



Rio+20 - United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - Audio

From Awareness to Action

Professor Godfrey Boyle

My memories of the UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 are rose-tinted, infused with the warm glow of the Midnight Sun-- that wonderful Northern latitude phenomenon in which the sun in June never sets. I was in Stockholm as a young journalist, promoting a magazine on alternative energy and writing a report on the conference for the Irish Times. In my report, I welcomed the idealistic sentiments expressed in the Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment but lamented the failure of the official conference to tackle the underlying causes of environmental degradation, or to propose practical solutions. Fortunately these topics were, as I reported, addressed with enthusiasm in unofficial Stockholm 'side events' such as the 'Environment Forum' and the 'Peoples' Technology Exhibition'.

It's easy to forget today how poor public and governmental awareness of environment and sustainability issues was in 1972. Seminal reports like *The Limits to Growth* had only just been published, and there was little or no awareness of climate change. A big debate in the Environment Forum in '72 was on the perceived need to curb population growth, or whether technological progress would instead be the key to solving the world's environmental problems. Now in 2012, world population has almost trebled to seven billion, world GDP has grown in real terms by more than six times, and with technological progress still rapidly accelerating, those issues are still highly relevant.

The Stockholm 72 Declaration lacked legislative force, but it did succeed in raising awareness of environmental issues, and led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme. The Swedish Government recently held a Stockholm Plus 40 conference to celebrate the '72 conference and highlight some of the developments over the subsequent 40 years.

Twenty years after Stockholm, at Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the UN Conference on Environment and Development produced more awareness-raising documents, principally the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, which included a set of 27 sustainable development principles; and Agenda 21, a detailed set of guidelines on how countries should go about implementing sustainable development. This had been defined in the 1987 United Nations Brundtland Commission's report *Our Common Future* as:

“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs.” Rio 92 also concluded two important legally binding international agreements, the Convention on Climate Change – which led to the Kyoto agreement on limiting global greenhouse gas emissions – and the Convention on Biodiversity.

Ten years on from Rio, the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg in 2002 brought together governmental and non-governmental organizations to try to stimulate more action on implementing the Declarations of previous Summits. It specified five factors essential for sustainable development: Water, Energy, Health, Agriculture and Biodiversity, summarized as ‘WEHAB’. A central focus of the discussions was on how to achieve ‘sustainable consumption and production’-- though what these terms should mean in practice was controversial, and the conference resulted in few concrete outcomes, apart from a final Johannesburg Declaration.

Now, in June 2012, twenty years from the first Rio conference, Brazil is hosting the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. This extract from the Draft Conference Declaration expresses its overall aim:

“(to) renew our commitment to sustainable development and express our determination to pursue the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. We further affirm our resolve to strengthen the institutional framework for sustainable development.”

Strengthening the Institutional Framework’ is UN-speak for modifying existing UN Institutions, such as the Commission on Sustainable Development or the Environment Programme, or creating new ones to speed up the world-wide sustainable development process.

Rio+20 will try to address the need to create employment in a global recession, building cities to house the world’s growing population whilst also working out an efficient system to feed everyone without further degrading the environment.

This increasing population will also require fresh water and access to that will be debated along with the impact on the world’s oceans.

Pre-Rio, however, major debates rage behind the scenes. The ‘North-South Divide’, in which the interests of the richer, mainly Northern, ‘developed’ countries don’t coincide with those of the poorer, mainly Southern ‘developing countries, has been a source of continuing disputes since Stockholm. The developing countries see the developed world as largely to blame for the environmental problems of the planet, arguing that the richer countries should therefore shoulder most of the costs of transition to a more sustainable world economy. But the

wealthy countries are reluctant to make major commitments -- especially in the current climate of worldwide economic turbulence.

Another major debate is about the meaning of the term 'green economy'. Many conservative corporations and governments see it as a just more benign, less environmentally destructive way of enabling our current growth and profit-oriented economy to progress towards a more 'sustainable' future. But green, left-wing groups and governments see the creation of a truly 'green economy' as necessitating a major transition to a radically different economic and political system, one in which market forces are subordinated to considerations of social need, equity and ecological balance.

At present, with just a week or so to go, the prospects for concrete action emerging from Rio+20 seem poor -- though we could be pleasantly surprised. What seems likely to emerge is a 'Roadmap' outlining possible ways forward, leading by 2015 to clear definitions of Sustainable Development Goals, targets for production & consumption, follow-up reports, and specific actions on areas such as energy and water.

The Rio+20 debates will be covered extensively in mainstream media such as the BBC in the weeks before and during the conference. You can also get more information, and get involved in some of the debates, via the official UNCSD web site and the web site "Earthsummit 2012", set up by the UN-approved but non-governmental Stakeholder Forum to encourage comment on the UN conference.