



The Rio+20 UN conference on sustainable development

Standard Note: SN/SC/06246
Last updated: 5 March 2012
Author: Dr Patsy Richards
Section: Science & Environment

From 20-22 June 2012 the UN will hold a conference on sustainable development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, twenty years on from the 'Earth Summit' of 1992, also held in Rio. This note sets out the likely agenda for the conference and some surrounding political issues.

Unlike the first Rio Summit, which resulted in the climate change and biodiversity conventions, along with a sustainable development action plan, this conference will focus on sustainable development. Its two themes are the 'green economy' and an institutional framework for sustainable development. One aim is to develop sustainable development goals, like the UN millennium development goals. In January 2012 a 'zero draft' outcome document was produced.

In October 2011 the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC) published its [Report on Preparations for the Rio+20 Summit](#) which noted inadequate progress since 1992. That report and the Government response were debated in the House on 28 February 2012.

Contents

1	Introduction	2
1.1	Progress since 1992 Earth Summit	2
2	Preparatory work	2
2.1	EAC Report	3
2.2	Draft outcome document and aims of Rio+20	4
	Sustainable development goals (SDGs)	5
	The 'green economy'	5
	The institutional framework	6
3	UK sustainable development policy and attendance at Rio	6

This information is provided to Members of Parliament in support of their parliamentary duties and is not intended to address the specific circumstances of any particular individual. It should not be relied upon as being up to date; the law or policies may have changed since it was last updated; and it should not be relied upon as legal or professional advice or as a substitute for it. A suitably qualified professional should be consulted if specific advice or information is required.

This information is provided subject to [our general terms and conditions](#) which are available online or may be provided on request in hard copy. Authors are available to discuss the content of this briefing with Members and their staff, but not with the general public.

1 Introduction

1.1 Progress since 1992 Earth Summit

Twenty years ago, the landmark Rio 'Earth Summit' of 1992 was also called UNCED, the UN Conference on Environment and Development. It covered three main themes; biodiversity, climate change, and sustainable development. It resulted in legally binding conventions on the first two. It resulted in an 'action plan', called Agenda 21, on sustainable development, and a high level UN commission on sustainable development (UNCSD).

Sustainable development had been placed on the map five years previously, by the Brundtland Commission (the World Commission on Environment and Development). This defined sustainable development as:

"development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

A 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) also took place 10 years on, in Johannesburg. But perhaps as a result of the lack of a legally binding agreement at Rio, *policy* progress on sustainable development has been less tangible than in the areas of climate change and biodiversity. Development targets have mainly been promoted globally via the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) for 2015.

The [Third Meeting of the \[UN\] High Level Panel on Global Sustainability](#) (GSP) took place in Helsinki in May 2011. It recognised that while the MDGs had made progress in reducing poverty, progress had been limited in part because of an 'ingrained sectoral approach' rather than advancing several elements of sustainability in parallel:

Discussing the added value of the Panel's final report, Panel members highlighted the importance of understanding why efforts towards sustainable development have fallen short to date.

9. Panel members recognized that the three pillars of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social) are closely linked, however this relationship is not often reflected in policy design and implementation, which commonly fall within sectors. Some suggested to focus the work in providing solutions that consider synergies, and trade-offs between sectors.

10. Panel members also noted an added value of the Panel's final report could lie in building on the shared interest for long-term sustainability and living within the earth's planetary boundaries. While recognizing the different circumstances of individual countries and groups of countries, it was acknowledged that truly sustainable development would require tough political calls and at times radical new approaches in order to meet this shared objective

Apart from the fact that the MDGs are in danger of being missed, they of course apply only to the developing countries. The 2012 conference does therefore provide a chance to refocus global efforts.

2 Preparatory work

A number of preparatory UN meetings have been held, starting from May 2010. The preparatory meetings and inter-sessional meetings in the run-up to the conference are on the [conference website](#).

The main themes for Rio+20 are a 'green economy' and 'governance', or the institutional framework for sustainable development. The full text of the UN General Assembly Resolution [A/RES/64/236](#) of March 2010 provides further detail.¹

The European Commission issued a [Communication](#)² in June 2011 on the conference subtitled *Towards the green economy and better governance*. It outlines action on the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) since 2001 and talks about promoting the 'right kind' of growth. It said:

To give renewed impetus to sustainable development Rio+20 needs to create a shared vision for change, backed by a decision framework for specific action. The main "ingredients" of an overall outcome could be envisaged as follows:

1. A broad political "rallying call" with a shared, ambitious vision and goals.
2. A set of specific actions at international, regional and national level - mapped out as a "Green Economy Roadmap".
3. A "toolbox" of policy approaches and best practice examples to be used to reach agreed objectives.
4. A mechanism to promote and monitor overall progress.

The UK position pre-conference was summed up by Peter Unwin, DG of Environment and Rural Group at Defra who told the Environmental Audit Committee (EAC, in evidence, 14 September 2011) that the UK wanted to see some deliverable outcomes. When pressed, he said that the type of things the UK would want to see on the table included:

- removal of subsidies that harm the environment
- introduction of pricing to reflect externalities
- liberalisation of trade markets to environmental services

Peter Unwin confirmed that the UK would be contributing to the EU's position. If this did not include everything the UK wanted then Ministers would consider a separate submission. This is because UK sustainable development policy is well advanced and the UK sees itself as an exemplar country in this area. (See also notes on UK policy below.)

2.1 EAC Report

In October 2011 the EAC published its [Report on Preparations for the Rio+20 Summit](#)³. It said it had timed its report to feed into the call for text for the UN's 'zero draft' outcome document. The EAC summarised:

There has been inadequate progress on sustainable development since the 1992 Earth Summit. There is still far to travel, and approaching environmental 'planetary boundaries' make the task more urgent than ever. The Millennium Development Goals have helped shape aid programmes over the last decade, including the UK's, but globally their targets appear likely to be missed by their 2015 end-date. Nor have they fully captured the challenges facing sustainability. The Government should support

¹ UN Resolution A/RES/64/236 adopted by the G8, [Amplification of Agenda 21, the Programme for the further implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development](#), 31 March 2010.

² COM(2011) 363 final http://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/pdf/rio/com_2011_363_en.pdf

³ HC 1026 Eighth Report of Session 2010-12 26 October 2011

work aimed at launching new 'Goals' - Sustainability Goals and Consumption Goals - at Rio+20, to shift the effort towards the sustainable development and sustainable consumption contributions that the UK and other developed countries now need to make.

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) could apply in all countries and include the environmental and social pillars of sustainable development, not just the economic (poverty reduction) focus of the MDGs. The Committee felt that there was a danger that the financial crisis would tempt countries to aim for a 'slightly greened business as usual' at Rio in a fear of hampering economic recovery. It also said it would revisit the issue and conference outcomes later.

The [Government responded](#) to the EAC on 11 January 2012.⁴ It said it supported the “development of a process to develop a set of high level sustainability goals, and are actively exploring how they could relate to a framework to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after 2015. In the meantime, these discussions should not detract from focusing on meeting the MDGs”.

The Committee’s report and Government response were debated on 28 February 2012.⁵

2.2 Draft outcome document and aims of Rio+20

The UN has set out the following aims:⁶

The objective of the Conference is to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assess the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development, and address new and emerging challenges

The Conference will focus on two themes: (a) a [green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication](#); and (b) the [institutional framework for sustainable development](#).

The IIED told the EAC in evidence that it felt the prospects for a binding agreement were ‘pretty bleak’ given current cynicism about multilateral agreements. Oxfam agreed, partly because the time scales were short. But both these witnesses felt that nevertheless the conference could achieve timely outcomes. The Stakeholder Forum was very optimistic and told the EAC committee (7 September 2011) that this was the first conference that had been called for by developing countries, in contrast to Stockholm, Rio and Jo’burg, which were developed countries’ initiatives.

Following its call for text by November 2011, in January 2012 the UN produced a [‘zero draft’ of an outcome document, The Future We Want](#). This now forms the main negotiating text for the conference. It notes:⁷

We nevertheless observe that, despite efforts by Governments and non-State actors in all countries, sustainable development remains a distant goal and there remain major barriers and systemic gaps in the implementation of internationally agreed commitments.

⁴ Fifth Special Report Preparations for the Rio +20 Summit: Government Response to the Committee's Eighth Report of Session 2010-12 11 January 2012

⁵ [HC Deb 28 February 2012 c221 onwards](#)

⁶ <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/objectiveandthemes.html>

⁷ <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/futurewewant.html#Vb>

Sustainable development goals (SDGs)

The document does however include the proposal to develop some SDGs by 2015. Defra witnesses had told the EAC that SDGs were attractive in having been suggested by developing countries, but also that the timetable was tight for them to have been inserted into the zero draft document.

The 'green economy'

It is not altogether clear how a 'green economy' is best defined. The zero draft document sets out some benefits of greening the economy. The UK Government in its response to the EAC points to its document *Enabling the Transition to a Green Economy: Government and business working together*.⁸ It also says it is keen to develop the idea of 'sustainability reporting' between now and Rio+20.

The UN draft outcome document says on this:

We view the green economy as a means to achieve sustainable development, which must remain our overarching goal. We acknowledge that a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication should protect and enhance the natural resource base, increase resource efficiency, promote sustainable consumption and production patterns, and move the world toward low-carbon development.

27. We underscore that green economy is not intended as a rigid set of rules but rather as a decision-making framework to foster integrated consideration of the three pillars of sustainable development in all relevant domains of public and private decision-making.

28. We recognize that each country, respecting specific realities of economic, social and environmental development as well as particular conditions and priorities, will make the appropriate choices.

29. We are convinced that green economy policies and measures can offer win-win opportunities to improve the integration of economic development with environmental sustainability to all countries, regardless of the structure of their economy and their level of development.

30. We acknowledge, however, that developing countries are facing great challenges in eradicating poverty and sustaining growth, and a transition to a green economy will require structural adjustments which may involve additional costs to their economies. In this regard, the support of the international community is necessary.

31. We note that the transformation to a green economy should be an opportunity to all countries and a threat to none. We therefore resolve that international efforts to help countries build a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication must not:

- a) create new trade barriers;
- b) impose new conditionalities on aid and finance;
- c) widen technology gaps or exacerbate technological dependence of developing countries on developed countries;

⁸

http://www.businesslink.gov.uk/Horizontal_Services_files/Enabling_the_transition_to_a_Green_Economy__Main_D.pdf

d) restrict the policy space for countries to pursue their own paths to sustainable development.

The institutional framework

The EAC and the UK Government are in agreement that the UN governance machinery needed to be overhauled. The UK Government believes that UN institutions on environment and sustainable development are both cluttered and too siloed. The Government does not agree with calls for an International Court on the Environment, however, and cites past lack of international appetite for such a body.

The draft outcome document reaffirms the role of the UN General Assembly, and ECOSOC (the UN Economic and Social Council). On the UNCSD however, it includes two options; either to reaffirm its role or to transform it into a 'Sustainable Development Council'. On UNEP (United Nations Environment Programme), again, there are alternatives, one including the creation of a specialised agency based on UNEP and based in Nairobi, and the establishment of an "Ombudsperson, or High Commissioner for Future Generations, to promote sustainable development".

The [Third World Network](#)⁹ has published its initial reaction to the draft outcome document, and calls it "clearly an attempt by the Secretariat to produce a document that can be widely accepted in time for adoption in June, with the hope that its generality will not give rise to difficult intergovernmental negotiations". It considers the draft weak on implementation and sees problems with a new organisation based on UNEP.

3 UK sustainable development policy and attendance at Rio

The UK has a cross-departmental sustainable development strategy [Securing the Future: UK Sustainable Development Strategy](#) (March 2005).

Under the Strategy, the UK already has a set of sustainable development indicators, published annually. Government departments also publish Sustainable Development Action Plans (SDAPs) under the strategy, which the UK's Sustainable Development Commission (SDC) used to audit.

It could be said then that the UK would be better placed than most countries to meet any requirements of Rio+20, since it has been an international leader in such issues.

On the other hand, the SDC or 'sustainability watchdog', was wound up in 2010. Writing on the last day of its existence, on 31 March 2011, the *Guardian* claimed it was not clear who was to take over its responsibilities; the Commons EAC could be told (by Government) to take over the role but not how to resource this.¹⁰

A further dent to the UK's sustainability credentials has come with a controversy over who will attend the summit. Because the Summit coincided with the Queen's Diamond Jubilee Celebrations, Government sources apparently confirmed that the Prime Minister would not attend, despite the EAC's call for him to do so. The UK's delegation would instead be led by Environment Secretary Caroline Spelman.¹¹ The Government's response to the EAC

⁹ TWN Update on Sustainable Development Conference 2012 (Jan12/01) 20 January 2012 Third World Network <http://www.twinside.org.sg/title2/sdc2012/sdc2012.120101.htm>

¹⁰ Goodbye Sustainable Development Commission, hello hot air *Guardian* 31 March 2011 <http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/damian-carrington-blog/2011/mar/31/sustainable-development-commission>

¹¹ David Cameron to snub Rio +20 Earth Summit, despite MPs' calls *Guardian* 26 October 2011

confirmed that the Environment Secretary would be attending and that “Who else attends ... will be decided upon in due course”.

Joan Walley, chair of the EAC, said in the debate on 28 February 2012:¹²

The Select Committee report calls on the Prime Minister to attend the summit to show the UK’s commitment. His office informed us that he would not be able to do so because of a clash of dates with the diamond jubilee celebrations. That seems to have prompted the United Nations and Brazil to move the summit to later in June to allow not just the Prime Minister, but other Heads of Government to attend. The response to the report states that decisions about who will attend Rio, apart from the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, will be decided on later, as will the decision on the need for a special envoy. Right from the word go, the Government have to be careful not to be on the back foot. This matter has to be clarified.

I have no quarrel whatever with the Secretary of State going out there. It is vital that she attends. I know that she is very committed and that she has been involved in all the preliminary stages. However, I believe that for the full backing of the team, the Prime Minister needs to be there, as well as the Deputy Prime Minister, the scientists and the business leaders. The UK team have to make their mark. At a time when the world is changing; when environmental debt needs to be as high up the agenda as economic debt; when we face temperature rise and biodiversity loss unless we learn to live within our planetary boundaries; and when we have one opportunity for the international community to frame the new priorities and to work out how we will each, individually and collectively, engage with this matter, we need the UK Prime Minister to be there, actively shaping the new agenda and understanding what alliances are being forged.

Richard Benyon, the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, said on this matter, and on the UK’s priorities:

A very strong message has been conveyed by this debate. The hon. Lady knows that I cannot give an absolute commitment one way or the other. As was made clear to her Committee, the Prime Minister thinks that this is an absolute priority. The Secretary of State will be going, and whether or not the Prime Minister can go will be announced in the near future.

As I was saying and as was said earlier, businesses are leading the way, and to an extent Government must follow. We know that the Brazilians are planning to bring non-governmental organisations and the private sector together before the ministerial segment, and I hope that a range of UK businesses and NGOs will help to shape the negotiations that follow. We have also encouraged the Brazilians to hold a trade fair to showcase the opportunities that the transition to a green economy can offer. It is important to note that politicians will not just be talking to each other: there will be engagement with business, the voluntary sector, NGOs and, of course, Governments.

These are our high-level priorities for Rio. The areas where we think we can make a real difference include the sustainable development goals, agriculture and energy, valuing natural capital and corporate sustainability.

¹² [HC Deb 28 February 2012 c223](#)