

Dominicans at the UN

“Cry out as if you have a million voices, for it is silence which kills the world.” –*Catherine of Siena*



The Journey to Rio+20

What is Rio+20 and Why Is It So Important?

The **United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, or RIO + 20)**, will be held from June 20 – 22 in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. This event marks the 40th anniversary of the first Rio Conference – more commonly known as the **Earth Summit**. The expectations for RIO + 20 are in many ways linked to the unfulfilled commitments and

promises of the 1992 Earth Summit. The paradigm shift from unsustainable economic growth models to sustainable development was a commitment at the highest political level in 1992. However, the gaps in implementation of

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Rio 1992: The Earth Summit

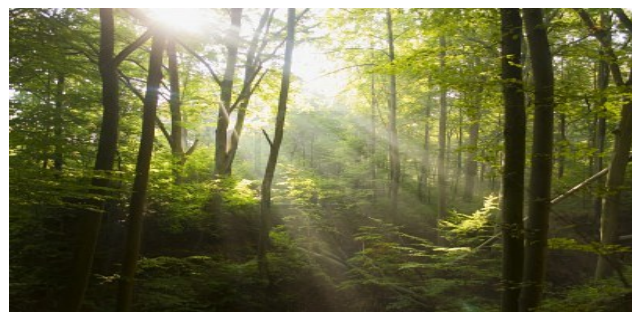
The 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development was the largest gathering of world leaders in history, with 117 heads of state and representatives of 178 countries in attendance. Its goal was to reconcile worldwide economic development with environmental protection. The Conference resulted in several significant agreements, including **The Rio Declaration** and its **21 Principles**; **Agenda 21 Programme of Action** for sustainable development worldwide.; and **Rio Conventions** on biodiversity, climate and desertification and land degradation.

Underlying the **Earth Summit** agreements was the realization that humanity had reached a turning point, and that we would be better able to manage and protect our ecosystems for a more prosperous future for all through a global partnership. Central to this partnership would be the **UN Commission for Sustainable Development (UNCSD)**, which met for the first time in June 1993. Its mandate was to monitor and report on the implementation of the Earth Summit's agreements. The spirit of the **Earth Summit** was captured by the expression "*harmony with nature*," which was brought to the fore in Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration :
"Human beings are at the center

of concern for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature." Another significant outcome of the Earth Summit was the validation of the participation of the **Major Groups** in the sustainable development process. This assures that the voice of civil society has a place at the table. The nine Major Groups are : farmers; women; youth; Indigenous Peoples; science & technology; business & industry; local authorities; NGOs; workers & trade unions.

Rio+20: Why Should We Care?

The 1992 Earth Summit's promise to make "*environmental protection...an integral part of the development process*" has not been fulfilled; and its call to action document, **Agenda 21**, as well as the **Rio Declaration's Principles**, are largely forgotten. These documents together provided a framework for action to be implemented globally, nationally and locally by governments, UN organizations and major groups in every area in which human activity has a direct impact on the environment. It is reasonable to ask : *why this failure* when the international community has the technological expertise; a clearer, scientifically-based understanding of Earth as a living system of interdependent, interrelated components of which humans are a part; and the financial resources to explore



and implement more sustainable models of development? Clearly, there is a reluctance to critique present economic and social systems, as well as a lack of political will for action based on such critique. It is equally clear that we can no longer proceed with a "business as usual" approach that assumes that there are "no limits" to Earth's resources.

**RIO+20****United Nations Conference
on Sustainable Development**

The State of Our World...

The prevailing model of economic development, which has provided us with life as we experience it here in the United States, is no longer sustainable. It commodifies and exhausts Earth's limited resources, and relies heavily on unequal trade which favors developed countries and transnational corporations at the expense of people, healthy ecosystems and the needs of present and future generations. Income inequalities between and within States are pervasive. The top 20% of the population enjoys more than 70% of the world's total income; while the bottom 20% receive barely 2%. This growing gap in wealth between the rich and the poor is widely recognized as one of the root causes of conflict and violence worldwide. This distorted distribution of economic wealth is the consequence of a deregulated and destabilizing international financial system, and a multilateral trade system that favors transnational corporations and a minority of the population. Yet, when financial and economic crises hit, as in 2008-2009, it is those who already live in abject poverty who bear a disproportionate share of the burden.

At the same time, the ecological crisis has significantly worsened. Despite the warnings

voiced in Rio in 1992, resource depletion, pollution, loss of biodiversity, ecosystems, forests, as well as climate change, have escalated at an alarming rate. In 1992, the developed countries agreed to take the lead in shifting from an unsustainable mode of production and consumption, which relied almost exclusively on fossil fuel. However, this has not been the case; and to further exacerbate matters, emerging economies, like China and India, are patterning their economic development according to ours. Over the past century, the U.S. has been the world's largest overall contributor to climate change, generating about 30% of total global energy-related carbon dioxide emissions. We continue to produce far more emissions on an annual basis than any other nation, except China. And there is no significant sign of a shift in the offing.

RIO + 20 must reclaim and advance an ethical and inclusive global vision that promotes ecological and social integrity, the global common good and the well-being of Earth and all her Peoples. In the words of the **Earth Charter**, **RIO + 20** must move us to realize our *“responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life and to future generations.”*

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the agreed to conclusions are stunning. Many would say that we are at a genuine “tipping point” in terms of the viability of the Planet. What happens – or does not happen – at Rio next month will have far-reaching implication for us as a species, and for our one fragile home, Earth. That being said, it is important to note that there has been precious little, if any, significant coverage of this upcoming Conference in the US media, and it is important for us to ask why this is the case. But before focusing on **Rio + 20** itself, here is a brief summary of the key outcomes of the 1992 Earth Summit, which will help provide a context for the upcoming conference.

What is Sustainable Development?

Sustainable development integrates the social, environmental and economic dimensions of development. For too long our development model has placed the social and environmental dimensions at the service of the economy. It is abundantly clear that this market-driven, profit-centered model has done nothing to eliminate the scourge of poverty, nor has it enhanced Earth's flourishing. Sustainable development would be attentive to both the needs of people, and the limited nature of Earth's resource base. RIO + 20 will attempt to address this issue by focusing on two themes: **green economy** in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and, the **institutional framework** necessary to move sustainable development into the future.

What is the Green Economy?

While there is no universally accepted definition of this term, the United Nations Environment Programme 2011 defines a green economy as *one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities...it can be thought of as an economy which is low-carbon, resource efficient and socially inclusive*. However, there is great concern on the part of civil society worldwide that this concept will be co-opted by the private sector – business, industry, transnational corporations - into a market-driven venture that will put a price tag on nature by providing trading of carbon, forests, biodiversity and water. This in turn would lead to massive displacement and marginalization of communities most dependent on access to these resources. In other words, the green economy in the hands of business would be “business as usual,” with a *tint of green*.

SOME GUIDING PRINCIPLES when considering a green economy include:

- Its holistic nature; that is, it encompasses the three dimensions of development: social, environmental and economic
- Its inter-generational equity: looking to both short and long-term implications of decisions made in the present, for future generations
- Its common but differentiated responsibilities:

Developed countries must take the lead in changing unsustainable production/consumption patterns

Developing countries must maintain their development goals, while adopting sustainable practices

Developed countries commit to enable and support developing countries' sustainable development through finance, technology transfer and reforms to global economic and financial structures. (cf. *The Transition To A Green Economy : Benefits, Challenges and Risks from a Sustainable Development Perspective*, Jose Antonio Ocampo, Columbia University)

An Institutional Framework

This where the rubber-hits-the-road. The world is in a far more precarious position than it was twenty years ago after the 1992 Earth Summit. The reason for this is quite simply that governments do not want to be held “*accountable*” for the agreements that they have entered into; or, they have chosen not to enter into certain agreements because they do not coincide with national self-interest. The hope is that the Conference in Rio will result in a mechanism that would have the authority to call governments to this accountability. The track record, however, is not encouraging. *What is not needed is just another document.* At the end of the day, there is really nothing left to say. What is needed is implementation, and the political will to let this happen, for the sake of the greater *common good*.



What Can You Do?

1) It is the hope that RIO + 20 will be attended by heads of state and government, as was the 1992 Conference. However, as of this writing it is unclear as to whether or not President Obama will attend. As US citizens, we have the grassroots power to urge our government to take leadership in the sustainable development process. **Consider taking the time to send a letter, phone call or e-mail to President Obama, Mr. John Matuszak, the Head of the US Delegation to RIO + 20, Secretary of State Clinton, and UN Ambassador Susan Rice, as well as to your Congresspersons/Senators, urging them to:**

- Give high priority to RIO + 20 and the critical need to re-establish balance with Earth and her ecosystems for the sake of not only ourselves, but for future generations;
- Affirm the need for a **shared vision and a common ethical framework** to inspire and guide decisions regarding sustainable development;
- Reaffirm the **1992 Rio Principles**, giving particular emphasis to the **Access to Information Principle (#10)**; the **Polluter Pays Principle (#13)**; and the **Precautionary Principle (#15)**. To read about the principles, go to:
<http://www.unep.org/Documents.Multilingual/Default.asp?documentid=78&articleid=1163>
- Adopt a **Corporate Responsibility Sustainability Convention** – to ensure oversight of transnational corporations who might otherwise manipulate the concept of *the green economy* for the sake of profit.

2) Re-familiarize yourselves with the **EARTH CHARTER** - <http://www.earthcharterinaction.org>

3) Become part of the **NATIONAL CLIMATE ETHICS CAMPAIGN** –
<http://www.climateethicscampaign.org>

Addresses for Sustainable Development Advocacy

President Barack Obama

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/contact/submit-questions-and-comments>

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“We stand at a critical moment in Earth's history, a time when humanity must choose its future. As the world becomes increasingly interdependent and fragile, the future at once holds great peril and great promise. To move forward we must recognize that in the midst of a magnificent diversity of cultures and life forms we are one human family and one Earth community with a common destiny. We must join together to bring forth a sustainable global society founded on respect for nature, universal human rights, economic justice, and a culture of peace. Towards this end, it is imperative that we, the peoples of Earth, declare our responsibility to one another, to the greater community of life, and to future generations.”

Margaret Mayce, O.P., DLC/NGO Representative to the United Nations

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