

## **International Awards for Liveable Communities 2010**

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#### **The Challenge and Spirit of Rio**

*By Felix Dodds*

In less than two years' time, Rio de Janeiro will host another Earth Summit - 20 years after the first. In May this year we had the first preparatory meeting for Rio+20 in New York

The call for a Rio+20 was made in 2007 by Brazil's President Lula da Silva at the UN General Assembly.

It was clear to President Lula and to a growing number of others that the world has changed enormously since 1992, when the world agreed to Agenda 21 – if you remember we called it the blueprint for the 21st Century.

Rio 2012 will need to provide much-needed new momentum to international co-operation, on environment and sustainable development.

It is also the twentieth anniversary of Local Agenda 21 which played such a significant role in the populating Agenda 21 after Rio.

#### **Broken promises**

Most of the problems the world now faces have been on the international agenda for decades, some going back as far the Stockholm environmental conference in 1972. Where the seminal report from the Club of Rome warned us of the 'Limits to Growth'

We know from the UNEP GEO4 Report, the IPCC, the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment and what i have been hearing today that the problems we are facing have not reduced but become more acute, - not as a result of the lack of proclaimed government commitments to action, but to their dismal performance in implementing their agreements.

Indeed, if governments had implemented the many conventions, treaties and declarations they have negotiated from Stockholm to Rio to Kyoto to Johannesburg, we would be well along the road to sustainability.

Governments have not done enough by far to carry out their commitments, particularly as to helping finance developing countries' movement towards sustainability.

This failure has only added to the anger of most developing countries at the continued broken promises, and has undermined their ability to make commitments of their own. As a result, we now face challenges on a number of fronts: I want to highlight five:

1. Human societies are living beyond the carrying capacity of the planet
2. Climate change has emerged as an out-of-control driver
3. There is now becoming an increasing link between environment and security
4. Governments have still not given the UN the mandate, the resources or the institutional capacities required to monitor and enforce international agreements.
5. The still-prevailing, consumption-based economic model is not only failing to deliver progress to enormous numbers of the world's population, but is seriously threatening the economic stability of all nations, and compromising the prospect for any of us to live on this planet sustainably.

But I do believe that all of these issues can be positively influenced by Earth Summit 2012.

We still have time to change direction.....

Addressing **the challenges** we face successfully will require an ambitious and creative agenda and us all working together.

The UN General Assembly resolution last year which endorsed the summit produced just that – agreeing to focus on four areas:

### **1. Review of present commitments**

The 1992 Earth Summit was an amazing achievement:

- Agenda 21 – the blueprint for the 21<sup>st</sup> century
- The Rio Declaration – a set of principles that have found their way into many government's legislation such as the polluter pays principal
- The Rio conventions – climate change, biodiversity, desertification and straddling fish stocks
- A new international body to deal with sustainable development the UN Commission on Sustainable Development
- Nine chapters that gives roles and responsibilities to stakeholders

We know that much hasn't been implemented, perhaps we thought we had longer, money promised to developing countries to enable them to develop sustainably didn't materialise, too often today's political needs were seen to be more important than tomorrow's sustainability.

But there was some good news perhaps the most significant being the chapter on Local Authorities which spurred over 6000 communities to develop local agenda 21s. There should be an analysis of what worked in the last twenty years in LA21.

If Rio+20 must be about something it must be about **re-engaging local communities** in our journey to create a more sustainable and just world. We need to know what worked in the local agenda 21s what could be the challenge for 2012 on the green economy.

## **2. The green economy in the context of poverty alleviation and sustainable development**

The current economic model, which has brought unprecedented prosperity to the more developed countries, has only deepened the disparity between them and most developing countries.

The parallels of the ecological problems with the financial crisis are clear. The banks and financial institutions privatised the gains and socialised the losses. An example of the cost of the irresponsibility in Iceland where the action of a few bankers has left a debt which amounts to \$330,000 for every man, woman and child in Iceland.

We are doing the same with the planet's natural capital. We are according to WWF operating at 25% above the biological capacity to support life and that is before adding another billion people by 2020.

We are going to see an even greater ecological crunch in the years to come

Our present lifestyles are drawing down the ecological capital from other parts of the world and from future generations. We are increasingly becoming the most irresponsible generation our planet has seen.

The past 30 years have been characterised by irresponsible capitalism, pursuing limitless economic growth at the expense of both society and environment, with little or no regard for the natural resource base upon which such wealth is built.

The principal goal of our economy should be to improve the lives of all the world's people and to free them from want and ignorance - without compromising the planet itself.

An economy that integrates sustainable development principles with responsible capitalism can produce enough wealth to meet the needs of people in all nations, equitably and sustainably.

Earth Summit 2012 can clearly draw a roadmap to set the world on the path to a new "green" economy that is sustainable, equitable and accessible to all.

**Local government** can and will play a **critical role** what **Rio+20** should be about is bringing together all the great activities that local authorities have already started to do on the green economy at the local level. To bring these to the table to use Rio+20 as a magnifying glass to focus on the good ones and to replicate them. 2012 should re-launch local agenda 21 as a concept around the green economy – all local authorities should create a local green economy agenda 21 to take forward the outcomes from Rio and to engage their population in a journey to a more local sustainability.

### 3. Emerging issues

Environmental and security issues are becoming increasingly intertwined. The "environment-security/insecurity nexus" covers such overlapping issues such as climate security, energy security, ecosystem destruction, biodiversity loss, food security, water security, health security which will all contribute to an increase in environmental refugees.

At the Copenhagen climate summit, Bangladesh's Finance Minister said he expected 20 million environmental refugees to be fleeing his country by 2050, and warned that developed countries would have to accommodate many of them. Are those countries and communities ready to accept many of them...after all much of the cause of Bangladesh's and many other developing countries problems will be due to our activities in the north. If we do take on-board the principal of the polluter pays from Rio then what is our responsibility?

It is at the local level that most of the emerging issues will be felt first. Local authorities need to take a lead at addressing the challenges ahead by looking to conserve water, reduce energy from traditional carbon based sources, to reduce the ecological footprints – to start thinking of their towns and cities working within a 'one planet

living' – we are at present according to WWF living at the rate of 1.5 planets in their recent report.

### **3. Sustainable development governance**

The present global institutions are wholly inadequate to deal with the Earth's major challenges.

As most of the necessary changes are economic in nature, primary responsibility for decision making cannot be made by environmental ministries. They will continue to be vested in the ministries' of finance, development and trade.

To ensure that these decisions have the required environmental input, it is essential that environmental ministries and agencies have a place at the table and the capacities to ensure that the economic decisions will produce the necessary transition to sustainability.

Earth Summit 2012 should agree on strengthening and upgrading the United Nations Environment Programme (Unep), which should be the most influential champion of the global environment.

We need a review of the environment Conventions to reduce fragmentation and increase cooperation and coordination.

Just as we have had problems mainstreaming environment we need to strengthen and mainstream sustainable development in the UN system. Its time to return to the idea of transforming the Trusteeship Council a core body of the UN into a Sustainable Development Council. A council that can address the emerging and critical issues that will need to be addressed in the coming years.

We also need to review sustainable development governance at the nation level, What has happened since 1992 the experiments with green ministers, sustainable development strategies, sustainable development ministries, energy and climate ministries. What has worked and what hasn't. We also need to look to the local level local agenda 21 and regional government and see what has worked there too.

### **Climate changing**

What else should we expect from Earth Summit 2012?

Climate change is perhaps the biggest single challenge humans have ever faced. It is the greatest security risk we have ever faced; and as a global phenomenon, we face it together.

Earth Summit 2012 can provide a high-profile forum to complete and sign a more comprehensive climate change agreement which we hope the COP in South Africa in 2011 will agree to.

The number of stakeholders across the field has grown hugely in the years since Rio 1992. The new summit can provide an active demonstration of a participatory democratic model, which brings together all those who can contribute to implementation of the decisions taken.

2012 must also be about stakeholders coming to the table with their own commitments. Some of this happened around Copenhagen with local and regional government and industry.

### **Is there a Common future?**

Since 1992, awareness of the Earth's environmental challenges has become universal.

What is lacking is the will of governments to act.

Supported, indeed driven, by an aware and actively committed public, governments must and can act decisively.

Earth Summit 2012 needs to utilise communications media assertively and creatively - to engage the global public in a global conversation on how we are able to live on this "one planet" together.

We need to reboot sustainable development

We need to refocus our local, national and global economies around a green and sustainable economy

We need to re-engage local communities as the best way to start creating and living our more sustainable planet.

Earth Summit 2012 presents a unique platform for negotiating the co-operation needed to achieve a new deal between North and South, between rich and poor and between present and future generations. A co-operation that is critical to the future of all people on the planet; and a co-operation that we must achieve.