



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

### *Rio Roundtable*

#### **Dr Helen Yanacopulos**

My name is Helen yanacopulos and sitting around the table with me today are Godfrey Boyle, Stephen Peake and Joe Smith. We are here to discuss the context and outcomes of the Rio Plus Twenty conference. Stephen, what are your thoughts?

#### **Stephen**

If you look at the main outcome of the conference which is this document entitled “The Future We Want” which is fifty odd pages long um nearly three hundred paragraphs long. It’s quite an interesting document. It’s academically and for those people who are studying international relations and interested in how these UN processes evolve over time it’s actually a very good document compared to the negotiating document that they were dealing with pre-meeting which has a lot more interest in it. What the Brazilian hosts have managed to do is produce this rather fine piece of soft international law – it’s not binding. It’s all fine words and we’ve got quite a lot of that. But it actually hangs together and they’ve hit all the kind of right buttons about what has gone on in the past and the promises and the gap between action and promises and what’s helped them do that I think is that they very cleverly decided either just before the conference or when the conference got going, it’s clear that the Brazilian hosts decided that the only way that they were going to bring this conference to an orderly close a couple of days later would be that they would kick some of the really important stuff into the long grass. They kicked that can down the road – for a different metaphor. And some of the key things which they kicked down the road which we were all hoping for was one was some progress on sustainable development goals. Another was on what they call institutional framework for sustainable development. It means how does the UN do sustainable development. And the third one that they sort of kicked down the road a bit was what do they call it – “Means of Implementation” which really means money – who is giving who what. So you could look at the outcome and the media has as said not much happened and to some extent that’s true. But these three important processes have been launched and they need to be landed in the next two or three years. So there is some progress.

#### **Helen**

I wonder if Godfrey can step in here because Godfrey you’ve been to a number of these conferences and it will be interesting to hear how this conference sits amongst the historical legacy of these types of conferences.

**Godfrey**

Well yes I mean as I said in my podcast before Rio I did attend the Stockholm Conference all those years ago and that also in a way was similar to - -

**Joe Smith**

Don't be bashful Godfrey. It was 1972 –

**Godfrey**

1972 – all right then it was forty years ago, indeed it was. And in many ways it also was a conference that had a relatively fuzzy outcome. There weren't any particular laws passed or resolutions that were binding and this one's pretty much the same. I also as did some of the other people around this table, attend the Johannesburg Summit which also was a bit disappointing in terms of positive outcomes. So it's perhaps really only the old Rio twenty years ago that had the positive outcomes like the Climate Change Convention and the Biodiversity Convention and so on and the Agenda Twenty One. I do share Stephen's view that perhaps the Declaration isn't quite as pessimistic as it might appear to be and I confess that I haven't read all X thousand words of it. But I – I was dismayed by reports about the coverage of the conference in that it seemed that what was being said was that by many people that they had given up on the idea that governments can act in these domains and that we have to leave everything on many things from now on to the private sector and to the NGO's and to civil society. And I'm afraid I don't really think I agree with that. I think that there are still many things that governments could and should do in the international and the national and the regional arena and that it isn't really good enough to leave things to the private sector, however important their participation may be of course I totally acknowledge.

**Joe Smith**

I want to go even further than that and say that possibly the most optimistic thing about what's happening with these UN processes and we've got to remember this is just one moment in time, one pin in the map, this meeting is part of a much longer process. The optimistic thing I find is that actually we are kind of sieving this massive agenda that's emerged over four decades and sieving out some of the high sounding chat and beginning to collect a to do list. And one of the contrasts you could make between Stockholm in '72 which generated and was part of and was partly generated by a big civil movement around environmental protection generated things like Earth Day and '92 which again had a massive wave of public and media attention. Those things felt like a kind of a clearing of the throat politically. Didn't really generate anything substantial outside the conventions, which of course were only starting points and took years to mature. You could say biodiversity has not got there yet. However the moment we are in now feels like there is a bit of a distribution of labour. I think there's a question about whether they needed Rio Plus Twenty whether we wouldn't have been better off if we had just got a few reports from working groups spread across the Planet and that

would actually I think been much truer to the spirit of where we're at with this story. But there's no doubt about it Godfrey. You're dead right. This is not a set of issues that can be left to the private sector or some mix of homespun transition town activity and multinational reporting process. Government and government competence I think is going to be really central to that. I want to ask Stephen your experience of the UN system – whether you see there's an effective join between governments and the UN process around these big arm-waving topics. Is that maturing?

**Stephen**

It is. I mean if you look at the process of the development of soft international law this sort of fine decorations that come out of these very large environmental mega meetings, there is institutional memory and in fact if you look at the zero draft document going into the negotiations there was some new language there and new language always frightens the horses and so if you want to go home early and for the conference to end on time the default setting is to chuck the new language away and get out the old language. And so you see in the informal reports of what was going on that you see reports in the Press that delegations went back to the old Johannesburg language. They go back to safe little chunks of language and they insert that and you build the document as a series of little bricks and you do it that way because you each know that you have committed to that sentence before so it's a bit ridiculous if you put your flag u p and say you disagree with that sentence because you will disagree with yourself. So it tends to ... but there is institutional memory and I think that Joe was absolutely right to look at that broader perspective on whether the politics works. And it's clear right now in 2012 as we face this global financial turmoil there isn't a particular appetite right now. The timing just wasn't right for us to have a great wonderful kind of pow-wow, which resulted in some new binding, interesting international law. I mean who remembers Stockholm Plus Ten? You're shaking your heads and nor do I

**Joe**

I was in shorts Steve –

**Stephen**

If you do a bit of research, as I had to do you find out that there was a Stockholm Plus Ten. It was in Nairobi and despite Stockholm being an important meeting and again there is no institutional memory of that particular event there is, as Joe and Godfrey said about Johannesburg there was some outcomes around actions although still the Press was unhappy that there wasn't some really concrete thing that came out. But these things do happen and I think we just don't know yet what the influence of Rio Plus Twenty as a meeting will be. We could be surprised. Certainly this process has been launched and we could come to value these processes extremely highly.

**Joe**

So Stephen would I be right in thinking that one of those processes that's been set in train is to shift attention from millennium development goals to sustainable development goals or to extend that concept of concrete targets into the sustainability field? Helen this is something you can talk to because you've worked with the MDGs, as they're known.

**Helen**

Yeah it's interesting how um the sustainable development goals have come out very clearly in the document "The Future We Want" – the outcome document. The Millennium Development Goals have been around for since 2000 and they have been extremely successful in many ways. These – these are disputed kind of outcomes of the Millennium Development Goals. One of the things that we can very clear about is that there are certain goals that are being achieved particularly around clean water, around education in many countries. And one of the things around the Millennium Development Goals is that they have very clear outcomes, very clear targets and they're not the responsibility of just one particular political actor so the State is the key player in the Millennium Development Goals but they have been negotiated through a process of States, UN, Civil Society and but the States are ultimately responsible and I think this goes back to the point that – that Godfrey and Joe made around the role of the State in these types of international negotiations.

**Joe**

But doesn't it say also something interesting about the difference between environmental politics and social politics because where you've got a social goal such as ending poverty, giving access to education for children you've got to sort of shape around that goal that you also know the kind of emotional register you're working and there is real clarity about whether that's being delivered or not. And social campaigners have played all those cards and they played them effectively. They're not always getting all they want and as you say the MDGs are being hotly contested but I think we can look at solid progress there. If you then look at environmental politics I would say one of the hazards for the future we want document and for thinking in terms of sustainable development goals is that we underestimate the conflict involved. We underestimate the real politics that needs to be done to resolve environmental debates that's somehow deep seated and it's been there since '72 the assumption that it's just enough to say this is bad. It's just enough to describe environmental limits or the current phrase is boundaries and actually it's not enough. It doesn't suddenly become self-evident. This is a kind of – intellectually this is a really deterministic habit whereby you think that the political outcome will simply you know drop out of the end of the machine.

**Stephen**

And interestingly enough what's crept into this document and the negotiating process that lead up to it is this phrase "science led-agenda". I think we've invented a new euphemism.

We call – we say “the science led-agenda” and what does that mean? This seems to mean this recognising of planetary boundaries. So they sort of mean can I please have some of the politics that I would expect would flow if you actually had been reading and understanding the science. But you don’t seem – the science doesn’t seem to lead the agenda. So science led-agenda actually means “environmental led-agenda” i.e. the politics that would flow if you accept limits to growth. And this is the story behind this rather cumbersome phrase “Institutional framework for sustainable development”. This is one of the things they kicked down the road. That is the UN Commission on Sustainable Development - the CSD – is that working properly? Is UNEP - United Nations Environment Programme – working as effectively as it could do among the constellation of other Secretariats and UN specialised agencies? This is a sort of perennial question and clearly not everyone is happy with the way that the UN system does sustainability. That’s no surprise because we know that sustainability has some environmental politics, some economics certainly in it and some social dimensions and then it has all these thematic areas – forests, oceans, you know, climate, biodiversity. So you wouldn’t expect a bureaucracy to be able to deal with that easily but I think that what lies behind this as I say it’s perennial frustration with the way that the UN does sustainability. It’s a recognition actually that what Joe was saying and it’s a profound point that it is time for a politics of environment to emerge

**Joe**

And where we allow some argument actually you know we allow conflict because these topics are full of conflict and we behave like they aren't. And at the centre of that argument and at the centre of that politics is a debate about who is responsible and who is vulnerable. That isn't going to be resolved by science. That's going to be resolved by politics.

**Stephen**

If I may I'd like to read Paragraph Four from The Future We Want. It's quite a long paragraph and I suppose the goal is to make numeric technocratic targets that speak to this. So this is what the nations of the world, the leaders of the world and the high level representatives agreed in Paragraph Four. We recognise that poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production, and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development are the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development. We also reaffirm the need to achieve sustainable development by promoting sustained - - -

**Joe**

Sorry – I can't stand it any more Stephen. What people need to imagine is that those key words appear in the paragraph re-jigged for another ten lines. But I mean your point is that actually there is nothing really to grip on to there and so what I want to do is say that something did happen at the conference and in the run up to it which you really can get a grip

on and that is the goals around Sustainable Energy for All and I think it would be worth us actually saying okay so you made a bit of a gag of that and rightly so you know. It's very predictable body of um helping grannies across the road kind of emotions. But the truth is there is something really solid around that programme.

### **Godfrey**

Yes if I can just talk about the energy issue for a moment. I mean I was both disappointed and mildly pleased by two things that I – two outcomes of the conference. I mean it – one very disappointing thing was that the conference failed to address the huge issue of subsidies to fossil fuels which everyone I think – almost everyone agrees are enormous. I mean the latest estimate I saw was a billion dollars a year being devoted to fossil fuel subsidies whether it's tax breaks or giving cheap fuel to poor people and so on. And almost everyone agrees those ought to be phased out very rapidly and that global carbon emissions would be reduced by five per cent or thereabouts if we did that. So it's a great shame to me that this conference somehow failed to address those issues because of presumably the parlous state of the world economy or at least of the European and American bits of the world economy rather than the BRICS countries. But I do take some crumbs of comfort from the United Nations Secretary General's Sustainable Energy for All initiative which apparently has had the backing of a hundred NGOs and companies and so on and will lead to hopefully very improved conditions in many thousands of villages in the developing world over the next ten or twenty years although I had caveat there again you see it's another example of how perhaps the World Governmental Organisations have stepped back and the gap has been filled at least partially by well meaning NGOs and companies. But it's only the good guys, the benign companies that step forward to the plate in doing these things. It leaves aside all the harsh and unpleasant and ruthless companies that wouldn't dream of getting involved in anything as good as Sustainable Energy for All. So I still think that although this initiative is to be welcomed it isn't really enough.

### **Stephen**

But Godfrey, wouldn't the big guns come and play in this game if – if you were removing the subsidy from fossil fuel and you were starting to tax carbon at a meaningful level or give it a meaningful price one way or the other? –

### **Godfrey**

Absolutely

### **Stephen**

Can you give examples of - -of developments within the energy industry that indicate how that might work or where that might go?

**Godfrey**

Well I suppose speaking from my sort of perhaps partial point of view I mean I would like to see the emphasis on exploring for oil and gas in the Arctic and sensitive regions being de-emphasised by the big oil –

**Stephen**

Are you being polite when you say “de-emphasised”?

**Godfrey**

All right then – well for want of a better word. And um unlike the abandonment of renewables – renewables which some of the big companies have done they should be investing more in renewable energy because all the studies that I have seen show that renewables really could make major, major contribution to the world’s energy needs on an indefinitely prolonged basis rather than for the relatively short term period that fossil fuels would be sufficient for.

**Stephen**

I’m a bit in two minds about this issue about fossil fuel subsidies and carbon taxes and energy prices because it’s easy for us to sit here in relatively developed wealthy Britain – for now – and speculate on what would happen to the Nigerians if their governments stop subsidising their fuel. But you know they want to develop cheaper energy prices, fuels economic growth – it fuels high carbon high-energy economic growth. Its not the green growth that this meeting sat down to talk about but it does bring people rapidly out of poverty and give them the sorts of live – lifestyles that they – that they hanker after. So I think we have to be careful about the price of energy.

**Godfrey**

Can I come back? Of course you’re right to say there are two different types of subsidies. There are tax breaks for the oil exploration companies and there’s the cheap energy given to poor people. And certainly if you were to phase out the latter there would need to be other measures introduced to make it easier for poor people to still get the fuel that they need and of course I totally agree with that. I do think that the big energy companies could come on board and accommodate to reducing fossil fuel subsidies. It would have to be phased over a period of years. It wouldn’t happen over night. But the Shells and the BPs of this world are perfectly capable of living without the subsidies and they are huge. And not only are they huge but they’ve gone on for decade after decade whereas the subsidies that people sometimes criticise that have gone to renewables have only gone to them for the last ten or twenty years and even then relatively minor compared to the fossil fuel subsidies. So I think there definitely isn’t a level playing field here.

**Joe**

But you've raised the question of leadership in the big corporations and Stephen you've been working with hundreds of leaders from large corporations across the last ten years. What's your level of optimism or pessimism about their capacity to absorb just taking energy as an example to absorb the mission in front of them?

**Stephen**

I think the energy industry and the engineering companies and those that are involved in designing and building the cities of the future they are not assuming that energy is going to be cheap. They are assuming that energy is going to be expensive and water is going to be short. And the ones that I work with, the large engineering companies, the large fossil fuel companies believe that to their DNA – to the level of their DNA. That is the world in which they see. And when they accept that, as they largely are doing now, they are plotting and planning to try to build resilient facilities, resilient infrastructure. I mean that actually is happening. So energy is a classic case um if we say we have this Energy For All agenda, we'd like to give commercial suppliers of cheaper energy, cleaner energy to the billion people that don't currently have it and to the billion that are coming by the time we meet in ten years, what's there not to like about that? There's just one tiny weeny problem in there. That's our other agenda with climate change, which is that we need to not only produce and provide cheap energy but that has to be largely carbon free if we are gonna meet this temperature target. And of course we see that really these things don't at the moment join up. So we have this Energy For All agenda but we still don't for example have the rapid deployment of carbon capture storage for either gas fuelled or coal fired power stations around the world in the developing world. Still not really happy. It's still too slow. So we can have Energy For All but we don't quite mean it yet with carbon. And that's just one example. There's issues around development of forests, development of oceans, et cetera et cetera. And that's when the whole thing blows up and we say it doesn't you know it doesn't quite all add up.

**Godfrey**

I mean Sustainable Energy For All of course to clarify is meant to be for the poor villagers of the world. It isn't really particularly to be addressing the cities and big consumers that you quite rightly pointed out and it is aiming at massive increases in renewable energy, energy efficiency, reducing fuel poverty. But you're quite right. It isn't intended to address the big issues that you've just outlined.

**Helen**

So this sounds very depressing. Is it depressing? Is Rio – is the outcome of Rio depressing? What do we see – what do we take out of Rio? What ways forward can we see?



**Godfrey**

Well I've been slightly heartened by this conversation in that Stephen seems to be able to put together some grounds for cautious long term optimism from the apparent short term depressing outcome of the – that would appear to be so from the immediate aftermath of Rio Plus Twenty. I mean I for one was relatively disappointed by it although I kind of expected that I would be because the expectations had been less than wowed by the propaganda before it. I suppose I am heartened by what Stephen's been saying. I think the sustainable development goals could lead to something very valuable by 2015. The other things that have been set in train .. For all could be very valuable and maybe as Joe's been saying it's only one step in a whole series of steps that we've made every since Stockholm in 1972 and we shouldn't attach too much importance particularly at a time of world economic turmoil to one particular conference.

**Joe**

That's right. And I also want to cheer us all up with the thought that okay if the media weren't that attentive and the public went that attentive to a United Nations meeting for most people many miles away the truth is that across forty years public understanding and engagement of these incredibly complex environmental change issues has grown enormously. So we know that actually a pretty substantial proportion of the world's population have a pretty good understanding of what climate change is and what needs to be done about it. And that's not a bad place to be starting. I also think that if you – if you look away from that pin in the map which is the UN conference and you look at what's happening in some incredibly innovative community schemes but at the same time you look at what a company like Unilever is setting itself to do very public targets for say 2020. Um there's a lot happening out there. There's a lot on the map. So I suppose I would slow myself down a little and remind myself of the phrase that hope is a good breakfast but a bad supper. We need to I think communicate an idea about where we want society to go. There's never been social change of any scale that hasn't described a better world we're going towards but then actually just get down to writing a to do list.

**Helen**

Stephen what are your thoughts?

**Stephen**

I'm reflecting on some time I spent with a colleague, Jack Frost, who's head of the hydrogen fuel cells business at Johnson Matthey. He and I were doing some leadership training the other day together and he was busy sharing his thoughts on the power and the sexiness of supply chain management. And I must admit that I and people in the room didn't immediately see how supply chain management could be so sexy. But if you look at the story of what

we've done with for example vehicle emissions and catalytic converters it's a general story where governments and society have asked for something. They've asked industry to develop alternative ways of doing things in this case with engine emissions and engine technologies. And they've done that over a sustained period of time where it was certain that the whole thing was gonna change and that the rules of the game would change and investment could flow. And I just wonder – I started to think about these summits as a sort of supply chain and I was asking myself what is the question that we've asked the supply chain to deliver. And I don't think we're very good at expressing that question. We've kind of left it in cotton wool terms. I could go back Joe. Shall I carry on reading Paragraph Four? We've asked for motherhood and apple pie and all these wonderful things which actually nobody can easily operationalise and I think we haven't yet. My hope is that in terms of working together, civil society, governments, the private sector that we haven't even begun to even mine the potential of what we could do together if we could just have a better approach to supply chain management. What would you like? I mean the core of what Jack says, and it's so powerful, is that you can have anything you want – just ask.

### **Godfrey**

Just to chip in here for a second. I mean we keep using the word “we” here a lot and of course that's ignoring the fact that the world is driven by different interests, many of which do not really concur. You've got the interests of the poor; you've got the interests of the rich countries and the poor countries; you've got the interests of the multinationals some of which are very benign and well meaning as the ones like the ones that Stephen deals with, others which are perhaps not so well meaning and rather ruthless and don't really care about global warming or pollution or deaths in coal mines or whatever it may be. And so we have to be a bit careful about our use of the word “we” here because there are many “we's” and they don't all agree with one another.

### **Stephen**

I don't know why everyone behaves with these sustainability summits like it's a sort of World Cup. And the way that we behave is that we have the World Cup and there is the Final and there is no result – always no result in the Final and then everyone runs away and says, “well that's it now. We've had the World Cup. We know there's no result. There's no need to meet again.” And you know football is like that. You know just because Germany wins the World Cup or Italy wins the World Cup that means the next day we all get up and think “I wonder who is gonna win the next World Cup?” and it starts again. It's a game.

### **Joe**

Can we all agree in ten years time we'll take a boat to Stockholm Plus Fifty?

### **Helen**

Absolutely

**Godfrey**

See you there.