



Reporting the human dimensions of climate change in the developing world



ECOSYSTEMS

ENERGY

FOOD SECURITY

IMPACT

POLLUTION

WATER

You Are Here: Home » Impact » Rio+20: A lesson in communications

Rio+20: A lesson in communications

Posted by: Yvonne Bokhour Posted date: August 07, 2012 In: Impact | comment : 0

Say what you will about the success or failure of Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (successor to 1992's Earth Summit), the event was a fascinating communications case study.

More than 40,000 people—including heads of state and government, as well as business and NGO representatives—gathered in Rio de Janeiro from 20-22 June to discuss topics that are critical to sustaining our world. Their agenda? Preventing poverty, promoting growth, protecting the earth. Providing access to food, education, and energy. The goals of the conference were as noble as they were complex.

The road to Rio was at times bumpy. The meeting was months in the making but, days before, participants were expressing doubts about its potential. Ban Ki-moon, the UN Secretary-General, said in his opening remarks, "Let me be frank: our efforts have not lived up to the measure of the challenge... Nature does not wait. Nature does not negotiate with human beings." Now, in Rio+20's aftermath, many have dubbed the event a disappointment, if not a downright failure.

How, one might ask, can 40,000+ people shape agreements representing the world's entire population? Negotiations were affected by obvious factors including the euro's precarious status, the United States' upcoming election, and the disparate interests of developed versus developing nations.

But other, less conspicuous, factors were also at work. Crafting documents at the UN is a painstaking process. Marion Barthelemy, Chief of the Global Policy Branch/UN Division for Sustainable Development, says, "Every Member State of the UN has the right to change, add or amend the negotiating text."

The difficulties inherent in this methodology are mind-boggling, and yet the hope embodied by interactions between nations is at the very heart of the United Nations' mission. Member States coordinate their positions in advance of talks. Negotiating groups then step in to represent the largest constituencies (for example, the European Union represents 27 countries). But, says Barthelemy, other "Member States participate individually, depending on their particular interests."

Manish Bapna, Interim President of the [World Resources Institute](#), says "The unanimity of the process is a problem. I believe deeply in consensus. I do not believe in having to achieve unanimity when 120+ countries are involved."

Information technology may have helped or hindered the drafting process, depending on your point of view. According to Barthelemy, "Information technology definitely helped. An e-room accessed by Member States enabled negotiators (and their capitals) to have the latest compilation text almost instantly after each negotiating session."



Ministerial dialogue on sustainable development expectations for Rio+20. Photo credit: UN Photo/Mark Garten

On the other hand, the [Earth Communications Bulletin](#) reports “instant communication led to ‘excessive’ 24-hour control from capitals, sapping negotiators’ initiative and slowing down negotiations.”

Meanwhile, an organized social media campaign—[Rio+Social](#)—enabled 50 million people to engage in a global conversation on energy, food, water, health, oceans, and disasters. Rio+20 was held not only in Brazil, but also on Twitter, Facebook, and YouTube, spawning an exchange of ideas not possible at the original Earth Summit. Barthelemy says social media provided “much more extensive feedback from all stakeholders” including “reactions to what was being negotiated.”

While climate change was a major focus at Rio’s first Earth Summit, it meandered through Rio+20, subtly affecting every aspect of sustainability. In their outcome document, “[The Future We Want](#),” Member States expressed “profound alarm that emissions of greenhouse gases continue to rise globally,” noting “all countries, particularly developing countries, are vulnerable to the adverse impacts of climate change, and are already experiencing increased impacts including persistent drought and extreme weather events, sea level rise, coastal erosion and ocean acidification.” To preserve food security, eradicate poverty, and achieve sustainability, Member States agreed, “adaptation to climate change represents an immediate and urgent global priority.”

Notably, Rio+20 did not generate an agreement to further reduce emissions of greenhouse gases, which former UN Environment Programme (UNEP) director Dr. Svein Tveitdal had indicated to be of urgent importance [in his interview](#) with UNEARTH before the conference. Instead, the outcome document expresses “grave concern” on emissions, urging parties to various climate change agreements such as the [United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) and the [Kyoto Protocol](#) to “fully implement their commitments.”

“The Future We Want” also calls for strengthening the UNEP and using a green economy to promote sustainability. It welcomed the launch of a [Green Climate Fund](#), noting the importance of “mobilizing funding from a variety of sources, public and private.”

At a press conference on 28 June, Ban Ki-moon dubbed Rio+20 a success, stating more than 100 governments have reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable development. He also noted the role a “green economy can play in poverty reduction, economic growth, and environmental care.”

But many commentators are bemoaning the weakness of the “The Future We Want,” noting its non-binding nature, lack of specificity, and paucity of commitments. Bapna says, “One of the big questions going forward after Rio, is will the UN be able to craft a process that is better able to reflect international attitudes and norms on sustainability, and that isn’t held hostage to special interests? That is almost an existential question for the United Nations.”

Networking between businesses, NGOs, and others may have spawned as much if not more potential than negotiations between governments. For example, a coalition called the Consumer Goods Forum, comprised of 24 major companies including Unilever, Nike, and Coca-Cola, announced their determination to include conservation in their business planning.

Another coalition of institutional investors, headed by British insurance giant Aviva, urged governments to insist that businesses issue regular reports on their environmental efforts. “The Future We Want” includes a request to this effect.

According to Barthelemy, “Sustainable development can be advanced only if all stakeholders get together to achieve it together.” This sentiment was perhaps best exemplified by the announcement that governments, businesses and other groups have committed \$513 billion for sustainable development.

Vast, complex challenges were acknowledged but not solved at Rio+20. Still, interested parties are finding ways to communicate, despite the many obstacles they face. Bapna states, “The real action on sustainability is happening on the ground around the world, not in negotiations where the lowest common denominator holds sway. The side events at Rio brought together some of the people, including local governments, civil society groups, business and development banks, who are making this change happen, providing useful opportunities for sharing sustainability innovations and best practice.”



[< Previous](#)

[Next >](#)

Leave a Comment

Name*