

Assessing Rio Plus 20

Written by Peter M. Haas

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PETER M. HAAS, AUG 6 2012

Rio Plus 20 is over. It ended with hardly a whimper, and it was only nominally covered in the mainstream media. Activists blogged shortly after its end trying to spin the meager outcomes in the terms of their various policy agendas. George Monbiot of The Guardian was possibly the most outspoken and critical, writing that “World leaders have spent 20 years bracing themselves to express ‘deep concern’ about the world’s environmental crises, but not to do anything about them.”

Was it a success or a failure? In Zhou Enlai’s 1971 timeless commentary on the 1789 Storming of the Bastille’s impact, “It is too soon to tell.” Since the Rio Plus 20 conference was intended to steer long term socio-environmental trends, it is indeed too soon to tell about its effectiveness. Mega conferences of this sort seldom have discernible short term consequences. They contribute to longer term processes of agenda setting, coalition building and networking within civil society, social learning, and the occasional piece of treaty law.

But one can lay down some theoretically informed benchmarks by which subsequent assessments of the Conference can be conducted. Here I suggest some outcomes that would indicate that the Conference had an impact on redirecting our industrial societies towards more environmentally sustainable practices. The assessment hinges on whether the Conference amplified major social forces or causal mechanisms by which governments and societies address shared problems. Specifically, did Rio and its aftermath contribute to international agenda building, norm creation, institution building, learning, and a green political economy? To some extent we can view Rio Plus 20 as a natural experiment. To the extent that significant new efforts emerge after it, we can attribute their causes to the theoretical traditions associated with their understanding: constructivism, institutionalism and political economy.

Realism has little to offer, beyond a desultory expectation that little will happen without a turnaround by the USA, China and Europe in terms of relating sustainability to their national interests. To make things worse, many Realists remain skeptical that sustainability is actually related to core national interests, so they predict that this will not happen, and thus no new capabilities will be deployed to promote sustainability. On the other hand Realist thought successfully explains the limited outcomes of Rio Plus 20, due to the reluctance of any of the major powers to exercise leadership, beyond that of the hosting Brazilians who took care to ensure that there was a text that would not embarrass them domestically and yet demonstrate their diplomatic leadership to the rest of the world.

Rio Plus 20 was actually two conferences. The diplomatic conference adopted a modest set of proposals – The Future that We Want declaration – that did little more than endorse ongoing efforts in the UN system, without expressing commitment to developing a new green economy, or setting any binding time tables or commitments. But there was a second conference as well. A parallel set of civil society events spread across the city of Rio brought together thousands of NGO members and the international business community.

While the immediate outcomes were meager and disappointing to most commentators, the question is whether there are subsequent processes that may follow from the Conference that will contribute to more sustainable social practices. We will have to look to the UN General Assembly and decisions by governments in the fall, and the more diffuse arrangements and choices by civil society.

Taking the long term view, concern about environmental sustainability has already become locked into international

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deliberations. From the baseline of the first international environmental conference – the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment at Stockholm, Sweden – concern about environmental sustainability has irreversibly become institutionalized on national and international agendas. Alongside significant developments of new international institutions (environmental agencies and UNEP), some achievements in dealing with shared environmental threats, and a too slow movement towards a more sustainable economic structure that is capable of generating jobs and growth that is decoupled from energy inputs and pollution outputs. In addition it is now widely taken for granted that participation at international conferences should draw widely from civil society as well as the more traditional state system.

To appreciate the extent to which this new *problematique* or agenda has become institutionalized, consider the counterfactual regarding representation. No efforts are afoot to exclude civil society from participating actively at such international meetings, despite the nominal challenge to national sovereignty. States have forfeited control of the agenda to more diffuse sources, and it remains unclear as to how well states are able to effectively steer agendas in the face of such widespread participation.

Benchmarks for Appraising Rio Plus 20

Norms. Sustainable Development as a generative norm remains under-developed. It was originally forged by the Brundtland Commission Report through tactical linkages, and has not yet amassed sufficient widespread substantive or principled support to be able to drive collective action. Movement towards the creation of a Sustainable Development norm would also be a sign of Rio's success.

Discursive practices. The dominant way in which issues are discussed helps frame the issue for decision makers, and privileges certain policy choices and obscures others. In the aftermath of Rio Plus 20, will meaningful discussions occur about the meaning of Sustainable Development, and its value? Such changes in discursive practices could induce large groups of actors to be more willing to make consumer sacrifices and press their governments for stronger policies supporting sustainability and a green economy. Topics for active discussions could include a green economy, ecosystem valuation, and the limitations of GDP accounting. In addition, the different North/South viewpoints on job creation, intellectual property rights protection, and technology transfer have to be addressed. Discussions about Sustainable Development Goals in the General Assembly would be a positive step.

Network building. One of the barriers to developing new green economies is the relative political weakness of constituencies behind renewable energy sectors, cleaner agricultural practices, and low polluting technologies. If Rio Plus 20 contributed to building networks and coalitions between civil society and the private sector then it will have been successful at building the political institutions required for a green economy.

Institutional incentives. Since 1992 much of the international policy focus has revolved around the creation and effectiveness of multilateral institutions for monitoring, verification, and sanctioning violators. To the extent that such efforts further develop incentives for Sustainable Development, Rio will have been successful.

Knowledge deployment. The effective application of organized scientific consensus can contribute positively to improve collective action. Still, consensus about the causes of Sustainable Development and how to measure Sustainable Development require more support. Rio will have been successful if there is more public investment in sustainability science, if an international Sustainability science panel is created along the lines of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) or Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES), and if science panels are created for other issue areas, including ocean health.

Incentives for technological innovation. Analysts concur that a new green political economy is the vision of the future (Barbier 2011; Berkeley Round Table on the International Economy 2011; United Nations Environment Program 2011; Haas 2012). Yet, despite the growth in investment in green technology it is not anywhere near ready to contribute significantly to modern economic growth. The broader infrastructure of training, investment, and supply chains is still in its infancy. The many side events at Rio provided an ongoing forum for private sector and NGO collaboration. If these efforts continue to grow then Rio will have helped spawn a new political network that can

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contribute to the creation of a new large scale green technological system for sustainability. While Rio had few immediate accomplishments, the full assessment of its impact on humanity's ability to redirect trajectories of growth onto more sustainable tracks rests on the question of whether or not political actors are able to build from the conference. Rio had its limitations, but it may have a stronger long term impact if some of the broader social mechanisms that generate outcomes in international relations are reinforced as a consequence of its follow up.

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