
AIMING RIO + 10 : FAILURES , ACHIEVEMENTS AND THE WAY FORWARD

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Background

In 1992, world leaders from over 100 nations met at the Earth Summit in Rio to set out an ambitious agenda to address the environmental, economic, and social challenges facing the international community. It was an unprecedented opportunity for the Global heads to sit across the negotiating table and find collective solutions to issues pertinent to the present and future generations. On the face of it, the international community affirmed that current patterns of economic and social development are not sustainable and replicable, and something needs to be done about it. Since then there have been a few constructive suggestions and responses by government, business and the civil society to meet the challenges that lie ahead. The picture which is, however, emerging of the world today is far from what was envisaged. The real outcome of the summit - in terms of tangible gains, firm commitments and improvements in the plans and policies, has not been commensurate to the hype generated by the event.

How far has UNCED failed?

In the years following the Earth Summit, the state of the global environment has continued to deteriorate at a pace that all but obliterates the vision of sustainable development articulated at Rio. Accelerated economic globalization, privatization and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption have taken a devastating toll on the earth's natural resources and its capacity to sustain itself.

Agenda 21 signed up at UNCED focused on over 30 key issues concerning sustainable development ranging from agriculture to waste management to information for decision-making. The progress made post-Rio against some of these key issues is discussed in the subsequent paragraphs.

Global Warming and Climate Change

A Convention on Climate Change, promising to prevent global warming was signed in Rio and some significant development regarding cutting back emissions were made in the later Conference of Parties. Global emissions of carbon dioxide however have continued to rise. Record-setting temperatures in the 1990s are part of the twentieth-century warming trend. Just over the last three decades (between 1969-71 and 1996-98), global average temperature has risen by 0.44 degrees Celsius. The 3 parts per million increase in the atmospheric concentration of carbon dioxide in 1998 was the largest ever recorded. In the 21st century, temperature is projected to rise even faster.

Biodiversity losses

The convention on Conservation of Bio-diversity promising to protect threatened species was signed up in Rio. Scientists however estimate that well over 100,000 species have been extinguished by human activity in the years since the Earth Summit. The share of bird, mammal, and fish species that are now in danger of extinction is in double digits - 11 percent of all bird species, 25 percent of mammals, and 34 percent of fish. Each year 25 -30,000 monkeys and other

primates are shipped across international borders, along with some 2 to 5 million live birds, 3 million live farmed turtles, and 2 to 3 million other live reptiles.

Energy Use and Consumption issues

World energy consumption continues to rise and per capita consumption of commercial materials remains far higher in developed countries compared to developing. On the other hand, major increases in energy-generating capacity are still required in many developing countries if basic human needs are to be met. Over 2 billion people still have little or no access to public and/or commercial energy supplies.

Transfer of Environmental Technology

Instead of the promised technology transfer at Rio, the new intellectual property rights agreement at the WTO is creating new barriers to the South's access to environmentally sound technology. It is accelerating the practice of bio-piracy, in which genetic resources and the knowledge of local communities on the sustainable use of biodiversity are hijacked and transformed into patents and patented products that are the new source of enormous profit for the big corporations. Needless to say, the main victims are the poor communities and ordinary people who endure the destruction of their environment and the indignities of poverty.

Poverty Gaps

The economic divide between rich and poor continues to grow – and somewhat attributed to the effects of globalization and free trade. The poorest countries have become even more marginalized. Over 1.1 billion people – 20 per cent of the world's population – live in absolute poverty, on the equivalent of less than one dollar a day.

Information for Decision-Making

The Index of technological progress is deteriorating faster than the Gini Index for poverty. High speed computers and internet connections are penetrating the North whereas half the world's population has never made or received a telephone call. Just 23 countries account for 62 percent of all phone lines, even though these countries are home to less than 15 percent of the world's peoples. The emerging digital divide will leave the South even more deprived of information for development and decision-making.

Health

While the world economy is booming, the HIV epidemic is devastating sub-Saharan Africa, a region of 800 million people. Life expectancy – a sentinel indicator of progress – is falling precipitously as the virus spreads. Before the onslaught of AIDS, life expectancy in Zimbabwe was 65 years. In 1998, it was 44 years. By 2010, it is projected to fall to 39 years. Other countries, such as Botswana, Kenya, Namibia, South Africa, and Zambia, are experiencing similarly graphic declines.

Water Scarcity

The worldwide over-pumping of aquifers, which is concentrated in China, India, North Africa, the Middle East, and the United States, exceeds 160 billion tons of water per year. In India, one of many countries where population is outrunning water supply, water pumped from underground far exceeds aquifer recharge. The resulting fall in water tables will eventually reduce irrigation water supplies, threatening India's food security and it may like Africa, face a decline in life expectancy.

Forest Degradation

In spite of a recent downward trend, forest loss continues at an unacceptable rate. A total of 13.7 million hectares of forest – roughly the size of Nepal – are cut or burned each year. The causes of the poor implementation of existing instruments and insufficient international regulation include the fact that governments are unable to agree on the basic principles of sustainable management and protection of forests. In addition, the industrialized nations are reluctant to subject the way

they manage their forests to international scrutiny. Instead, they want to saddle the tropical forest countries with the main task of stemming the destruction.

Malnourishment and Food Security

One billion people in the world still suffer from malnutrition and a whopping 55 percent of American adults are overweight. Food insecurity conditions are increasing in many of the African countries. Further, spreading water shortages threaten to reduce the global food supply by more than 10 percent.

Declining Aid

At the Rio summit, the developed countries promised to provide "new and additional" resources to help protect the environment and meet human needs in the developing countries. Ironically, the global aid has fallen and financial resources continue to move out from developing countries through debt servicing and declining terms of trade. Net flows of official development assistance, on which least developed and several other low-income countries depend, after increasing in 1993, declined in real terms in later years. Countries of Sub Sahara Africa still lose around 15 percent of their GDP through the fall in their terms of trade, and even more through debt servicing. In all \$300-500 billion flows out from South to North each year, creating a huge financial vacuum that the small and fast declining volume of aid is unable to offset. Net capital flows of private direct investment, portfolio investment and commercial bank lending have increased during the period 1992-1995, but have been concentrated in a relatively small number of developing countries.

Skewed Globalisation

In the five years after Rio, globalization is undermining the sustainable development agenda. In particular, the 1994 Marrakesh Agreements of the WTO appear to be overriding the 1992 Rio Agreements of UNCED. Commerce and the need to be competitive in the global market, have become the top priority in many countries. The environment, welfare of the poor and global partnership have been downgraded on the agenda. The kind of globalization prevailing today is inequitable, benefiting a few but marginalizing many. It is based on, and is rapidly spreading the same consumption and production patterns that has already proclaimed unsustainable. It represents the growing power of big business that is increasing its monopoly of the economy and extending its reach to policy-making bodies.

Achievements of the Rio Summit

To give a balanced perspective, the UNCED summit was not a complete failure as it did yield some immediate, sustained and unplanned successes. In terms of immediate successes, five major documents emerged from the Earth Summit: a Climate Change Convention, a set of Forest Principles, a Biodiversity Convention, the Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, UNCED's agenda for the next century.

Framework for Climate Change Convention

The Climate Change Convention signed up by the National Governments called upon the countries to make their best effort to reduce greenhouse gas emissions, but did not set a goal of achieving 1990 levels by the year 2000 - a standard around which all countries but the United States had achieved consensus. Nevertheless, the convention by itself was a landmark in environmental negotiations.

Agreement on Conservation of Bio-Diversity

More than 100 countries signed up the Convention, which requires all signatories to develop national plans to identify the biodiversity located within their borders and to establish protected

areas to conserve that biodiversity. It closely links the protection of biodiversity with the development of biotechnology, which relies on diverse species as genetic raw material.

Principles for the Sustainable Management of Forests

"Forest Principles" - downgraded from an initially hoped for 'Forest Convention' proposed to double the worldwide international forest conservation assistance to \$2.7 billion. It further gave countries sovereign and inalienable right to utilize, manage and develop their forests in accordance with their development needs.

Agenda 21

Agenda 21 was a comprehensive and a very ambitious plan of action drawn up at the UNCED in every area in which human impacts on the environment, and was intended to be taken up globally, nationally and locally by UN bodies, governments and other major groups. It was the most elaborate of the documents agreed upon at the Earth Summit. Its goal was to provide "a blueprint for action in all areas relating to sustainable development of the planet from now until the twenty-first century." The more than 800 -page document contains sections on poverty, consumption patterns, population growth, desertification, mountain ecosystems, ocean ecology, toxic chemicals and more than a dozen other areas.

In terms of long term successes, UNCED provided a momentum for some future actions concerning environment and development at the regional and country levels. At the Lisbon Summit, the European Council adopted an eight -point agenda to follow-up on the Agenda 21. This included action on National Sustainable Development Strategies and 'round tables', the Forest Principles, the Climate Plan and biodiversity. (Sandbrook, 1997) The European Community later ratified the Biodiversity and Climate Conventions and was a major force behind the establishment of Intergovernmental Panel on Forests. The fact that that European Union was unable to agree upon the amount of aid to pledge as well as the magnitude of reductions in the carbon dioxide emissions sheds light on the limited successes of the Agenda 21.

There were other key landmarks which are described in the subsequent paragraphs.

Formation of CSD

The formation of United Nations Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) is a partially successful outcome of UNCED as it keeps Agenda 21 alive by methodically following up on Agenda 21 priorities and themes, and continues to be the focal point for national reporting. Further, it has ensured that Environment and Sustainable Development is on the global agenda and gets the attention of the media and other sectors.

Local Agenda 21

Local Agenda 21 too was a definitive success in some countries as it put environmental concerns a part of the economic decision -making processes and led to the creation of the national -level strategies and action plans. At the moment, there are broadly 60 countries with some kind of national follow-up forum. Some of the success stories of these Local Agenda 21 have shown that sustainable development does work and many more successes are possible if the level of commitment is maintained in the future.

Montreal and Kyoto Protocol

The Conference of Party meetings which followed up the deliberations of the UNFCCC have made positive developments in phasing out the use of ozone -depleting chemicals and negotiating some carbon emission cuts in Annex 1 countries.

Increased Life Expectancy

A number of infectious diseases may be eradicated in the near future, given continued efforts, but others, notably malaria, are increasing. While the developing countries as a whole have narrowed the "health gap" with the industrialized countries in several important indicators, including life

expectancy and infant and child mortality, the gap is widening between the least developed countries and other developing countries.

Population Growth rate

Fertility rates are declining more rapidly than expected in most regions. Latest projections show many developing countries will stabilize population within the next generation or two. Some countries still face high population growth rates that strain natural resources.

Reduction in Unleaded Gasoline

A number of countries have phased out unleaded gasoline while many more are in the process of doing so. It is expected that 55 countries will be adopting totally unleaded fuel by 2005 - up from 36 at the moment.

Emergence of informed Civil Society

The most significant yet unplanned of long-term successes of UNCED was the emergence of the Civil Society force as a watchdog of national and international policies concerning environment and development. The participation of NGOs in the UNCED led to a flourishing of these NGOs all across the globe and they almost assumed it as their right to participate in all significant conventions and treaties. The later years saw a growth in magnitude and areas in which civil society forces operated - from agriculture and trade policies to climate change and human rights.

Reasons of Failure

There were several reasons which lead to the failure of UNCED summit and the impact it made in the coming years. Significantly, on one hand civil communities within countries have taken a lot of inspiration from the UNCED and are doing quite a lot at their own levels without necessarily taking guidance from Agenda 21 but there had been not much 'satisfactory progress' with regard to global agreements or conventions. This was because the global aspect required national Governments making certain commitments and those were often harder to achieve.

Conflicting Agenda

There was a major conflict in the agenda set out for the UNCED summit. It was largely taken to be as a Northern agenda where the richer countries focused on problems concerning "Lifestyles" rather than "Livelihood". For the South, the more pressing issues were economic development and poverty eradication rather than focusing on environmental problems such as climate change, forests and biodiversity. Structural adjustment policies, trade-liberalisation, and international debt repayment hampered the environment of poor countries in much severe ways as compared to Climate change. The South primarily viewed UNCED as a strategy of the North to curb their economic growths.

Optimal Ignorance

The UNCED did not venture into the domain of North-South inequality in discussing issues concerning environment and development. The underlying fact is that distributive issues lie at the heart of politics of causes and impacts of global environmental changes. These issues were conveniently forgotten and no efforts were made to look at the environmental problems from a holistic perspective.

Failure of the Bargain

UNCED turned out to be a big bargaining event rather than a venue for sharing joint concerns and developing synergy in actions. The North had its vast financial resources and advanced technologies to offer while the South had control over much of the biodiversity and forested areas. In the bargaining which ensued, there was much rhetoric and very less commitments. The North was willing to give aid in a manner which did not affect their domestic economies and lifestyles, while the South was unwilling to commit on actions which slowed down their economic progress or reduced their access to their own natural sources. Essentially, the bargaining process failed and both the parties went back without having made any concrete transaction.

Global Recession

The global recession in the economy implied that focus on environmental issues and financing the South slipped down the Agenda of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). This made it difficult to translate the broad recommendations of Agenda 21 into practical realities, except on a domestic front. (Sandbrook, 1997)

The URUGUAY Round

The Uruguay Trade round completed shortly after the Rio summit did a lot of damage to the already waning spirit of unity among the countries. Many of the Southern countries ended up in disadvantageous positions under liberalised and free trade regimes set up under the Uruguay round and that totally eroded their trust on the North. Further, the Uruguay Round shifted the negotiating tables from UN to other platforms and cast even more strain on the environment and social costs leading to increased inequity and polarity of wealth.

Little Financing for Development

Agenda 21 called for OECD countries to pledge 0.7 percent of their GDP as aid. The figure however proved to be mythical as the aid given by the North continued to decline in the years following the Rio Summit. Good policies therefore continued to be on paper in absence of funding. An example is that of Convention for Drylands - an excellent codification of best practices, which was brought together by the African countries but continues to be unfinanced. (Sandbrook, 1997) Further, with the declining aid, some countries such as US refused to pay their dues to the UN rendering it even helpless and financially incapable for catalysing Agenda 21 activities.

Lack of Consensus with G77

The voice of the South was not a unified voice and there were difference in ideologies with regards to the use of their own natural resources. Some countries saw a chance to benefit from the process of globalisation through ruthless mining of their plentiful natural resources and bio-diversity, and therefore did not join the anti-trade liberalisation bandwagon. Further, they put divergent views on a number of other policy matters which hampered the negotiation process.

US Stance

The U.S. was successful in watering down the Earth Summit treaties. Its isolation and extreme stance in the deliberation process led many participants to denounce the Earth Summit as a failure. Further, as most UNCED participants did not believe there was value in concluding treaties which excluded the United States, not much headway could be made on many of the issues.

Final Analysis

In Rio, the industrialized nations had assumed responsibility for the global ecological crisis and for correcting ecological mistakes. But so far, there was no example of any industrialized nation having taken on a credible pace-setting role and seriously beginning to change its production practices and lifestyle that devour resources and degrade the environment. It is therefore not surprising that no model of ecological-social development can emerge in the arena of international negotiations.

In Rio, the conflicts of interests between North and South were too great and there was too little time to negotiate compromises. And in the final analysis both the negotiating blocs lacked the political will to give right signals to the other. The developing countries rejected all interference by the North in their environmental policies and the majority of these countries continue to regard environmental protection as a task ranking lower than economic growth.

Further, the national Governments were more concerned with their own domestic policies and economic growth, and did not want to acknowledge environmental problems as their own problem. As a result, there were not much concrete commitments by national heads and little funding was pledged for turning the vision embodied in Agenda 21 into reality. In fact, the retreat from the

principles of Agenda 21 by governments has been so complete in later years that environment and development NGOs have often dubbed the five -year review of the Earth Summit, undertaken by the UN in 1997 as Rio minus Five instead of Rio plus Five. Little urgency has been shown by the government bodies in yearly meeting of the Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) to tackle the problems of environment sustainability.

Of the many reasons why the promises of Rio have failed, the most significant ones are:

- § The international decision -making process is too slow, requiring a lmost 200 national governments to agree before global action is taken.
- § Most national governments have not given financial priority to solving global problems.
- § There is too little democratic accountability at the global decision -making level. As a result, it's difficult to generate effective public pressure for action.

Solidarity action and global justice mean the industrialized nations must radically cut back their consumption of raw materials, energy and nature and thereby reduce their output of emissions and waste by 80-90 per cent. Only then will the people of the world's poorer countries have a chance to realize their right to development. But countries continue to put domestic growth in front of the global environmental issues. United States and some other wealthy nations continue to resist appeals to commit to binding targets for reducing emissions of carbon dioxide and other greenhouse gases. Domestic policies and concerns are the key reasons behind this transience.

Further, the South has no incentive to agree with the North after years of broken promises about cutting their own consumption levels and funding environmental activities in the developing world. In the rapidly expanding economies of the South, the South too has turned blind eye to the environmental problems and is set to tread on the path followed by Western country to attain unsustainable economic prosperity.

Conclusion

No industrialized nation has begun credible moves to cut down on its resource -devouring and environment-degrading production practices and lifestyle. In the rapidly expanding economies of the South a form of catch -up development is taking place that is radically increasing consumption of energy and natural resources and thus output of refuse and emissions. At the same time, even minimal social and ecological standards are seen as potential drawbacks for production locations. Instead, the international political and economic elite are more and more accepting a gap between the rich and the poor. Too little is being done and that too slowly. Scientists point out to emission reduction of as much as 60% to check global warming and the world is nowhere near that.

International negotiations cannot come into practice unless the nations are willing to partially forego their sovereignty in the interest of a global, common good. Further, these negotiations require financial resources so that benefits foregone could be compensated and costs incurred could be met. In the absence of such resources and willingness, these negotiations would only remain on paper as good policies. In view of this, one could conclude that Rio did very little to change the world at the global level in tune with the needs for sustainable development. It did not create a sense of collective action or led to availability of additional resources to tackle the problem.

It is evident that the path of global negotiations to world -wide problems is indeed a difficult one and there are no early successes. In fact, coming to a national resolve and undertaking national action is a primer to the success of international treaties. This has shifted the onus for action for most of the problems from the supra -natural to the national and even to the local level. The idea of subsidiarity came up at Rio which emphasized placing responsibilities at the most local level of administration seems to be the way forward.

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