

From Rio to Rio+20: Progress and Challenges since the 1992 Earth Summit

At the 1992 [Earth Summit](#) — the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development — representatives from 178 countries, including 108 world leaders, forged a bold new vision for development — sustainable development. The vision, embodied in Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles, marked a major shift, calling for the full integration of environmental, social and economic dimensions into development planning.

There has been significant progress since the Earth Summit, but the track record for implementing Agenda 21 and sustainable development is decidedly mixed. In many ways, the idea of sustainability has gained acceptance across broad swathes of the public. But sustainability has often been associated with the environment, without proper consideration for economic or social development.

According to the 2012 Human Development Report, people today are healthier, live longer, are more educated and have more access to goods and services. But there are major regional differences, and also stark inequalities within countries. And while more people are living better since the Earth Summit, the natural world that underpins this prosperity has continued to be degraded. At Rio+20, government, business and civil society leaders will seek ways to ensure a sustainable future.

The following are some of the major developments since the Earth Summit — some positive, some not — and how Rio+20 may address them.

Financing

In the 1992 [Rio Declaration](#), developed countries acknowledged their responsibility in the global pursuit of sustainable development. At the 1992 [Earth Summit](#), it was estimated that over \$600 billion a year, through the year 2000, would be needed in developing countries to carry out activities listed in Agenda 21 to achieve sustainable development.

Out of the \$600 billion, it was noted in the Agenda 21 text, “about \$125 billion in grant or concessional terms from the international community” was needed. At the time, \$125 billion was roughly equal to 0.7 per cent of the combined gross national income (GNI) of donor countries. At the UN in 1970, countries agreed to the 0.7 per cent target to be dedicated to [official development assistance](#) (ODA), or foreign aid, which has been met by only a handful of developed countries.

Poverty

Major efforts have been undertaken through the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) — eight targeted development goals designed to advance progress in reducing extreme poverty, hunger, illiteracy and disease by 2015.

- In every region of the developing world, the percentage of people living on less than \$1.25 a day declined, but over a billion people still live in poverty.
- Since 1992, average life expectancy has increased by three and a half years.
- Today, 27 per cent of the world’s population lives in absolute poverty, down from 46 per cent in 1990.
- Progress on meeting the MDGs has been very uneven across regions, with large areas in sub-Saharan Africa and south Asia unlikely to achieve the Goals.



Biodiversity

The target agreed to by the 193 parties to the [Convention on Biological Diversity](#) to achieve a significant reduction of biodiversity loss by 2010 was not met.

- Biodiversity has declined by 12 per cent at the global level.
- Environmentally protected areas have increased worldwide by 42 per cent, yet only 13 per cent of the world's land surface, 7 per cent of its coastal waters and 1.4 per cent of its oceans are protected
- Some 20 to 30 per cent of species assessed may be at risk of extinction from climate change impacts before 2100 if increases in global mean temperatures exceed 2-3 °C.
- A new legal protocol was agreed to in Nagoya in 2010 to promote access to and benefit-sharing from biodiversity resources.

Cities

Rapidly expanding cities are straining to provide basic services, including safe water, proper sanitation, transportation, health and education for their inhabitants, while promoting job-creating economic development that does not place undue pressures on land and other resources.

- Urban population has grown by 45 per cent since 1992, and in the coming decades, 95 per cent of the world's urban population growth will take place in developing countries. About one third of the world urban population lives in slum conditions.
- There were 23 megacities with at least 10 million people in 2011; up from 10 in 1992, and by 2025, the number is expected to reach 37.
- The MDG target of significantly improving the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers has been achieved.

Water

There has been progress in improving and expanding access to freshwater. But due to poor infrastructure and mismanagement, every year about two million people, mostly children, die from diseases associated with inadequate water supply, sanitation and hygiene.

- Only 63 per cent of people worldwide now have access to improved sanitation, a figure projected to increase to only 67 per cent by 2015.
- 89 per cent of the world's population now uses improved drinking water sources, and the MDG target for 2015 has been met—but 783 million people are still without access to safe drinking water.

Food

Agricultural output has expanded, but at the same time, soils, freshwater, oceans, forests and biodiversity are rapidly degrading. Climate change is putting even more pressure on the resources we depend on.

- Food production has continued to rise steadily at a pace exceeding population growth, yet 925 million people remain hungry.

Energy

One in five people—1.4 billion people—still lack access to modern electricity. Three billion people rely on wood, coal, charcoal or animal wastes for cooking and heating. Energy is the dominant contributor to climate change, accounting for around 60 per cent of total global greenhouse gas emissions.

- Renewable energy sources (including biomass) currently account for only 13 per cent of the global energy supply.

Climate

Since 1992, 195 countries have joined the [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and 192 have become members of the Kyoto Protocol, which gained a second commitment period in Durban in 2011.





Countries have agreed that they should work towards the goal of keeping the global temperature rise to under 2°C. According to the [Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change](#), evidence suggests that climate change has led to changes in climate extremes such as heat waves, record high temperatures and, in many regions, heavy precipitation or droughts in the past half century.

- Carbon dioxide emissions have increased by 38 per cent since 1990.
- The 10 hottest years ever measured have all occurred since 1998.

Oceans and Seas

The world's oceans – their temperature, chemistry, currents and life – drive global systems that make the Earth habitable. Our rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines, much of our food, and even the oxygen in the air we breathe, are all ultimately provided and regulated by the sea.

- About 85 per cent of all fish stocks in the oceans are now overexploited, depleted, recovering or fully depleted.
- Sea levels have risen at an average rate of about 2.5 mm per year since 1992.
- Around [25 per cent](#) of the world's CO₂ emissions are being absorbed into the seas and oceans, where they are converted to carbonic acid, threatening coral reefs and other marine life.

Forests

More than 1.6 billion people, a quarter of the world's population, depend on forests for their livelihoods.

- Primary forest area decreased by 300 million hectares since 1990.
- An estimated 80 per cent of the world's forests are publicly owned.

Ozone

The [Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer](#) are dedicated to the protection of the earth's ozone layer. With 196 parties, it is one of the most widely ratified treaties in United Nations history.

- Over 90 per cent of all ozone-depleting substances under the Montreal Protocol were phased out between 1992 and 2009.

Resources and waste

The depletion and exploitation of our resources undermines global progress and requires rethinking resource management and how we produce and consume.

- The global use of natural resources rose by over 40 per cent from 1992 to 2005.
- Since 1992, demand for cement rose by more than 170 per cent and demand for steel by more than 100 per cent. Plastics production rose by 130 per cent.

Land Degradation

Productive lands in dry regions or drylands around the world, home to more than two billion people, are under increasing threat due to poor land management practices and climate change.

- More than 12 million hectares of productive land are lost due to desertification every year, the equivalent of losing an area the size of South Africa every decade.
- Over the next 25 years land degradation could reduce global food production by as much as 12 per cent leading to a 30 per cent increase in world food prices.

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