

## Rio plus Ten Summit

### *Earth Summit 2002: The Plan To Save The World In Ten Days, Without Costing*

The world summit on sustainable development was organised by the United Nations (UN) and held in Johannesburg from the 26th of August to the 4th of September 2002. The convention was moved forward by seven days so that it can end on a different date. For, whether by coincidence, the World Summit on Sustainable Development was, years ago, scheduled to end on 11th September 2002. This was understandably shifted after last year's terrorist attacks.

The summit cost around A\$90m and was the biggest international convention ever held. Some 65,000 delegates from 185 countries, including more than 100 heads of government attended the forum. Unlike the 1992 earth summit in Rio, there was a strong presence from multinational firms such as McDonald's, Rio Tinto, Nike, Nestle and British American Tobacco. The objective was to reconcile development and economic growth with environmental sustainability. But it took place against a backdrop of poverty in Africa, caused partly by climate change, which is reducing rainfall, and a lack of clean water and sanitation.

This process of inter-governmental dialogue to facilitate ecologically sustainable development commenced when the world community gathered in Stockholm thirty years ago for the first UN Conference on the Environment. That event inspired green activism at the grass-roots level. It put the environment on the international agenda. It led to the establishment environmental portfolios within government, formation of non-government organisations, environmental offices within large companies and development of international conventions concerning aspects of the environment. Stockholm produced the first global action plan for the environment. Its recommendations for national and international action contained over 150 separate proposals. They were reinforced by a Declaration of Principles, which provided the foundation for the development of international environmental law during the '70s and '80s.

Ten years ago, the international community gathered again for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The Summit produced four major agreements: the Rio Declaration; a Statement of Principles on forests; and two conventions, one on climate change and one on biodiversity as well as an environment and development blueprint for the new century, called Agenda 21. But as Kofi Annan, the UN Secretary General, sighs, implementation of the decisions has been "far from satisfactory". Most notably, the rich world has comprehensively failed to live up to its promise to increase aid to help poor nations to develop in a sustainable way.

In preparation for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the primary documents were the proposed Plan of Implementation and a Political Declaration prepared by the South African Government. In addition, the United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan issued a 63-page report analysing progress over the past decade in implementing Agenda 21, the global plan for sustainable development that was adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro (Press Summary of the Secretary-General's Report On Implementing Agenda 21, Jan 2002). The report assesses economic, social and environmental trends over the past ten years and offers suggestions on how

the international community can realistically redirect its efforts to realise the goals set forth in Agenda 21.

The report suggests that the world's environment is still too fragile and existing conservation measures are far from sufficient. There has been only very limited progress in reducing poverty in the developing world and globalisation, by itself, has not benefited most people in the world, according to the report. Attempts to promote human development and to reverse environmental degradation have not, in general, been effective over the last decade. The report goes on to suggest that too few resources, a lack of political will, a piecemeal and uncoordinated approach, and continued wasteful patterns of production and consumption have conspired to thwart efforts to implement sustainable development, or development that is balanced between people's economic and social needs and the ability of the earth's resources and ecosystems to meet present and future needs.

However, the report indicates, despite a decade of far from satisfactory results, Agenda 21 — the agreement that was unanimously adopted at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro — remains a powerful, long-term vision that is still valid today. The world has changed in the ten years since Rio, with new demands and challenges created by globalisation, the information and communications revolution, and the spread of HIV/AIDS. The world's population reached 6 billion in 2000, a significant rise from 1950 when it was 2.5 billion. More than 11,000 species are now considered threatened and more than 800 species have already become extinct due to loss of habitats. The potential effect of greenhouse gases on the planet's climate is increasingly considered the world's greatest yet environmental threat. Still, according to the UN report, sustainable development remains a viable alternative to the present business-as-usual approach to development.

I wish I could agree with the Secretary General's sentiments. I wish I could see how the proposed 'Plan of Implementation' would indeed achieve what Agenda 21 set out to achieve in the first place. In an environment where 50 of the top 100 economies are companies, and with arguably the most powerful economy failing to show any leadership, I fail to see human kind agreeing to work towards 'Our Common Future'. Until we understand, and openly discuss the issue of clear trade-offs between environmental protection, social justice and economic development - in an effort to address sustainability of the planet (not 'sustainable development' within each country) - combined with political agendas that are based on longer-term decision making strategies, we will move at a pace that is too slow to be able to mitigate the effects of 'development' and 'growth' on our planet.

***Previously published in an edited format in Engineers Australia – February 2005***

*Written by* Terence Jeyaretnam,  
Director, Net Balance Management Group  
Director, Net Balance Foundation

© Net Balance Foundation Limited