



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

Tensions at Rio+20

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The UN Conference on Sustainable Development, also called the Rio+20 conference taking place in Brazil, in the words of the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon, “will be one of the most important global meetings on sustainable development in our time”. That this conference is taking place is extremely important – it brings together governments, NGOs and businesses to discuss ways forward in achieving sustainable development. It also brings broader attention to the issues around sustainable development and allows civil society and other groups the opportunity and platform to highlight deficiencies from the previous agreements and conferences, and to lobby for further changes governments need to make. But many people think conferences such as this are just talking shops, where the agreements made are of the lowest common denominator, and where the implementation of these agreements are voluntarily and therefore lack the enforcement needed for the goals to be achieved.

There are many such tensions in international negotiations and I'll be highlighting some of these with respect to the Rio+20 conference over the next few minutes.

International conferences such as Rio are complicated. Bringing 194 governments together to discuss issues of sustainable development is no easy task. Even more challenging are the complex issues being discussed – arguably the most important issues humanity must face. Sustainability and Development are two different practical and academic fields, and one of the successes of the original Rio conference in 1992 was that it brought these two fields together. Yet the marriage of these two fields has not been reconciled fully in practice. At the Rio+20 conference, we still hear critiques that we need a better practical definition of sustainable development.

The 1987 Brundtland Report defined sustainable development as “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” Environmental sustainability and development, and poverty reduction have frequently been at odds with each other. In order for countries to improve their citizen's lives, and to achieve the Millennium Development Goals, they need to grow their economies. Yet this growth has and can be contradictory to environmental sustainability. Brazil is a case in point – the country has made huge leaps in increasing its GDP (Brazil's economy is now the 6th largest in the world, beating out the UK). Yet Brazil is still an extremely unequal society,

some parts of the country having the highest levels of inequality between rich and poor in the world. Brazil also has had one of the highest levels of deforestation in the world due to the logging of the Amazon, and the need for economic development here is at odds with environmental sustainability.

Another tension at the Rio+20 conference revolves around the new popular phrase - the Green Economy, promoted as one of the main conference themes. While it is good that business is becoming more involved in sustainable development, as we hear in other podcasts in this series, there are clear tensions in what this means in practice. The lack of involvement of the business sector was one of the problems with the original Rio conference. Many large international businesses are embracing the green economy, as this makes both environmental and financial sense to them. However, the other side of 'greening business' is that we are moving towards a commodification of the environment and that this is 'a new phase of capitalist expansion'. The capitalist expansion that has contributed to the environmental and human problems we are currently facing.

Further tensions revolve around the leadership at the conference. The emerging block of countries, called the BRICS – comprised of Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa have been most enthusiastic about the conference, and established leaders from the United States, the UK and other European countries have been less involved. The BRICS countries account for 40% of the world's population and make up 18% of the world's GDP. Some argue that we are seeing a sea change of leadership in global governance, not only with respect to the conference, but that the conference is an illustration of how this 5 country block is shifting the global economy from the existing powerful countries to the emerging ones.

The BRICS could potentially be setting a new agenda around sustainable development, particularly as they themselves have large swathes of their population living in poverty. The hope is that they might significantly change international priorities in such negotiations. Yet the question is whether these countries will operate differently, and what effect this will have on sustainable development. It remains to be seen how much of a difference their leadership role is going to have given that as a block, they have not fundamentally changed the economic paradigms of the international system. The question that remains to be seen is - will the BRICS fight on the side of the least developed countries or will they perpetuate the international economic system that allowed them to emerge.

In summary, an Oxfam report on the summit highlighted the key strategic issue of Rio+20 when it asked the question for the summit: do we "tweak a failing system established by and in the interest of 20% of the world's population, which has also brought benefits to another 30% in poor countries, OR responding to planetary limits, shape new rules that will bring prosperity to the half of humanity yet to benefit from industrialisation, urbanisation and higher

incomes.” These tensions and questions show us that while there is hope for change in a conference such as Rio+20, the issues being discussed are extremely complex and are riddled with the fundamental tensions of international politics.