

The UNCED process concluded with a sense of accomplishment, realism, I think, and hope. The biggest accomplishment was the extent to which different concerns converged around a common agenda and countries rallied behind a global commitment to sustainable development. . . . For the first time, nations everywhere acknowledged that the problems are real, and they agreed on a common course of action to combat them. A collective enterprise crystallized in Rio. Precedents were set and irreversible networks and partnerships were formed. A global consensus was reached that practical solutions are available, not quick fixes; no short cuts, but progressive steps in the right direction.¹³

The single most important fear expressed by NGOs, developing countries and other observers critical of UNCED's real results was the failure of governments from the developed countries, including Canada, to commit money to sustainable development. Tim Draimin told the Committee that Canada's ability to meet its pledge to maintain and hopefully increase ODA in the next budget will be a key indicator of our commitment. This is particularly alarming given the announcement in the government's "mini-budget" of 2 December 1992 that Canada's foreign aid budget will be cut by 10%.

Overall, Rio cannot be said to have been successful in integrating, in practice or in theory, the two areas in which the international community has worked to achieve change; environmental protection and international development. Jim MacNeill, who was the Secretary General of the Brundtland Commission, based his evaluation of Rio on the expectations that Commission had for it:

The Commission intended that Rio would provide an opportunity for governments to map out a global transition to more sustainable forms of development. It proposed that governments take strong measures to tame our terminal propensity to multiply our numbers, tackle mass poverty and change the consumption, production and trading patterns that underlay the dismal trends that put human civilization at increasing risk. As a minimum first step, the Commission called for a range of measures to integrate environmental and economic considerations at the centre of decision-making in the cabinet chambers of government, the board rooms of industry and the kitchens of our homes. Clearly, the Summit did not achieve those goals.¹⁴

The following documents were the tangible products of UNCED:

1. Agenda 21

Agenda 21 is considered the key document of the Conference. Its content was largely negotiated during the PrepComs, starting from Maurice Strong's visionary concept of it as an integrated action plan for governments and international organizations to deal with the specific sectoral issues on the UNCED agenda. It is a 700-page, 40-chapter inventory of environment and development issues, including action programs and cost estimates for their implementation. It represents an attempt to restructure human thinking and activities in order to integrate the environment and the economy. Although government leaders, by signing Agenda 21, may have committed themselves to an intention to implement these programs, no financial or other binding commitments were made.

Agenda 21 addresses environmental issues on a sectoral basis; for example, poverty reduction, technology transfer, climate change and hazardous waste disposal. The Agenda also contains key chapters that (i) recommend the establishment of a UN-related commission to track the progress of nations and (ii) outline financing mechanisms and structures to assist countries in their sustainable development efforts.

¹³ Ibid., Issue No. 45, 16 November 1992, p. 5-6.

¹⁴ Jim MacNeill, "The 1992 Rio Conference: Setting the Global Compass," *Rio Reviews*, 1992, p. 34.