



UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012 “Rio+20”

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General description

“Rio+20” is a UN conference of the highest possible level, including some 110 heads of state and government and other high-level representatives. It is coordinated by UN Department of Social and Economic Affairs (DESA). Rio+20 is a follow up of two important events: the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), in Rio de Janeiro, and the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg.

The conference will take place 20 to 22 June 2012 and will be accompanied by a number of official and unofficial events ([Trade Union Assembly on Labour and Environment](#), [People’s Summit](#), Dialogue Days etc). The Conference will result in a focused political document on the institutional framework for sustainable development, green economy as well as issues such as employment, food and energy. One of the expected outputs of Rio+20 will be a set of principles or framework on Sustainable Development Goals.

Themes of the conference

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 seven [priority areas](#) include decent jobs, energy, sustainable cities, food security and sustainable agriculture, water, oceans and disaster readiness.

Trade union issues and advocacy

[Workers and trade unions](#) are one of the 9 Major Groups recognised by Rio+20 in the non-governmental sector. ITUC (ESP department) coordinates this Major Group, running a [campaign on Rio+20](#) and representing trade union perspective in the negotiations. ITUC will also host the [Trade Union Assembly on Labour and Environment](#) a week before Rio+20 and contribute to the other events, incl. Sustainable Development Dialogues (preceded by open [online Rio+20 Dialogues](#), esp. theme 6: employment, Decent Work and migration). The unionists will also participate in the [People’s Summit](#).

Key trade union demands include:

- **Green & Decent Jobs** - A shift in investments which will ensure more decent jobs are created from environmentally-friendly investments, and millions more are transformed into sustainable jobs. This we call Green & Decent Jobs. [read more](#)
- **Social Protection Floor** - A commitment to provide social protection for all, ensuring that all workers and their families are protected against the multiple environmental and economic crises they face. This we call the Social Protection Floor. [read more](#)
- **Financial Transactions Tax** - The launch of a global Financial Transactions Tax, which will provide the revenue to fund development and the fight against climate change, as well as contribute to reform the financial system that caused the financial crisis in the first place. [read more](#)

Other demands (on the principles for the green economy, workplace rights, taxation, etc) are available [here](#).

The negotiating text, at the current stage, includes many of the ideas and proposals supported by the trade unions (incl. equity, workers' involvement, Just Transition, decent work and green jobs, social protection and the Social Protection Floor, innovative funding and Financial Transactions Tax), but also many elements that can be considered a step backwards (potential erasing of gender equality and the right to water, heavy emphasis on voluntary actions of the private sector in delivering sustainable development etc.). One of the main shortcomings is the lack of strong, concrete action-oriented commitments.

Critical issues

One of the biggest debates is around the **weak rights-based language** of the Rio outcome document. Almost all references to human rights, with the exception of the right to a clean and healthy environment, are being questioned and potentially removed by some governments. Right to food, right to safe drinking water and right to development risk to disappear from the text. The UN High Commissioner on Human Rights sent a letter to all permanent missions to UN, calling on a stronger human rights language in the Rio document. His call has been supported by a wide CSO community, including the ITUC.

Another debate has been running around the use of **terms Green Economy vs. Sustainable Development**. The definition of Sustainable Development is much clearer and better established, as well as more holistic, than the one of Green Economy. Sustainable Development has, at least in theory, 3 equally important pillars: environment, economy and social issues. Green Economy seems to focus only on the first two, with a tendency to approach the issue 'greening of the economy' mostly with new technologies and renewable energy sources, rather than deeper changes in society and economic systems. Some of the governments have pushed for a wider use of the term Green Economy, while other prefer to frame the debate as Sustainable Development, fearing conditionalities that might be go with the Green Economy approach. ITUC has stressed the need for investment in employment and green and decent jobs, which are important for all: developed, developing and countries in transition. The debate is also reflected in the outcome documents of other fora, including BRICS and UNCTAD.

Even when referring to Sustainable Development, the process is criticised for **undervaluing the social dimension**.

Another worrisome trend in Rio, as well as in almost all of the other development agendas, is the strong focus on **private sector**, risking an increased support for privatisation of public goods and services. Developed countries push for a strong focus on voluntary commitments and actions of the private sector, rather than regulatory measures.

Following the Agenda 21's approach to **inclusiveness and representation**, Rio+20 has acknowledged 9 Major Groups and holds regular meetings with their representatives. Still, the actual level of openness for their perspectives has been described by many of their representatives as far from satisfactory.

A big question remains around the **Sustainable Development Goals**. Proposed by Colombia, SDGs would set targets for advancing sustainable development. Since the issue has triggered many debates, the current proposal is in Rio decide only on the process of elaborating the goals and work on their actual content after the conference. The SDGs are seen as an important element of the upcoming UN post-2015 development framework.

A big debate is also around the issue of the **future global governance of sustainable development** issues. There are various proposals on the table: from creating a new UN umbrella organisation, through expanding the mandate of the Commission for Sustainable Development to upgrading the status of UNEP. All of the options have their downsides and merits. Still, no matter what will be its structural placement, the biggest question remains the institution's mandate.

As in the case of many other agendas, governments seem reluctant to take on any particular **commitments** and introduce accountability mechanisms, thus undermining the heart of multilateralism itself.

Rio+20 and other development agendas

Rio+20 is considered one of the most important high-level events in the last years and most of the other development actors and forums prepare their positions to feed into the event. [G20](#) will hold its summit in Mexico just before Rio+20 and is expected to prepare strong commitments for the conference. The [BRICS Summit in Delhi](#) in March this year made important references to the conference and issues it will tackle. [UN Development Cooperation Forum](#) (UNDCF) will hold in May a [High-Level Symposium](#) focused on the issue of mobilizing development cooperation for sustainable development and feeding to Rio+20, where they will organize a special session. The UNDCF meeting in July will keep the focus on sustainable development. The [UN process on the post-2015 framework](#) also sees Rio+20 as an important milestone, with the first high-level discussions and setting guidelines for the Sustainable Development Goals (which are meant to be closely tied to the post-2015 framework).

More information

- [ITUC Rio+20 campaign page](#)
- [Official UNCSD "Rio+20" website](#)
- [Rio+20 People's Summit website](#)