**The Rio Earth Summit**  
  
The Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro was a 12 day conference unprecedented for the UN, in terms of both its size and the scope of its concerns. Twenty years after the first global environment conference, the UN sought to help Governments rethink economic development and find ways to halt the destruction of irreplaceable natural resources and pollution of the planet. Hundreds of thousands of people from all walks of life were drawn into the Rio process. They persuaded their leaders to go to Rio and join other nations in making the difficult decisions needed to ensure a healthy planet for generations to come. And the message has produced results, making eco-efficiency a guiding principle for business and governments alike.

* Patterns of production — particularly the production of toxic components, such as lead in gasoline, or poisonous waste — are being scrutinized in a systematic manner by the UN and Governments alike;
* Alternative sources of energy are being sought to replace the use of fossil fuels which are linked to global climate change;
* New reliance on public transportation systems is being emphasized in order to reduce vehicle emissions, congestion in cities and the health problems caused by polluted air and smog;
* There is much greater awareness of and concern over the growing scarcity of water.

**The Earth Summit Agreements**  
  
In Rio, Governments — 108 represented by heads of State or Government — adopted five major agreements aimed at changing the traditional approach to development:

**1. Agenda 21** — a comprehensive program of action for global action in all areas of sustainable development;

**2. The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development** — a series of principles defining the rights and responsibilities of States;

**3. The Statement of Forest Principles —** a set of principles to underlie the sustainable management of forests worldwide.

In addition, **two legally binding** Conventions aimed at preventing global climate change and the eradication of the diversity of biological species were opened for signature at the Summit, giving high profile to these efforts:

**4. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change**

**5. The Convention on Biological Diversity**

Agenda 21 addresses today’s pressing problems and aims to prepare a blue print for sustainable development. It contains detailed proposals for action in social and economic areas (such as combating poverty, changing patterns of production and consumption and addressing demographic dynamics), and for conserving and managing the natural resources that are the basis for life — protecting the atmosphere, oceans and biodiversity; preventing deforestation; and promoting sustainable agriculture, for example.  
  
Governments agreed that the integration of environment and development concerns will lead to the fulfillment of basic needs, improved standards for all, better protected and better managed ecosystems and a safer and a more prosperous future. “No nation can achieve this on its own. Together we can — in a global partnership for sustainable development”, states the preamble.  
  
The program of action also recommends ways to strengthen the part played by major groups — women, trade unions, farmers, children and young people, indigenous peoples, the scientific community, local authorities, business, industry and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) — in achieving sustainable development.  
  
The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development supports Agenda 21 by defining the rights and responsibilities of States regarding these issues. Among its principles:

* That human beings are at the center of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature;
* That scientific uncertainty should not delay measures to prevent environmental degradation where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage;
* That States have a sovereign right to exploit their own resources but not to cause damage to the environment of other States;
* That eradicating poverty and reducing disparities in worldwide standards of living are “indispensable” for sustainable development;
* That the full participation of women is essential for achieving sustainable development; and
* That the developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.

The Statement of Forest Principles, the non–legally binding statement of principles for the sustainable management of forests, was the first global consensus reached on forests. Among its provisions:

* That all countries, notably developed countries, should make an effort to “green the world” through reforestation and forest conservation;
* That States have a right to develop forests according to their socio-economic needs, in keeping with national sustainable development policies; and
* Those specific financial resources should be provided to develop programs that encourage economic and social substitution policies.

At the Summit, the UN was also called on to negotiate an international legal agreement on desertification, to hold talks on preventing the depletion of certain fish stocks, to devise a program of action for the sustainable development of small island developing States and to establish mechanisms for ensuring the implementation of the Rio accords.

**UN Follow-Up**  
  
The Earth Summit succeeded in presenting new perspectives on economic progress. It was lauded as the beginning of a new era and its success would be measured by the implementation — locally, nationally and internationally — of its agreements. Those attending the Summit understood that making the necessary changes would not be easy: it would be a multi-phased process; it would take place at different rates in different parts of the world; and it would require the expenditure of funds now in order to prevent much larger financial and environmental costs in the future.  
  
In Rio, the UN was given a key role in the implementation of Agenda 21. Since then, the Organization has taken steps to integrate concepts of sustainable development into all relevant policies and program. Income-generating projects increasingly take into account environmental consequences. Development assistance program are increasingly directed towards women, given their central roles as producers and as caretakers of families. Efforts to manage forests in a sustainable manner begin with finding alternatives to meet the needs of people who are overusing them. The moral and social imperatives for alleviating poverty are given additional urgency by the recognition that poor people can cause damage to the environment. And foreign investment decisions increasingly take into account the fact that drawing down the earth’s natural resources for short-term profit is bad for business in the long run.  
  
In adopting Agenda 21, the Earth Summit also requested the United Nations to initiate talks aimed at halting the rapid depletion of certain fish stocks and preventing conflict over fishing on the high seas. After negotiations spanning more than two years, the UN Agreement on High Seas Fishing was opened for signature on 4 December 1995. It provides for all species of straddling and highly migratory fish — those which swim between national economic zones or migrate across broad areas of the ocean — to be subject to quotas designed to ensure the continued survival of fish for our children and grandchildren to enjoy.  
  
Also at the Summit, Governments requested the UN to hold negotiations for an international legal agreement to prevent the degradation of dry lands. The resulting International Convention to Combat Desertification in Those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, particularly in Africa, was opened for signing in October 1994 and entered into force in December 1996. It calls for urgent action to be taken in Africa, where some 66 per cent of the continent is desert or dry lands and 73 per cent of agricultural dry lands are already degraded.  
  
In order to promote the well-being of people living in island countries, the Summit called for the UN to convene a Global Conference on the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States. The Conference was held in Barbados in May 1994 and produced a program of action designed to assist these environmentally and economically vulnerable countries.  
  
In addition, three bodies were created within the United Nations to ensure full support for implementation of Agenda 21 worldwide:

* The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which first met in June 1993;
* The Inter-agency Committee on Sustainable Development, set up by the Secretary-General in 1992 to ensure effective system-wide cooperation and coordination in the follow-up to the Summit; and
* The High-level Advisory Board on Sustainable Development, established in 1993 to advise the

**Financing Sustainable Development**  
  
At Rio, it was agreed that most financing for Agenda 21 would come from within a country’s own public and private sectors. However, new and additional external funds were considered necessary if developing countries were to adopt sustainable development practices. Of the estimated $600 billion required annually by developing countries to implement Agenda 21, most — $475 billion — was to be transferred from economic activities in those countries.  
  
A further $125 billion would be needed in new and additional funds from external sources, some $70 billion more than current levels of official development assistance (ODA). According to the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), between 1992 and 1995, levels of ODA fell from about $60.8 billion to $59.2 billion, despite a call at Rio for donor countries to more than double their official assistance.  
  
Other monies are available for implementation of Agenda 21. The Global Environment Facility (GEF) was set up in 1991. It is implemented by the World Bank, the United Nations Development Program and the United Nations Environment Program. The GEF provides funding for activities aimed at achieving global environmental benefits in four areas: climate change, loss of biodiversity, pollution of international waters and the depletion of the ozone layer. At Rio, the Facility became the funding mechanism for activities under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the Convention on Biological Diversity. In 1994, the scope of the GEF’s funding was broadened to include land degradation, primarily desertification and deforestation, where this is linked to the four focal areas above. Since 1992, some $2 billion has been pledged for activities supported by the [GEF](http://www.worldbank.org/html/gef/gefgraph.htm).   
  
In the years since the Earth Summit, the level of funding channeled to many of the developing countries as direct private investment has increased significantly and now far outstrips official flows. In 1995, this reportedly amounted to some $95 billion. Efforts are being made to ensure that activities supported by these funds are also environmentally sustainable.  
  
  
**Years After Rio**  
In June 1997, the world’s attention again focused on the Earth Summit. When Governments met in New York for the UN General Assembly’s special session to review progress since Rio, the questions were: What changes have the major players — including Governments, international policy makers, businesses, trade unions, farmers and women’s groups — been able to bring about in the five years since Rio?

A great deal has happened, but, in the view of some, not nearly enough to achieve the Summit’s goals. There is growing awareness of the many “negative incentives” which continue to encourage people to become wasteful consumers.

Conferences that have followed the Earth Summit — such as the 1994 Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen, the 1995 Women’s Conference in Beijing, and the 1996 Habitat II Conference in Istanbul — has reinforced the commitment to sustainable development and adopted action plans to build on Agenda 21 in specific areas. Fish populations are being more closely regulated, harmful pollutants (CFC’s) to the atmosphere are not being produced and clear-cutting of forests is being reduced. While there are many positive strides in the right direction, the fight for a sustainable Earth is far from over.