

THE UNITED NATIONS CONFERENCE ON ENVIRONMENT AND DEVELOPMENT

From 3-14 June 1992, Rio de Janeiro hosted the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). Never before had so many countries come together in a spirit of concern and cooperation. The conference focused on current development and economic practices and their impact on the global environment, and on the development of a common strategy to integrate environmental considerations into economic and development decision-making worldwide. The conference concluded with the Earth Summit, at which leaders of 105 nations rallied behind a global commitment to sustainable development.

However, deep disappointment about UNCED has also been expressed by many participants and commentators. The conference is said to have failed to recognize and grapple with the link between the world's environmental crisis and its dominant model of economic development. Developing countries, in particular, would charge that the crucial issues of transfer of resources and transfer of technology did not begin to be examined. Other global concerns such as population growth, poverty of developing countries, overconsumption of resources, and the relationship between these issues and environmental problems, were not adequately addressed. Désirée McGraw, former UNCED Youth Ambassador, identified debt, militarization and nuclear energy as "non-agenda" items crucial to achieving UNCED's stated goal of sustainable development.¹ Even the praise of those expressing pleasure at the outcome of Rio is guarded; it is agreed that the degree to which the conference can be considered a success will only be known in time. The nature of the follow-up process by which decisions taken at Rio are implemented by governments and international bodies will determine the conference's ultimate significance.

Canadians have expressed a high level of concern about their natural environment. Our commitment was demonstrated by the lead role Canada took at the Earth Summit. Ten months have now passed since UNCED, and the challenge facing Canadians is how may we profit from the work begun at Rio? What action and direction must Canadians take to improve those areas where Rio failed, and to make significant and lasting environmental advances both at home and internationally? The House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment has endeavoured to address this challenge.

The Committee followed the events at Rio closely. Many of the members attended Rio and were active participants in the UNCED process, tracking the goals of the conference and its accomplishments, as well as the areas where success was not achieved. Because of the crucial importance of immediate, effective follow-up to Rio, in Canada as well as elsewhere, the members of this Committee wished to study the Conventions which Canada signed, and the steps which are being taken or considered by Canada for the coming months. Through the recommendations contained in this report, the Committee attempts to define Canada's future course of action toward the implementation of sustainable development.

¹ Désirée McGraw, "Making Sense of UNCED," Paper submitted to the House of Commons Standing Committee on Environment, December 1992, p. 6.