



Rio+20 shows little sign of living up to original Earth summit

As Brazil prepares for the Rio+20 conference, there is little on the agenda to suggest any substantive action will be taken.



The Christ the Redeemer statue stands in darkness during the Earth Hour campaign in Rio de Janeiro in 2011. The city hosts Rio+20 in June 2012. Photograph: Felipe Dana/AP

By Fred Pearce

It is easy to be cynical. Back in 1992, more than 100 world leaders, including George H.W. Bush, showed up for the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. It was a two-week mega-event that attracted huge attention, highlighted by the signing of two groundbreaking treaties on climate change and biodiversity and grand declarations about creating a future green and equitable world.

To put it mildly, the subsequent two decades have not lived up to the promises. George W. Bush effectively broke the climate treaty signed by his father, refusing to sign up to the Kyoto Protocol. Emissions have soared, resource plundering has intensified, nature is still on the retreat, the world has become less equitable, and climate change has gone from distant prospect to frightening reality. While [the population bomb](#) may be being defused, [the consumption bomb](#) is

primed to destroy us all.

The 1992 Rio summit's aspirations were left in the hands of a new body: the [UN Commission on Sustainable Development](#) (UNCSD). You have probably never heard of it. That's not a good sign, since the commission is now in charge of a new event, [Rio+20](#), which is being billed as the next step in making the planet fit for future generations.

Rio+20 will be held in the Brazilian megacity this June. It is hard to escape the conclusion that the hearts of our leaders are not in this. It will last for

The truth is we have gone backwards in the last two decades. just three days (June 20-22), rather than the 14 days of its predecessor. President Obama isn't going. The organizers are so scared nobody of note will turn up that, when they learned a few months ago that the event would clash with Britain and its former empire celebrating Queen Elizabeth's diamond jubilee, they postponed the summit for a week.

It probably won't help much. Even British Prime Minister David Cameron refused to take the hint and show any signs that he might attend.

It has to be said that maybe Cameron is right. The "[zero draft text](#)" (don't you just love UN-speak?) issued by the UNCSD at the end of January suggests leaders will not be asked to sign on to anything of substance that was not in the original Rio declaration 20 years ago. There will be no new treaties — plenty of pious words, but no action plan.

It is fine and good to call for a "green economy," of course. But as the [Green Economy Coalition](#) — a grouping of NGOs, research institutes, UN organizations, businesses and trade unions — puts it, the text fails to address the fundamental issues involved in achieving it. "How are we going to kick-start the finance of a green and fair economy?," the coalition asked in a statement issued last month. "How can we ensure the poorest benefit?... How will a green economy improve the management of our natural world?"

Many Western politicians may feel that the current economic crisis means that 2012 is not a good time to address environmental issues. But the counterargument is that rapacious use of the world's natural resources over the past 20 years is one reason we got into this mess — causing sharp rises in commodity prices, for instance — and that "green economics" is the only long-term solution.

The truth is that we have gone backwards in the past two decades. The growing power of big developing nations like China and Brazil is often putting the international agenda on sustainability into reverse. Their governments see even current weak international guidelines on social and

We need new environmental governance. It's time to reboot the Rio+20 summit agenda. environmental standards in development projects, such as those developed by the World Bank, as undermining their national sovereignty and impeding economic development, rather than enhancing and sustaining them.

As a result, notes Andy White, coordinator of the Washington-based [Rights and Resources](#)

[Initiative](#), “there is nothing in the draft Rio+20 text that even mentions the rights of poor people to their land and their forests, even though we know they are far better custodians of nature than governments or private corporations.”

Tinkering with business as usual is not enough. What is needed is new environmental governance for a crowded planet running on empty. It is time to reboot the Rio+20 summit agenda.

The world’s environmental scientists are doing their best. They know best how the planet’s life support systems have deteriorated since 1992 and the imminent dangers of runaway ecological and climatic disaster.

The International Council for Science (ICSU), which represents science bodies in 140 countries including the U.S. National Academy of Science, has organized a meeting in London in March to put pressure on the politicians to get real in Rio. The event, [Planet Under Pressure](#), is one of the formal pre-Rio preparatory meetings, and it won’t pull its punches.

The starting point for the scientists, says ICSU, is that “stark increases in [natural disasters](#), food and water security problems, and biodiversity loss are just part of the evidence that humanity [may be crossing planetary boundaries](#) and approaching dangerous tipping points.”

The March conference will hear, for instance, how researchers are developing early warning systems to spot those approaching tipping points. If such systems had been in place 40 years ago, they might have warned of the sudden emergence of the ozone hole over Antarctica. A decade ago, they might have predicted the collapse of Arctic sea ice. Next up could be the explosive growth of nitrogen-gorged “dead zones” in the oceans, or runaway emissions of methane from melting permafrost.

We need something like a UN environmental security council to drag us back from the tipping points. But the scientists don’t just want to predict disasters. They want to stop them. To do that, they will insist that politicians have to be wrenched from their comfort zones. New priorities will require new institutions and new actors. Frank Biermann of the Free University Amsterdam, who heads ICSU’s [Earth System Governance Project](#), will tell the conference that incremental steps will not be sufficient and that “we have to reorient and restructure our national and international institutions.”

We need, he says, a “constitutional moment... akin to the major transformative shift after 1945 that led to the establishment of the United Nations and other international organizations,” like the World Bank. At the very least we need something like a UN environmental security council — with real muscle to call the big polluters, ecosystem trashers, and resource plunderers to account and to drag us back from those tipping points.

Climate change will affect most people’s lives most dramatically through changes to the water cycle, with wet areas set to become wetter and dry areas drier. So, to take one specific recommendation, the scientists want Rio+20 to pledge a new system of global water governance

that would be charged with protecting international rivers for downstream users and maintaining irreplaceable underground water reserves for future generations.

Thankfully — for they do not always do this — the scientists have embraced a democratic vision that wants the environment to work for people. The new environmental governance, ICSU says, needs to build greater

Rio+20 needs to give teeth to its predecessor's vague promises about sustainable development. Resilience for humans to survive what is almost certainly looming, especially for the poorest, who need protection from climate change, food shortages, natural disasters, and failed states. That means developing crops [that are more drought tolerant](#), helping poor communities prudently harvest forests and other ecosystems for their own day-to-day needs, and ensuring that communities are better protected against floods and other natural disasters.

Other independent researchers take a similar view about the need for Rio+20 to give teeth to its predecessor's vague promises about sustainable development. Alex Evans of New York University's Center on International Cooperation, a co-founder of globaldashboard.org, says Rio+20 needs to address three fundamental challenges. The first is the greening of growth, especially in emerging economies — “not because they have the greatest responsibility, but because they have the greatest opportunities to be laboratories of the future.”

The second is creating greater equity in a world of growing tensions over access to energy, land, water, and the diminishing “carbon space” in the atmosphere if we are successfully to tackle climate change. The third is building resilience to inevitable shocks, whether from crossing thresholds in natural systems or from market dysfunction, as food and other resources grow scarce.

Evans agrees this is unlikely to be achieved by existing world leaders alone. Nor should it be. The world's seven billion people need to be asked what they think. That's us. Evans proposes harnessing the Web for an instant “global outsourcing process” during the 100 days leading up to the summit. Starting with the scientists' conference, those hundred days could rewrite the politicians' flaccid agenda, and pick peoples' delegates to attend on behalf of the real world.

The summit badly needs outside input. Right now, the official Rio+20 agenda and draft text show few signs that politicians are willing to go beyond the green-sounding rhetoric we heard from their predecessors in the same city two decades ago. It wasn't enough then. It certainly isn't enough now.