

Encyclopedia of Earth

United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil

Lead Authors: **Cutler J. Cleveland** (other articles) and **Ida Kubiszewski** (other articles)

Contributing Author: **Merrill Miller** (other articles)

Content Source: **United Nations** (other articles)

Article Topics: **Sustainable development and International environmental issues**

This article has been reviewed and approved by the following Topic Editor: **Peter Saundry** (other articles)

Last Updated: **November 9, 2007**

Table of Contents

- 1 Introduction
- 2 Results
 - 2.1 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development
 - 2.2 Agenda 21
 - 2.3 Statement of principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests
 - 2.4 United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity
 - 2.5 United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change
 - 2.6 United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development
- 3 Further Reading

Introduction

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit, took place in Rio de Janeiro, **Brazil**, from June 2-14, 1992. It was held twenty years after the **United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE)** took place in Stockholm, Sweden. Government officials from 178 countries and between 20,000 and 30,000 individuals from governments, non-governmental organizations, and the media participated in this event to discuss solutions for global problems such as poverty, war, and the growing gap between industrialized and developing countries. The central focus was the question of how to relieve the global environmental system through the introduction to the paradigm of sustainable development. This concept emphasizes that economic and social progress depend critically on the preservation of the natural resource base with effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.

Held to mark the twentieth anniversary of the **Stockholm Conference**, the Rio Earth Summit became everything that an earlier 'Stockholm plus ten' conference, held in Nairobi, **Kenya** in 1982, could not. Indeed, it became more than even its proponents had hoped for. Instead of being the 'second' United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, Rio was the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development; putting those two terms together, which had been so much at odds at Stockholm, might itself have been Rio's most important achievement. In particular, it broadened the scope of global environmental diplomacy by adopting the notion of sustainable development, which had been advocated 5 years earlier in by the World Commission on Environment and Development as one of its key policy frameworks.

The world at Rio was, of course, very different from the world at Stockholm. In the intervening two decades, the Cold War (the defining political framework at **UNCHE**) had disappeared, the level of public interest in the environment was greatly increased, environmental issues such as stratospheric ozone depletion and global climate change were now squarely on the global policy map, and energy had become a major concern for economic security in the aftermath of the oil price shocks of 1973-74 and 1980-81.

Results

The results of the UNCED included the Rio Declaration enunciating 27 principles of environment and development, Agenda 21, and a Statement of principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests, which were all adopted by consensus (without vote) by the conference. The institutional innovation resulting from the conference included an agreement on the operating rules for the Global Environmental Facility (GEF), **United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity**, and the establishment of the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) on the basis of an Agenda 21 recommendation. The **United Nations**



Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity were products of independent, but concurrent, negotiating processes that were opened for signatures at UNCED.

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development is a set of 27 legally non-binding principles designed to commit governments to ensure environmental protection and responsible development and intended to be an Environmental Bill of Rights, defining the rights of people to development, and their responsibilities to safeguard the common environment. It established the "Precautionary principle" and the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities". The Declaration recognizes that the only way to have long-term social and **economic progress** is to link it with environmental protection and to establish equitable global partnerships between governments and key actors of civil society and the business sector.

The Declaration includes many progressive approaches such as the **polluter pays principle** (the polluter bears the costs of pollution) and the precautionary principle (carry out environmental assessments to identify adverse impacts and eliminate any potential harms from a project before it is started). It advocates that today's development shall not undermine the resource base of future generations and that developed countries bear a special responsibility due to the pressure their societies place on the global environment and the technologies and **financial resources** they command. Strong environmental policies are inevitable but should not be used as an unjustifiable means of restricting international **trade** and shutting off the Northern **markets** for Southern countries. However, nations shall eradicate unsustainable patterns of **production** and **consumption**.

The earlier title "Earth Charter" was later appropriately downgraded as its contents were watered down and negotiated away. Effectively, its 27 principles are almost all weaker than the equivalent document signed in Stockholm 20 years earlier. The original idea of establishing an Earth Charter has not been forgotten but taken forward by the an independent NGO body, the Earth Charter Initiative.

Agenda 21

Agenda 21, the international plan of action to sustainable development, outlines key policies for achieving sustainable development that meets the needs of the poor and recognizes the limits of development to meet global needs. Agenda 21 has become the blueprint for **sustainability** and forms the basis for sustainable development strategies. It attempts to define a balance between **production**, **consumption**, population, development, and the Earth's life-supporting capacity. It addresses poverty, **excessive consumption**, health and education, cities and **agriculture**; food and natural resource management and several more subjects.

Its 40 chapters are broken up into four sections:

1. Social and economic dimensions: developing countries; poverty; **consumption** patterns; population; health; human settlements; integrating environment and development.
2. Conservation and management of resources: **atmosphere**; land; forests; deserts; **mountains**; **agriculture**; **biodiversity**; biotechnology; **oceans**; **fresh water**; toxic chemicals; hazardous, radioactive and solid waste and sewage.
3. Strengthening the role of major groups: women; children and youth; indigenous peoples; non-governmental organizations; local authorities; workers; business and industry; farmers; scientists and technologists.
4. Means of implementation: **finance**; technology transfer; science; education; capacity-building; international institutions; legal measures; information.

Statement of principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests

The Statement of Forest Principles was the first global agreement concerning sustainability of forest management. Although it was not a legally binding contract, all signatories are expected to practice reforestation and forest conservation; they were also to develop programs to find economic and social substitutions for **forestry**.

United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity

The **United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity** was signed by 154 member countries. The main objectives of the convention were to conserve biological species, genetic resources, habitats, and **ecosystems**; to ensure the sustainable use of biological materials; and to guarantee the fair and equitable sharing of benefits derived from genetic resources. It was conceived as a practical tool for translating the principles of Agenda 21 into reality.

United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) aims to "achieve ... stabilisation of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous interference with the climate system." It was signed by more than 180 governments and promotes the principles of **common but differentiated responsibility** and precautionary action.

The Convention divides countries into two groups: those who are listed in Annex 1 of the Convention and those who are not (known as 'non-Annex 1 Parties'). Annex 1 Parties are the industrialized countries, who have historically contributed the most to climate change. For example, North America and the European Union are jointly responsible for 85 percent of the human-made **carbon dioxide** in the atmosphere today. The UNFCCC established leading roles for industrialized countries in curbing **global warming** and required them assist developing countries to avoid the negative effects of climate change and to allow **adaptation**. UNFCCC called on Annex-1 Parties to stabilise their greenhouse gas **emissions** at 1990 levels by the year 2000.

United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development

The United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) was established by the UN General Assembly in December 1992 to ensure effective follow-up of UNCED. It is responsible for reviewing progress in the implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, as well as providing policy guidance to follow up the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) at the local, national, **regional** and international levels. The JPOI reaffirmed that the CSD is the high-level forum for sustainable development within the United Nations system.

Further Reading

- CSD homepage
- Full texts of all UNCED documents are available here:
 - Johnson, S.P., 1993. *The Earth Summit: The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED)*. Graham & Trotman/Martinus Nijhoff, London. ISBN: 1853337846
 - United Nations Environment Programme
- United Nations homepage
- UNFCCC homepage
- Hass, P.M., Levy, M.A. and Parson, E.A., 1992. Appraising the Earth Summit: How should we judge UNCED's success, *Environment*, 34(8):12–36.
- Gardner, R.N., 1992. *Negotiating Survival: Four Priorities after Rio*. Council on Foreign Relations Press, New York. ISBN: 0876091419
- Najam, Adil, 1995. An environmental negotiation strategy for the South, *International Environmental Affairs*, 7(3):249–287.
- Najam, A., Poling, J.M., Yamagishi, N., Straub, D.G., Sarno, J., DeRitter, S.M. and Kim, E.M., 2002, From Rio to Johannesburg: Progress and prospects, *Environment*, 44(7):26–38.

Citation

Cleveland, Cutler and Ida Kubiszewski (Lead Authors); Merrill Miller (Contributing Author); United Nations (Content source); Peter Saundry (Topic Editor). 2007. "United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), Rio de Janeiro, Brazil." In: Encyclopedia of Earth. Eds. Cutler J. Cleveland (Washington, D.C.: Environmental Information Coalition, National Council for Science and the Environment). [First published in the Encyclopedia of Earth May 7, 2007; Last revised November 9, 2007; Retrieved February 17, 2009]. <[http://www.eoearth.org/article/United_Nations_Conference_on_Environment_and_Development_\(UNCED\),_Rio_de_Janeiro,_Brazil](http://www.eoearth.org/article/United_Nations_Conference_on_Environment_and_Development_(UNCED),_Rio_de_Janeiro,_Brazil)>

Editing this Article

EoE Authors can click here to access this article within the editor wiki

If you are an expert, but not yet an Author, click here

Unless otherwise noted, all text is available under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike license.
Please see the Encyclopedia of Earth's website for Terms of Use information.
Supported by the Environmental Information Coalition and the National Council for Science and the Environment.