

## Editorial

# The Super Urgency of Rio+20: A World Environment Organization

This year marks the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the *Earth Summit* held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Meeting between 3<sup>rd</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> of June 1992, at least 178 governments participated in the Conference on Environment and Development that produced “Agenda 21.” In response to the enthusiasm generated in Rio, the United Nations established the Commission on Sustainable Development in December 1992.

According to the United Nations, Agenda 21 is a “comprehensive plan of action to be taken globally, nationally and locally by organizations of the UN System, Governments, and Major Groups in every area in which human impacts on the environment<sup>1</sup>. As the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development built on the two decade-old “Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment<sup>2</sup>” proclaimed on 16 June 1972, so will the outcome of the 2012 event to be held between 20<sup>th</sup> and 22<sup>nd</sup> June 2012 again in Brazil. The 10<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original Rio was held in 2002 in Johannesburg, South Africa.

Rio+20 has two themes: (a) a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and (b) the institutional framework for sustainable development<sup>3</sup>. The economic context and generational equity issues are very influential in planning the 2012 event and informs the adopted definition of sustainable development:

*“Sustainable development emphasizes a holistic, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision-making at all levels. It emphasizes not just strong economic performance but intra-generational and intergenerational equity. It rests on integration and a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental goals and objectives in both public and private decision-making<sup>4</sup>.”*

The institutional framework theme has become subject of intense debate with various pre-conference proposals to change the institutional status quo. According to the UN, the debate is precipitated by long-term dissatisfaction with the slow pace of moving from rhetoric to action on urgent topics such as climate change, deforestation, biodiversity conservation, displacement of human settlements for economic profit, etc.:

*“The proliferation of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and fragmentation of environmental institutions has driven calls to strengthen the environmental pillar of sustainable development. A number of processes have addressed the scope and options for reform of international environmental governance (IEG). Topics under the functions covered by the IEG agenda include strengthening the science-policy interface with the full and meaningful participation of developing countries and encouraging synergies between compatible multilateral environmental agreements. Institutional, or form-related questions, make up the other part of the IEG discussions. In this regard, the Nairobi-Helsinki Outcome adopted by Consultative Group of Ministers or High-level Representatives on International Environmental Governance identified the following options for broader reform:*

- (a) *Enhancing the United Nations Environment Program*
- (b) *Establishing a new umbrella organization for sustainable development*
- (c) *Creating a specialized agency such as a world environment organization*
- (d) *Introducing possible reforms to ECOSOC and the CSD*
- (e) *Enhanced institutional reforms and streamlining of present structures<sup>5</sup>”*

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs: Division for Sustainable Development. Agenda 21. <http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/agenda21/> Accessed January 2012.

<sup>2</sup> United Nations General Assembly: Report of the UN Conference on Environment and Development. <http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf151/aconf15126-1annex1.htm> Accessed January 2012.

<sup>3</sup> United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/about.html> Accessed January 2012.

<sup>4</sup> United Nations. Green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=62>. Accessed January 2012.

<sup>5</sup> United Nations. Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?page=view&type=12&nr=228&menu=63> Accessed January 2012.

Item (a) has led some to proposed raising the UNEP to the status of a “World Environment Organization” equivalent in executive function and prestige to the “World Health Organization.” The argument is that the UNEP as configured, and perhaps also because it is based in Kenya, has little or no political clout<sup>6</sup>. Others have argued that creating a centralized all-powerful organization for the environment might threaten the grassroots essential for a robust environmental governance<sup>7</sup>.

The Africa regional preparatory meeting for Rio+20 was held between 20<sup>th</sup> and 25<sup>th</sup> October 2011 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. The Environment Ministers that gathered for that meeting issued a consensus statement on many issues, but one concern is worth emphasizing<sup>8</sup>:

*“We are deeply concerned that Africa’s progress towards sustainable development is being severely compromised by new and emerging challenges. Chief among these are the adverse impact of climate change, increasing water scarcity, biodiversity and ecosystem loss, desertification, hazardous and electronic waste, low resilience to natural disasters, the energy crisis, the food crisis, rapid and unplanned urbanization resulting from rural-urban migration, piracy, human trafficking, migration and the global financial and economic crises. These challenges have led to the spread of new diseases, worsening poverty, and unemployment, especially of the youth.”*

We hope these voices will be heard loud and clearly at Rio+20.

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<sup>6</sup> Stefania Prestigiacomo and John Njoroge Michuki. 2009. Why we need a world environment organization. The Guardian.

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/cif-green/2009/oct/28/world-environment-organisation>

<sup>7</sup> Frank Biermann and Steffen Bauer 2005. A World Environment Organization: solution or threat for effective international environmental governance? Ashgate Publishers. ISBN-10: 0754637654

<sup>8</sup> United Nations Economic and Social Council, African Development Bank, African Union. Africa Consensus Statement to Rio+20.

<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/325Final%20Africa%20Consensus%20Statement%20to%20Rio20.pdf> Accessed January 2012.