) including Population Development, Social Development, Status of Women, Sustainable Development, Biological Diversity, Desertification, Forests, Ozone layer protection, Climate Change and Fisheries. One them was the 1997 UNFCCC [Kyoto Protocol](#) addressing the control of greenhouse gas emissions by developed countries.

These led to:

1. The 2000 [Millennium Declaration](#) from the General Assembly summit which led to the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs), aimed at reducing global poverty and setting a series of poverty reduction targets for 2015. While these goals were principally related to poverty, health, education and women's empowerment, responsibilities of the relevant countries, Goal 7 addressed sustainable development and Goal 8 specified a partnership whereby the developed countries supported the developing countries.
2. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, South Africa in 2002 (Rio+10). The extensive [summit report](#) specified a wide range of targets, many reflecting the MDG program, and contained detailed programs of action. The summary [outcomes](#) outlined a variety of initiatives by countries and corporations. New Zealand was substantially involved, and realised significant [achievements](#).
3. An International Conference on Financing for Development, Monterrey, Mexico, 18-22 March 2002 developed the [Monterrey Consensus](#) addressing the financial requirements for development. This also addressed institutional and governance issues.

The 2005 UN General Assembly [World Summit](#) addressed a range of critical security issues, one of which was sustainable development. A central theme was the "*interdependent and mutually reinforcing pillars*" of sustainable development as economic development, social development, and environmental protection, as outlined in the [outcomes](#) document and its [fact sheet](#).

In the years after 2005 the issues of **climate change** became more important, as the 2007 [fourth assessment report](#) of the IPCC indicated more clearly the hazards of the increase in green-house gasses. The [UNFCCC](#) activity became more critical, and the need for concerted global action came to a head during the Copenhagen conference in December 2009, where high ambitions to attain a binding agreement clashed with the reactive political realities that many countries were dealing with. The result of the “train wreck” was a much diluted [Copenhagen Accord](#) ; much less than was thought necessary for effective progress, but nevertheless provided a basis for moving forward. A less ambitious and more pragmatic approach was taken in Cancun in December 2010, with the hope that more progress is made in Durban in 2011. Wikipedia provides a [summary](#) of UNFCCC meetings, while the UNFCCC outlines a much greater range of the meetings related to the [Rio Conventions Calendar](#).

On the broader sustainability program, the UN General Assembly resolution [A/RES/64/236](#) in March 2010 established the Rio+20 meeting for June 2012 in Rio de Janeiro. This resolution outlines the historical and organisational context of this event and identifies many of the principles involved. The Rio+20 [web site](#) details the preparatory documents and the planning for the event. The principal themes to be addressed learning from what has and has not happened in proceeding years, as well as developing “The Green Economy” and “The Institutional Framework” required to carry action forward. In December 2010, the UN Secretary General presented his report [Objectives and themes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development](#). One of the principal documents is [The Great Green Technological Transformation](#), a publication of DESA.

The UNCSO, under the Secretary Generalship of the Chinese diplomat Sha Zukang, is currently coordinating a series of meetings in preparation for Rio+20, coordinated with the UNFCCC meetings. The New Zealand government is involved in this process and has launched an ‘all of government’ exercise in preparation. Other organisations are also involved in preparing for Rio+20. For instance the World Business Council for Sustainable Development has prepared [Vision 2050](#), which outlines their view of a sustainable world in 2050, and how business might contribute in bringing it about.

#### **Comment.**

These activities of the UN system are driven by the largely consensus agreement of the worlds’ governments, guided and stimulated by a range of ancillary organisations, NGOs and corporates, both national and international. The agreements do much to combine the interests and perceptions of the communities involved, the development and environmental agencies, corporate sector and international NGOs. They are broad ranging, incorporating the many ecological, social, political, technical, resource and economic factors in enhancing the sustainability of the development programs, and often distil the critical issues. However, the outcomes of the UN deliberations are essentially agreements between governments, and it is principally the responsibility of governments to implement them. The principal role of the UN is in monitoring progress, sharing information between countries and regions and providing some support for specific critical activities. Some insight into the nature and achievements of these programs can be seen in the UNDP report to the 2010 General Assembly [Accelerating Progress towards the millennium Development Goals – UNDPs Work on Environment and sustainable Development](#).

While most of the development initiatives focus on the needs of the developing countries, there is also attention given to the need for changes in patterns of consumption which are directed principally at developed countries, as the General Assembly Resolution [A/RES/64/236](#) states:

***“Reiterating that fundamental changes in the way societies produce and consume are indispensable for achieving global sustainable development and that all countries should promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, with the developed countries taking the lead.....”***

This issue was also identified in Agenda 21 in 1992, and in the almost 20 years since, developed countries have continued their unsustainable consumption patterns almost unheeded, supported by an economic model that relies on continued expansion in consumption. Further, key developing countries, particularly China and India, have developed their own economies based on the same unsustainable patterns, while exploiting the consumptive demands of the developed countries, as well as their own people’s. Thus unsustainable consumption has, in that time, become further entrenched in the global economy.

For forty years now there have been authoritative warnings of the global unsustainability of the lifestyles of developed countries, but the message was contrary to common expectations of progress and the powerful interests that were promoting it. The message was dismissed, distorted and denigrated. The experts trying to warn people of the threats were dismissed as doom-sayers, and the public preferred to listen to those who denied the risks. Few governments have been able to respond adequately, because the political risks have been so great. Now that the threat is starting to impact on our life, many nations are at a loss of what to do. In fact some of the more coherent constructive responses seem to be associated more with the developing countries, rather than the developed.

Note: Basic text was drawn from the Rio+20 web site, but it is extensively supplemented.  
<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=22>