

First published by the [Triple Crisis Blog](#) as Part of the Triple Crisis [Spotlight Rio+20](#) series.

June 25, 2012

## **Spotlight Rio+20: A Hard Slog Towards Sustainability**

*Lyuba Zarsky*

The Buddhists say enlightenment—the ability to see clearly and act appropriately—is to be found in the “middle path” between grasping and pushing away, expectation and aversion.

Attitudes about the likely outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference seem to fall into one camp or the other. Some grasp towards hope that the “outcome document” produced via intense negotiations by 191 countries—what UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon called a “[historic agreement](#)”—will translate into a global action plan for a green economy. Others, like the NGO leader Antonio Tujan Jr, find the agreement repulsive, “[an empty coffin](#)” in which the sustainable development promises of the first Rio conference will be buried. Many grumbled even before it began that the Conference would be a waste of time, a global gabfest akin to fiddling while the planet burns.

Neither perspective hits the target. There was always next to zero chance that governments would embrace new “breakthrough” commitments in Rio while Europe remained in the grip of economic crisis and the US is caught in the political stranglehold of government-bashers. Indeed, Tony Webb, founder of Ethical Corporation and business commentator proffers “[seven reasons why Rio+20 should have been delayed](#)” for a year or two.

But even should economic and political conditions improve, there’s sand in the wheels of international environmental negotiations in the form of the unabated bickering between North and South—spilling over from the climate change negotiations—over who’s to blame for the sorry state of the earth’s ecosystems and who should pay to get on a more ecologically sane development path. Also challenging is that all economies, North, South, and Emerging, are deeply bound up in decidedly “un-green” global trade and investment patterns. The World Trade Organization, which desperately needs an overhaul to enable green development, has been in a state of paralysis for nearly ten years.

But Rio is “big waste of time” only if progress is measured in terms of legally binding agreements, or indeed, of top-down government leadership by nation-states. The action in Rio is in the side events—the business and stakeholder meetings that are incubators for new initiatives and sources of inspiration for business and civil society sustainability leaders. An example is the [\\$175 billion in new loans](#) pledged by eight multilateral development banks for transportation projects that reduce urban congestion and cut energy use and air pollution. Launched in Rio, the project was led by a partnership between the Asian Development Bank and the Institute for Transportation and Development Policy.

Is the failure of governments to achieve a meaty global agreement a reason for despair? Rio+20 was originally conceived explicitly not to negotiate a new global treaty. After all, there are plenty already,

---

most languishing from lack of implementation. The ambition was less flashy, viz, to build the political will of national governments and global business to “raise their game” in terms of environmental sustainability. The point was to engage “the global public” in building the momentum needed to implement the 1992 Rio Declaration which called for the broad and deep integration of ecology, equity, and economics—sustainable development.

From this vantage point, progress towards global sustainability involves less of a “breakthrough” —a leap frog from the top down — and more of a hard slog from the bottom up. Big international conferences, like the original Rio Conference on Environment and Development in 1992, have played catalytic roles in the past, and perhaps will again. For the moment, however, governments seem — as one commentator put it—[more interested in saving themselves than saving the planet](#). Moreover, even in headier days, legally binding conventions like the three signed in Rio—on biological diversity, climate change and desertification —have been lackluster in enforcement and implementation.

So what’s the enlightened attitude towards Rio+20? Some have suggested that the conference is [already a success](#) simply because it has breathed new life into the sustainable development vision. Perhaps. For my money, the notion that governments will —or even can —make a transformational shift that launches an era of sustainable development is a chimera. They can (and must) certainly say, and do, a lot more than what they are saying at Rio and doing at home.

But the momentum for sustainability has to come from the bottom up — the day-to-day actions and investments taken by business, city and regional governments, NGOs, “the public” that transform how markets work and what values inform public policy. Rio+20 may help, a little, maybe even a lot in the long term. Or maybe not. It simply reflects the political realities of the day. Hopefully, as we slog along, political realities will change — and national governments will follow.