

Twenty years since the Rio Earth Summit – and now what?

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To illustrate how things have changed since 1992, I had to do no more than enter the departure lounge at OR Tambo International Airport. There, a Chinese man was communicating with a South African airline official through his i-Pad. This conversation was achieved through typing what he wanted to say, pressing an automatic translator, and showing it to the official. Technology so rapidly advanced; communication made so easy! Yet this advancement has not facilitated international agreement on the things that matter.

In 1992, cell phones were rare, and only those at research or academic institutions had access to email. I learnt about the Earth Summit from the radio. My strongest memory is George Bush Senior's voice on the airwaves saying 'American lifestyles are not negotiable'. Yet despite this posturing, the Earth Summit produced three ground-breaking multilateral agreements – on climate change, biodiversity and desertification – as well as the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and Agenda 21, the United Nations' Programme of Action for Sustainable Development. By no means perfect, these agreements could nevertheless have been used as a basis to shift away from environmentally destructive activities.

Twenty years on, in 2012, governments were hard-pressed to renew their commitment to tackling the challenges facing humanity, in particular the shrinking habitat available to humans and other species in the context of a global economy in which inequalities between rich and poor are increasing rather than decreasing. What they produced, at 02.45 on 19 June, was a document called 'The Future we Want',¹ which is full of non-committal phrases such as 'we stress the need to adopt measures ...', sweeping unattainable goals such as the commitment to 'free humanity from extreme poverty and hunger ...' and even harmful intentions such as '... sustained economic growth.' All in all, this document is not particularly helpful or inspiring. If governments are unable to respond adequately to the crises, where can we look?



People marching during Rio +20 reject the commodification of life (photo: Jessica Wilson).

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The Cúpula dos Povos, or People's Summit, that took place in downtown Rio de Janeiro while governments were dotting their 'i's and making dull political speeches at a distant location, provided inspiration; as did the City of Rio itself. Sprinkled with open-sided tents along Flamengo Park between the sea and highway, the Cúpula was a free-spirited, open-access, breeze-cooled, sunlit space in which people shared, celebrated, strategised and mobilised. It was also mostly in Portuguese, which made participation more difficult for the non-Brazilians. Nevertheless, the Cúpula embodied the dynamism that is growing in ordinary people, public-interest groups and social movements to challenge the power of capital and its destructive impacts. This power, many argue, combined with the social, cultural and political systems that support it, including patriarchy and racism, is the root cause of poverty and inequality, and threatens the very life-support system of planet earth. This self-promoting system is so deeply ingrained in our institutions and psyches that it is not easy to change. Out of the myriad of conversations, presentations and strategy sessions at the Cúpula, it became apparent that there are three broad entry points or roles for a growing civic movement.

The first is to continue to hold governments to account at local, national and international levels (including the United Nations and through meetings such as Rio+20). Governments have the power to mobilise and distribute resources, and to regulate. These activities should be practised in the public interest and to protect ecosystems, not to subsidise big business, fossil fuels or the military industrial complex.

The second role is to expose, halt and reverse activities, policies or investments that threaten livelihoods and ecosystems, and to restore and protect the commons. This role includes stopping water and land grabs and challenging the further commodification of nature that is happening through a perverse notion of the green economy and through various carbon trading initiatives, such as REDD (reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) under the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change. Many of these initiatives, such as constructing large dams and even fracking, are being marketed as responses to climate change, yet, more often than not, they are false solutions, and it is necessary to expose them as such.

The green economy is an important area for further public debate. For many years, environmentalists have struggled to have environmental externalities internalised into economic decisions. For example, a company should not profit at the expense of polluting a river that causes illness in a neighbouring community and for which the expense of cleaning would fall to the government. The 'cost' of this damage should be squarely assigned to the company, which would then make different decisions about production methods and profit margins. But now this well-intentioned concept has been twisted into assigning monetary values to natural resources and ecosystem services, with the danger that nature could be drawn into the market economy and traded. Incorporating nature into the market-based economy

means that property rights have to be assigned (e.g. you can 'own' the carbon in a tree or the purifying properties of a wetland), which *de facto* means that they are tradable, which means that it is extremely easy for them to be concentrated in the hands of those with money. It is effectively a transfer from poor to rich.

The third role of civic movements is to build alternatives, and this is where things get interesting. We are at a unique point in human history. Although we can learn from the past, this is the first time that humans have overused their habitat to the extent that there is nowhere left to expand. Since the late 1970s, we have been using the earth's resources at a faster rate than they can be replenished.² By 2007, humans were consuming the equivalent of one and a half earths.² We are doing a lot more than biting the hand that feeds us, we are destroying the feeder. This situation calls for radical and swift action. Although technology can play a role, what is needed is a complete shift in the way humans relate to each other and to nature. This means fundamentally new and different forms of social organisation, political structures and economies. It means new frames of reference, concepts and ways of seeing. It means learning from, and respecting, nature; and recognising that we too, intrinsically, are part of the natural world.

Many of these alternatives are being developed at a local and even personal level – alternative local currencies, building tolerance and compassion, farmer-to-farmer exchanges, really free markets, landless people's movements, and many more. The 'rights of nature' approach takes these ideas further by fundamentally challenging long-held human concepts of identity and separateness from the natural world. Through recognising the intrinsic right of natural systems to exist, this approach also provides a workable alternative to the green economy. Initiatives to strengthen participatory democracy from within the family to community, local, state and international levels are also critical. These initiatives are evident in the Arab Spring and Occupy movements.

Gathering sufficient momentum and power from these numerous alternatives and movements to counter the power of transnational companies, banks and supporting governments is the challenge. A strategy session at the Cúpula identified potential steps towards meeting this challenge, including building solidarity through support for each others' struggles and gatherings of 'the affected'. There is a need to develop further the new paradigm that unites social movements and activists throughout the world, and to deepen and sharpen our analysis to develop realistic alternatives.

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