

Rio+20: A Tale of Two Conferences



Later this decade, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil will host the two largest sporting events in the world, the World Cup and the Olympics. This year the city was the venue of another event of major international proportions but instead of sports the focus was sustainability. [The Rio +20 event](#) was arguably the largest single event related to sustainable development. This UN Conference gathered delegations from 188 member states, including heads of state of over 130 countries. There were also over 40,000 credential passes issued for the massive event.

Some of the conference results were also record breaking.

There were over 700 voluntary commitments by governments, businesses, NGOs, and other institutions reaching a total of over \$500 billion. This included a [pledge of \\$175 billion by eight multilateral development banks to support sustainable transport in developing countries](#).

The predominant conclusion of the Rio+20 event was a document approved by 193 countries entitled "[The Future We Want](#)." The key points of this international compromise included the following:

- Launching a process to establish sustainable development goals
- Detailing how the green economy can be used as a tool to achieve sustainable development
- Strengthening the UN Environment Programme and establishing a new forum for sustainable development
- Promoting corporate sustainability reporting measures
- Taking steps to go beyond GDP to assess the well-being of a country
- Developing a strategy for sustainable development financing
- Adopting a framework for tackling sustainable consumption and production
- Focusing on improving gender equality
- Stressing the need to engage civil society and incorporate science into policy
- Recognizing the importance of voluntary commitments on sustainable development

These results appear impressive and are certainly a step in the right direction. But those who have studied

sustainability understand that planning and strategy are only a small fraction of the total equation. Implementation is the lifeblood of a successful sustainability initiative and this key element was inadequately addressed.

The key to a viable implementation plan is specific and measurable action items and this was not produced by this event or the “[The Future We Want](#)” document. Although the commitments are remarkable, little detail was provided in terms of how these commitments will be applied, the expected timetable, or whether the financial commitments would be grants or loans. There is promise, however, that the event created the appropriate momentum that will allow the details to be worked out in the months and years to come.

Yet those who were not present in Rio in June may have failed to notice that Rio+20 was in fact two events. There was the much publicized UN conference that gathered diplomats and produced the open-ended “The Future We Want” document. But there were also a series of conferences, meetings, and workshops that gathered various actors in the world of sustainability including NGOs and businesses focused on social responsibility. Although less impressive on their own, the totality of these various “micro” events likely produced more [implementable activities](#) than the “macro” event of the official UN conference.

The conclusion of Rio+20 may be that coordinated government action may in fact be less effective than a collection of activities by smaller non-governmental players. Achieving consensus within a single nation is difficult in itself, thus making agreement on detailed actionable steps between hundreds of governments next to impossible. But implementable initiatives are a plausible outcome of interactions of various businesses and other non-governmental institutions. The Rio+20 Conference therefore reiterates the importance of all businesses and organizations understanding sustainability and how they can contribute to its improvement.

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