

# Wealth gap curbs Rio goals

Outcome of last week's Earth Summit reflects the divided priorities of rich and poor nations.

- [Jeff Tollefson](#)

26 June 2012

RIO DE JANEIRO



Environmental activists push an inflatable globe through the streets of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, during multilateral talks on sustainable development.

F. Dana/AP/PA

## Article tools

- [Email](#)
- [Download PDF](#)
- [Rights and Permissions](#)

- **Share/bookmark**

- [Connotea](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [Delicious](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Digg](#)
- [Friendfeed](#)

•

Brazil's celebrated coastal metropolis is defined by stark contrasts, both geographic and economic. Extravagant wealth rings the city's luxurious beaches, while poverty looks on from the haphazard developments called favelas that sprawl across the surrounding hills. Such conspicuous inequality is symbolic of the challenge humanity faces on a global scale — a problem that restricted progress at the Rio+20 meeting last week to a modest and mostly voluntary set of commitments.

“What has been agreed to is entirely insufficient to tackle the problems that are before us on environment and development,” says Manish Bapna, acting president of the World Resources Institute, a global environment think tank in Washington DC.

The 49-page document adopted on 22 June at the close of Rio+20 — the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development — does many small things. Called *The Future We Want*, it establishes a process for crafting a set of sustainable-development goals that would come into effect just as the UN Millennium Development Goals expire in 2015. It endorses efforts to reduce consumption, improve energy systems and encourage a greener world economy, and calls for an international governance system for conserving biodiversity in the high seas.

But the agreement offers little in the way of relief for an increasingly pressured biosphere. Whereas the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 served as a launch pad for landmark agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity and the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, the 2012 meeting instead revolved around the thorny question of global inequality.

Poverty, not global warming or the environment, is “the greatest challenge that we face in the world today”, said Luiz Alberto Figueiredo Machado, Brazil's chief negotiator, when a draft that ultimately became the final agreement was announced on 19 June. One of Brazil's slogans for the conference was “To grow, to include, to protect”, and as talks commenced, developing countries aligned their priorities in that order.

Throughout the meeting, the developing countries that make up the Group of 77 negotiating bloc (G77) objected to language that they felt might constrain their ability to grow and lift citizens out of poverty. In one case, the G77, along with the United States, blocked a European proposal to acknowledge the existence of global environmental thresholds that should not be surpassed. Such ‘planetary boundaries’ could include levels of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere and acidification of the oceans. Developing countries also fought against commitments to pursue a green economy unless they were phrased in the context of economic and social development. For such nations, “inclusive growth and a rapid increase in per capita income levels are development imperatives”, declared Indian Prime Minister Manmohan Singh

in his conference address.

Yet industrialized countries, including the United States and those in the European Union, seemed to be too preoccupied with their own economic woes to step forward with major new financial commitments for poor countries. The final text of the agreement provided no concrete answers to long-standing questions about development aid.

Although talks among high-level officials made little headway, there was a flurry of activity at hundreds of side meetings. The UN counted more than 100 individual initiatives on renewable energy by governments, businesses and multilateral financial institutions such as the World Bank, and monetary commitments of more than US\$513 billion for a range of public and private initiatives on sustainable development. Many observers took such announcements as a sign that action is happening from the bottom up, even as international negotiations stall at the top. But others regarded the initiatives as too little, too late.

“There is compelling scientific evidence that we will lose invaluable species, ecosystems and their services under global warming as generated by business as usual with a few green speckles,” says Hans Joachim Schellnhuber, director of the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany. Schellnhuber says that governments are ignoring planetary boundaries at their own peril. “In this respect, the second Rio summit has utterly failed.”

## **Human investment**

Brazil as a country is emblematic of the economic imbalance that hung over the meeting and that threatens to hamper progress at future global environment talks. With the sixth largest economy in the world, Brazil is regarded abroad as an emerging power, but the country sinks to 101st in a ranking of gross domestic product per capita.

Rio de Janeiro’s poorest districts, such as Cachoeirinha in the west, also offer a glimpse of the future for much of the planet. UN projections suggest that by 2025, the world’s cities could contain one billion new residents, most of whom will begin their lives in slums and poor communities throughout the developing world.



In the Manguinhos neighbourhood of Rio de Janeiro, talk of reducing consumption seems a world away.

V. R. Caivano/AP/PA

Jilson Roberto is head of the Cachoeirinha community association, and attended the 1992 Earth Summit to advocate for a green-development plan on behalf of favelas. Roberto says that his community has little to show for the effort 20 years later. Cachoeirinha still lacks basic rubbish collection and floods regularly when it rains. The area also remains in the hands of drug traffickers, their territory marked by a pair of sofas blocking the road outside the community centre. Governments shouldn't forget about the current generation as they plan for the future, Roberto says. "We need to invest in human beings today."

To that end, the summit agreement calls for a high-level political forum to promote work on sustainable development. Its role and function remain to be worked out, but the Rio agreement suggests that the forum would conduct a regular scientific assessment of progress towards sustainable-development initiatives, says Gisbert Glaser, senior adviser at the International Council for Science in Paris, which represented scientists' interests in the Rio+20 negotiations.

More than ever, Glaser says, scientists need to work across disciplines to advise policy-makers on a host of interrelated issues, from climate, energy and water to food, poverty and development. He adds that researchers need to develop metrics to help define sustainable development, similar to the carbon dioxide levels and temperature thresholds used to assess global warming, and then work with social scientists and economists to look for politically viable solutions. "This is a difficult thing to do," he says, "but we have to do it."

Examples of such complexity abound. When it comes to biofuels, for instance, governments must learn how to account for water use and international trade to understand the broader impacts of biofuel production on land use, biodiversity and food prices.

Biologist John Sulston of the University of Manchester, UK, who chaired a UK Royal Society working group that investigated links between global population and consumption, laments that the final agreement fails to link population to sustainable development. To Sulston, this is like planning a party without a guest list, "but on a unimaginably vast scale". In another example of the competing agendas at work behind such issues, the Vatican led a small group of countries in removing the term 'reproductive rights' from the text, despite pressure from family-planning groups.

Rather than complaining that global leaders have failed in the negotiations, Sulston says, scientists can and should work to help countries to develop new sustainable-development goals in the coming years. "Delving into the [agreement] text, we can see the skeleton of what we need to ensure our planet's future," he says. "From these bare bones we can raise an army."

Nature

486,

447

(28 June 2012)

doi:10.1038/486447a

## **Negotiators achieve early agreement at Rio**

# summit

But environmentalists decry proposed text, citing lack of ambition, inspiration and commitment.

- [Jeff Tollefson](#)

19 June 2012

Rio de Janeiro



Rio de Janeiro's iconic statue of Christ has gone green to celebrate the Earth Summit taking place there — but critics wonder if the agreement that emerged today is beyond redemption.

Reuters

## Article tools

- [Email](#)
- [Rights and Permissions](#)
- **Share/bookmark**
  - [Connotea](#)
  - [Facebook](#)
  - [Delicious](#)
  - [Twitter](#)
  - [Digg](#)

- [Friendfeed](#)

In the run-up to the Earth Summit taking place in Rio de Janeiro this week, Brazilian officials on 19 June unveiled a text agreed by negotiators that looks set to become the final agreement to emerge from the meeting. The 49-page document, which touches on all of the major issues surrounding sustainable development but requires very little in the way of concrete commitments from governments, will be taken up by world leaders when they gather at the 20–22 June Rio+20 meeting.

Environmentalists immediately blasted the text, saying that only heads of state and other high-level officials could now avert a “colossal failure” at the meeting. But most observers and government negotiators acknowledge that there will be little appetite among global leaders to launch another set of negotiations when they arrive in Rio this week. Brazil championed the document as a final accord, and the United States warned that the delicately woven agreement could unravel if leaders start pulling on loose threads.

In an extensive briefing late on Tuesday afternoon, Brazilian officials said that the agreement builds on what was achieved at the first Earth Summit 20 years ago and provides “a new vision for the future”. They added that the agreement re-emphasizes social development as one of the fundamental pillars of global sustainability, along with economic development and environmental protection.

“Ending poverty is the greatest global challenge that we face in the world today,” said Luiz Alberto Figueiredo, Brazil’s chief negotiator.

The agreement covers a wide range of territory from the environment, poverty and social justice to the pursuit of a nebulous green economy. It seeks to make countries work to alter consumption patterns and to formally investigate a way of calculating economic progress — one that takes environmental degradation and social woes into account. It also calls for the establishment of a set of “sustainable development goals” to replace the expiring Millennium Development Goals in 2015. But in stark contrast to the original Earth Summit in 1992, where governments signed two treaties and laid the groundwork for a third, all of the language is voluntary and any real decisions are invariably put off for another day.



RETURN TO RIO  
For Earth Summit  
news.

## Empty promises

Nobody was expecting any major treaties to come out of the Rio+20 meeting, in part because of a sense that the world has no shortage of treaties and commitments already. But for environmentalists, the agreement falls short of even the lowest expectations. “There’s a lot of content, but there’s no commitment,” says Samantha Smith, who heads the WWF Global Climate and Energy Initiative in Oslo, Norway. Smith says that the agreement highlights and reinforces the deep distrust between developing and developed countries as well as the resulting scepticism about multilateral treaties. Developing countries feel particularly stung by repeated failures of the industrialized countries to deliver on promises of aid, she says. If leaders simply sign off on the agreement as it stands, she says, “it’s time for a serious think about the purpose of such a powerless process”.

The drafted text reveals the difficulty facing negotiators as they try to craft language around even seemingly benign and non-controversial issues. For example, fearing that references to a “green economy” could hamper efforts to grow their economies and lift citizens out of poverty, developing countries objected to any mention of the idea unless it was followed by the phrase “in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication”.

Similar fears caused developing countries in the Group of 77 negotiating block to oppose Europe’s proposal to insert a reference to ‘planetary boundaries’ in the text. The concept of planetary boundaries, first suggested in *Nature* in 2009<sup>1</sup>, proposes to establish quantitative global thresholds that should not be exceeded in nine areas, including global warming, biodiversity and nitrogen and phosphorus cycles. Although not all scientists believe the idea of planetary boundaries is ready for prime-time politics, many attending Rio supported the idea of including some kind of reference to physical limits on Earth’s resources and human activities. “The science tells us that Earth’s resources, upon which we depend, cannot meet the continued demands of humanity,” says Katherine Richardson, a marine biologist at the University of Copenhagen.

## No limits

Environmentalists cited at least one small victory: the agreement calls for an integrated ocean assessment and sets up a process for negotiating a protocol governing the high seas under the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea, both to be completed by 2014.

But in the end, the text includes no mention of boundaries or limits, stressing only the need to integrate science and policy frameworks while calling for “a regular review of the state of the Earth’s changing environment and its impact on human well-being”.

Many of those participating in Rio+20 put the summit in a more positive light. And despite growing doubts about the power of international treaties to effect change, observers are taking heart in the steps that some countries are taking at the national and sub-national level. Brazil is a good example, having sharply reduced deforestation in recent years while developing the world’s most advanced biofuels industry and simultaneously helping to lift millions of people out of dire poverty.

Janos Pasztor, executive secretary of the UN High-level Panel on Global Sustainability, says

that the conference has helped spur a broader conversation about sustainable development as well as a host of initiatives among governments, civil-society groups, scientists and the private sector. “This conference is part of a larger process,” Pasztor says, “and the outcome document is just one of the many results that will be announced here in Rio.”

Nature

doi:10.1038/nature.2012.10861

## References

1. Rockström, J. *et al.* Nature 461, 472–475 (2009).

23 June 2012 Last updated at 00:55 GMT

# Rio summit ends with warning on corporate power

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Rio de Janeiro



Those activists who had demanded action on fossil fuel subsidies will be disappointed

The UN sustainable development summit in Brazil has ended with world leaders adopting a political declaration hammered out a few days previously.

Environment and development charities say the Rio+20 agreement is too weak to tackle social and environmental crises.

Gro Harlem Brundtland, author of a major UN sustainable development report 25 years ago, said corporate power was one reason for lack of progress.

Nations will spend three years drawing up sustainable development goals.

They will also work towards better protection for marine life on the high seas.

But moves to eliminate subsidies on fossil fuels - recommended in a number of authoritative reports as likely to boost economies and curb CO2 emissions - came to naught.

Plans to enshrine the right of poor people to have clean water, adequate food and modern forms of energy also foundered or were seriously weakened during the six days of preparatory talks.

And many governments were bitter that text enshrining women's reproductive rights was removed from the declaration over opposition from the Vatican backed by Russia and nations

from the Middle East and Latin America.

'No leadership'

The UN had billed the summit as a "once in a generation chance" to turn the global economy onto a sustainable track.

"It absolutely did not do that," said Barbara Stocking, chief executive of Oxfam GB.



The rights of poor people to have access to clean water were not enshrined as hoped "We had the leaders of the world here, but they really did not take decisions that will take us forward," she told the BBC.

"It was a real lack of action that is very worrying, because we know how difficult the situation is in much of the world in terms of environment and poverty, and they did not show the leadership we needed them to bring."

The president of the most impoverished country in the western hemisphere, Haiti's President Michel Martelly, said the summit could have delivered more.

"I feel like these poor countries, these countries that are always being hit by catastrophe - things have not changed much," he told the BBC.

"So on this summit I will say that much more effort needs to be done so we can correctly and precisely come out with resolutions that will have an impact on the lives of people being affected."

Cash concern

Developing countries had argued that they needed financial assistance in order to meet the costs of switching onto a green development path.

But with the US in an election year and the EU deep in eurozone mire, any mention of specific sums was blocked.

As a consequence, developing countries refused to let the declaration endorse green economics

as the definitive sustainable development path.

Prof Jeffrey Sachs, the Columbia University economist and special adviser to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, said support was needed.

"Those of us who look at this day in, day out know that many poor countries need that kind of help," he said.



Developing countries had said they needed financial help to adopt greener forms of development

"And it does not do any good to cite large ambitious promises many years out, and then behind the scenes to say 'we're not going to talk about how they're going to be fulfilled.'"

But Lisa Jackson, Administrator of the US Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and deputy head of the US delegation here, said the US was fully behind the "green economy" - and that the summit could help deliver the vision.

"The negotiated document, which is really the first time we have a multilateral document that talks about the green economy that has broad-based support - that is a big push," she said.

"But probably more important are the connections that are being made between businesses large and small, civil society, academia and of course governments at the national and sub-national level - all those things are pushing the green economy forwards."

Norwegian would

[Continue reading the main story](#)

## “Start Quote

People who have economic power influence political decision-makers - that's a fact”

Gro Harlem Brundtland Former head of World Commission on Environment

The need to put the world on a sustainable track, and the perils of not doing so, were outlined most influentially in a 1987 commission chaired by Gro Harlem Brundtland, then Prime Minister of Norway.

Speaking to BBC News in Rio, she reflected on the lack of real progress since then.

"Obviously when you look back 25 years now, less than one would have expected has happened - that's clear - but you can't think you can turn the world round in 25 years," she said.

She said there were "complex reasons" why governments had been unable to take the vision further - including the power of corporations.

"I think [the allegation] is justified - it's not the whole truth but it certainly is a big part of it," she said.

"In our political system, corporations, businesses and people who have economic power influence political decision-makers - that's a fact, and so it's part of the analysis."

The next key date on the sustainable development journey is 2015.

The sustainable development goals should be decided and declared by then; also, the UN climate convention will have what some, with trepidation, are calling its "next Copenhagen" - the summit that should in theory usher in a new global agreement with some legal force to tackle global warming.

22 June 2012 Last updated at 06:46 GMT

[Article written by Richard Black](#), Environment correspondent

## Rio summit: Little progress, 20 years on



Twenty years after the first Rio summit, campaigners say this global gathering has failed to achieve similar results

On the final day of the UN sustainable development summit in Rio, UN chief Ban Ki-moon has urged governments to eliminate hunger from the world.

The secretary-general said in a world of plenty, no-one should go hungry.

The final phase of the summit has seen pledges from countries and companies on issues such as clean energy.

But a number of veteran politicians have joined environment groups in saying the summit declaration was "a failure of leadership".

And UK Deputy Prime Minister Nick Clegg described the outcome as "insipid".

The meeting, marking 20 years since the iconic Earth Summit in the same city and 40 since the

very first global environment gathering in Stockholm, was aimed at stimulating moves towards the "green economy".

But the declaration that was concluded by government negotiators on Tuesday and that ministers have not sought to re-open, puts the green economy as just one possible pathway to sustainable development.

Mary Robinson, formerly both Irish president and UN High Commissioner for Human Rights, said it was not enough.

## “Start Quote

Despite the fact that the world produces enough food to feed everyone, there are more hungry people today than when the world last met in Rio in 1992”

Barbara Stocking Chief Executive, Oxfam

"This is a 'once in a generation' moment when the world needs vision, commitment and, above all, leadership," she said.

"Sadly, the current document is a failure of leadership."

The former Brazilian President Fernando Cardoso, who chaired the 1992 Earth Summit, said the declaration did not do as much for environmental protection as for human development.

"This old division between environment and development is not the way we are going to solve the problems that we are creating for our grandchildren and great-grandchildren," he said.

"We have to accept that the solutions to poverty and inequality lie in sustainable growth, not growth at all costs."

Mr Ban had hoped the summit would take firmer steps towards ensuring the poor had access to water, food and energy.

However, his flagship Sustainable Energy for All initiative was merely "noted" in the text, not enthusiastically endorsed.

## 'Ray of hope'

In the meeting's final phase, he challenged governments to do more.



The summit was supposed to ensure access to water, food and energy for the world's poor

"In a world of plenty, no-one, not a single person, should go hungry," he said.

"I invite all of you to join me in working for a future without hunger," he told the estimated 130 heads of state and government in Rio.

Currently, it is estimated that almost one billion people - one seventh of the world's population - live in chronic hunger, while another billion do not receive adequate nutrition.

Measures that could help address this include eliminating food waste - about one-third of food is thrown away in rich countries and an even higher proportion in the poorest, for different reasons - and doubling the productivity of smallholdings.

The challenge is partly based on Brazil's own "hunger zero" programme, started by President Lula de Silva.

"Ban Ki-moon's announcement is a welcome ray of hope in a summit that has been shamefully devoid of progress," said Oxfam's chief executive Barbara Stocking.

"Despite the fact that the world produces enough food to feed everyone, there are more hungry people today than when the world last met in Rio in 1992," she said.

However, for the moment, a challenge is all it is.

There is no new money, and no changes to the way the UN organisation itself approaches the issue of hunger.

Outside the main negotiations in Rio, companies and governments have made well over 200 pledges of voluntary action in various areas.

Energy, water and food are all in that mix - though outnumbered by pledges to include sustainability issues in education programmes.

20 June 2012 Last updated at 16:27 GMT

## **Rio+20: Progress on Earth issues 'too slow' - UN chief**

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Rio de Janeiro



Mr Ban said the world community needed to proceed further down the road

[Continue reading the main story](#)

## Related Stories

- ['Seize moment' call at Rio summit](#)
- [Rio weakens on energy and water](#)
- [Uncertainty hampers Rio+20 talks](#)

The UN sustainable development summit in Rio de Janeiro has formally opened with a warning from UN head Ban Ki-moon that progress on the issue is too slow.

The secretary-general told world leaders and other ministers that "words must translate into action".

On the summit's fringes, international finance institutions launched a \$175bn fund to boost sustainable transport.

And the UK government announced that major businesses will have to report their carbon emissions from next year.

Mr Ban opened the session with a reference to the historic Earth Summit held here in Rio 20 years ago, which spawned UN conventions on climate change, biodiversity and desertification, as well as the Agenda 21 blueprint for sustainable development.

"Since then, progress has been too slow - we have not gone far enough down the road," he said.

"We are now in sight of a historic agreement - the world is waiting to see if words will translate into action, as we know they must."

### Youth message

Mr Ban's comments suggested that there were still decisions for the estimated 130 heads of state and government, and ministers from other countries, to take here.

However, there has been no indication that any are planning to re-open talks on the agreement that their negotiators concluded on Tuesday, before the high-level talks began.

The opening session also heard from 17-year-old New Zealander Brittany Trilford, who won a competition organised by climate change campaign group tcktcktck to send a message behalf of the world's youth.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

## Rio summit jargon buster

Referring to the remaining length of the summit here, she told world leaders: "You have 72 hours to decide the fate of your children - my children - my childrens' children - and I start the clock now.

"Are you here to save face - or are you here to save us?"

The meeting has seen a slew of announcements from financial institutions and business groups on stimulating green development.

Perhaps the most significant came from a group of eight international development banks led

by the Asian Development Bank, who are preparing to pump \$175bn into sustainable transport schemes over the next decade.

Greenhouse gas emissions from transport are growing faster than from any other economic sector.

The banks calculate that air pollution, congestion, traffic accidents and climate impacts can take 5-10% off a country's GDP per year.

"This is a game changer for sustainable transport," commented Holger Dalkmann, of the World Resources Institute's center for sustainable transport.

"It will ensure that hundreds of millions of people will have cleaner air, less congested roads, and safer transportation."

19 June 2012 Last updated at 20:36 GMT

### **Share this page**

- [Delicious](#)
- [Digg](#)
- [Facebook](#)
- [reddit](#)
- [StumbleUpon](#)
- [Twitter](#)
- [Email](#)
- [Print](#)

## **Rio+20: Agreement reached, say diplomats**



By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Rio de Janeiro



Environmental groups have already lamented the draft text's lack of commitments [Continue reading the main story](#)

## Related Stories

- ['Seize moment' call at Rio summit](#)
- [Rio weakens on energy and water](#)
- [Uncertainty hampers Rio+20 talks](#)

Negotiators have agreed a text to be approved by world leaders meeting this week in Rio at a summit intended to put society on a more sustainable path.

Environmental groups and charities working on poverty issues believe the agreement is far too weak.

The Rio+20 gathering comes 20 years after the Earth Summit, also held in the Brazilian city.

The text has yet to be signed off by heads of government and ministers, but it seems that no changes will be made.

The European Union was the group most unhappy with what they saw as the low level of ambition in the text.

But Danish Environment Minister Ida Auken told BBC News that she believed it would be signed off.

"The EU would have liked to see a much more concrete and ambitious outcome, so in that respect I'm not happy with it," she said.

"However, we managed to get the green economy on the agenda, and so I think we have a strong foundation for this vision that can drive civil society and the private sector to work in the

same direction, to understand that environment and [that] the social side must be integrated into the heart of the economy."

As the current holders of the EU presidency, Denmark has been the most strident critic of the lack of ambition in the text that was issued by the Brazilian host government last Friday and discussed over the weekend.

Dismay

Environmental and developmental groups are dismayed by many aspects of the agreement.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

## **“Start Quote**

This damp squib of a draft negotiating text makes it clear the Rio talks lack the firepower needed to solve the global emergency we're facing”

Craig Bennett Director of policy and campaigns, Friends of the Earth

In large part, it merely "reaffirms" commitments governments have made previously.

Activists mounted a huge Twitter campaign on Monday in an attempt to persuade governments to make a commitment to end fossil fuel subsidies.

However the final text reaffirms previous commitments to phase them out if they "harmful and inefficient", without setting a date.

There will be a limited upgrade for the UN Environment Programme. Corporations will be invited - but not mandated - to report on their environmental and social impact.

A process will be established leading to a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs), to come into affect in 2015 alongside extensions to the current Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

The text calls for "urgent action" on unsustainable production and consumption, but it gives no detail, or a timetable, on how this can be achieved, and no clear direction as to how the world economy can be put on a greener path.

"This damp squib of a draft negotiating text makes it clear the Rio talks lack the firepower needed to solve the global emergency we're facing," said Friends of the Earth's director of policy and campaigns, Craig Bennett, in Rio.

"Developed countries have repeatedly failed to live safely within our planet's limits. Now they must wake up to the fact that until we fix our broken economic system we're just papering over the ever-widening cracks."

More than 100 world leaders are expected in Rio from Wednesday to attend the summit.

They include presidents and prime ministers from the large emerging economies, including China, India, Indonesia and South Africa.

But US President Barack Obama will not be there, and neither will UK Prime Minister David Cameron or German Chancellor Angela Merkel, who are all sending ministers in their places.

18 June 2012 Last updated at 22:43 GMT

# Rio+20: Expert panel's call to 'seize moment'

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Rio de Janeiro



The declaration will be presented to delegations at the summit in Rio [Continue reading the main story](#)

## Related Stories

- [Rio weakens on energy and water](#)
- [Uncertainty hampers Rio+20 talks](#)
- [Ecocide: A legal green high?](#)

Governments must seize the "historic opportunity" of the Rio+20 summit to put the world on a new sustainable course, says a panel of Nobel laureates, ministers and scientists.

The evidence that society is "on the edge of a threshold of a future with unprecedented environmental risks" is unequivocal, they conclude.

Their declaration will be presented to government delegations here.

In the main negotiations, nations are reportedly closing in on an agreement.

Luiz Alberto Figueiredo Machado of the Brazilian delegation, which is chairing the talks, told reporters he was "absolutely convinced" they would finish before midnight on Monday.

Heads of government from about 130 countries, and ministers from others, will begin their session on Wednesday and would sign off the text by the end of the week.

While the majority of people here expect a deal to be done, there are warnings from various organisations that it will not go nearly far enough towards sorting out the environment and development issues facing humanity.

Without explicitly criticising the draft agreement, the panel's declaration makes it clear that they agree.

"The combined effects of climate change, resource scarcity, loss of biodiversity and ecosystem resilience at a time of increased demand, poses a real threat to humanity's welfare," they write.

"There is an unacceptable risk that human pressures on the planet, should they continue on a business as usual trajectory, will trigger abrupt and irreversible changes with catastrophic outcomes for human societies and life as we know it."

[Continue reading the main story.](#)

## Rio summit jargon buster

The group of more than 30 signatories includes Nobel laureates such as Carlo Rubbia, Walter Kohn, Douglas Osheroff and Yuan Tseh Lee, as well as politicians including Brazil's Environment minister Izabella Teixeira and Finland's recently ex-President Tarja Halonen.

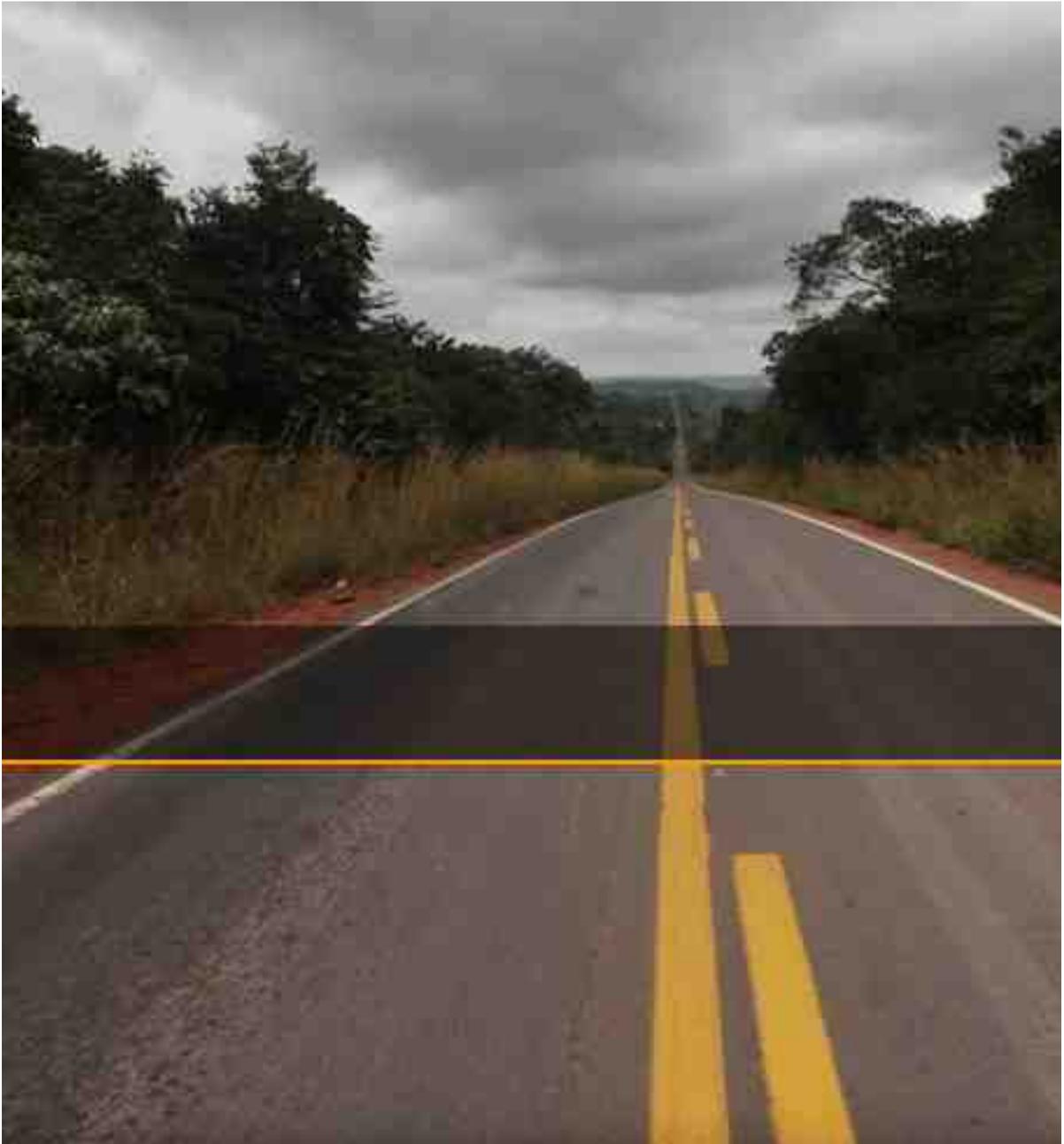
Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Norwegian prime minister and World Health Organization chief who led the Brundtland Commission on sustainable development in 1987, was also on the panel.

Prof Will Steffen from the Australian National University, one of the leading scientists in the group, said he hoped the declaration would make the implications of ministers' choices clear to them.

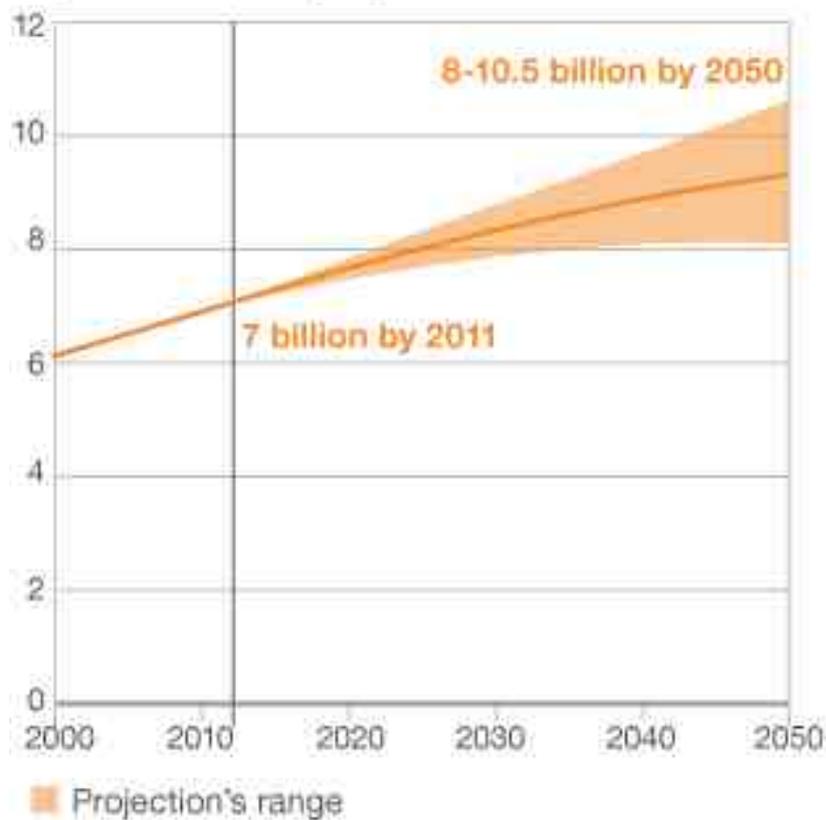
"There are intrinsic limits to the planet's capacity, and we must recognise that we're transgressing them - in fact, have transgressed some of them," he told BBC News.

"Business as usual is not an option."

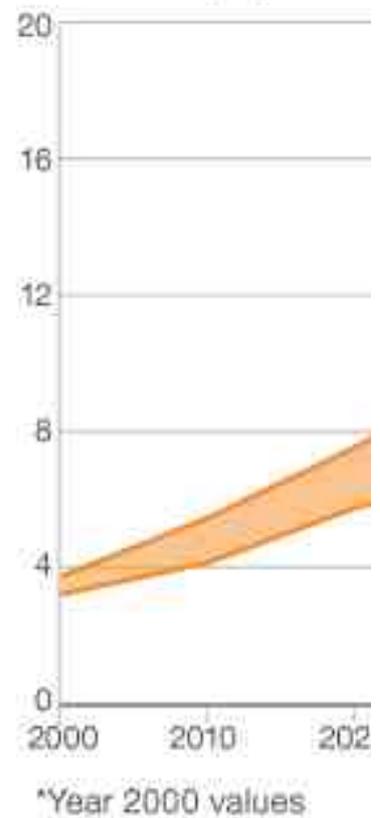
[Continue reading the main story.](#)



Population, billions of people:

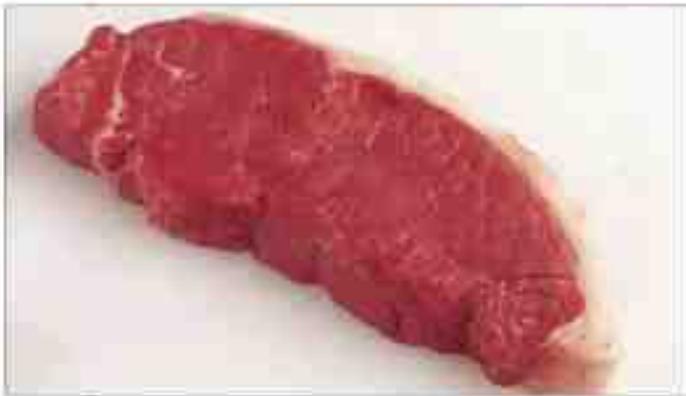


Income, US\$ per person\*



Sources: Population UNDESA, 2009. Wealth, Van Vuren et al, 2012.

- **The Rio summit will focus on efforts to reduce poverty, while protecting the environment. This task is made harder as the world's population is expected to rise steeply in the years ahead.**
- **The planet's population could be 15 billion people by 2100. Wealth is also expected to rise but its effect on the environment is unclear.**



- **In the past, more people, with more wealth has meant increased consumption.**
- **Since the last Rio summit in 1992, the number of people on Earth has gone up by**

• **22%**

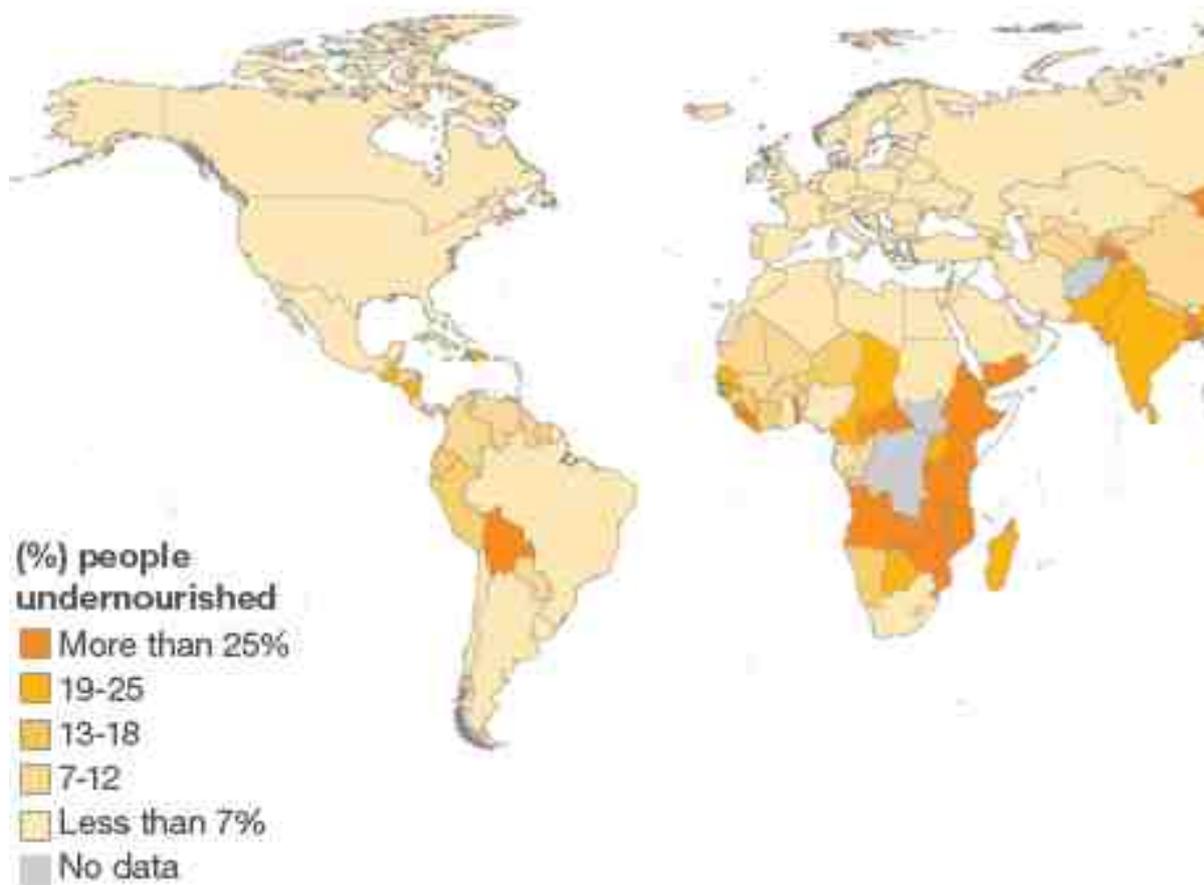
- **Seafood consumption has gone up by**

# 32%

- **Meat by**

# 26%

- **The average person eats 43 kg of meat a year. In 1992 it was 34 kg.**
- Source: UNEP, 2011. Figures relate to 2007



Source: UN

- While food consumption is rising, there are still large numbers of people who are undernourished.
- It is one of the UN's many development goals to halve the number of people who suffer from hunger by 2015.

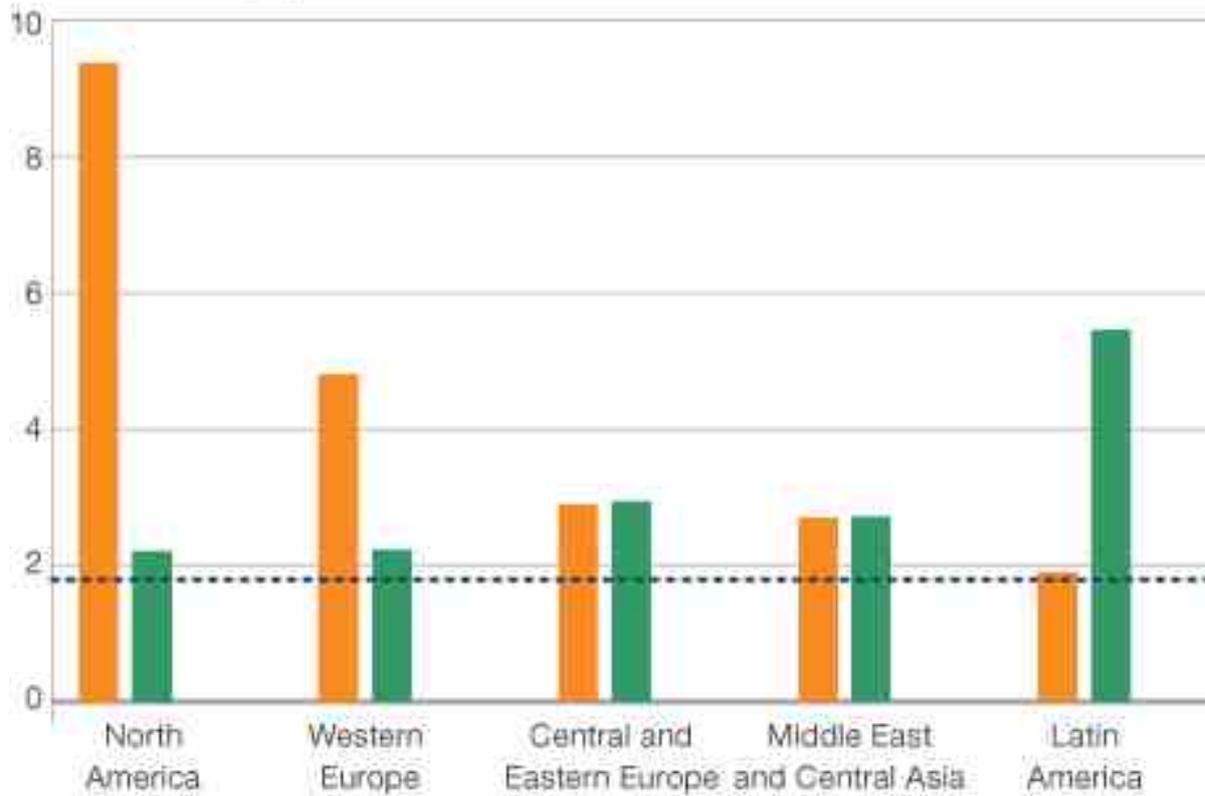


Source: WWF 2010, The ecological footprint, 1961-2007. Nasa

- **How able is the planet to meet increasing demand?**
- **In 1960, a little over half the planet's land, forests and fisheries were needed to meet human consumption.**
- **By the late 1970s, consumption was equal to one planet.**
- **By the first years of this century, one-and-a-half planets were needed to meet consumption.**

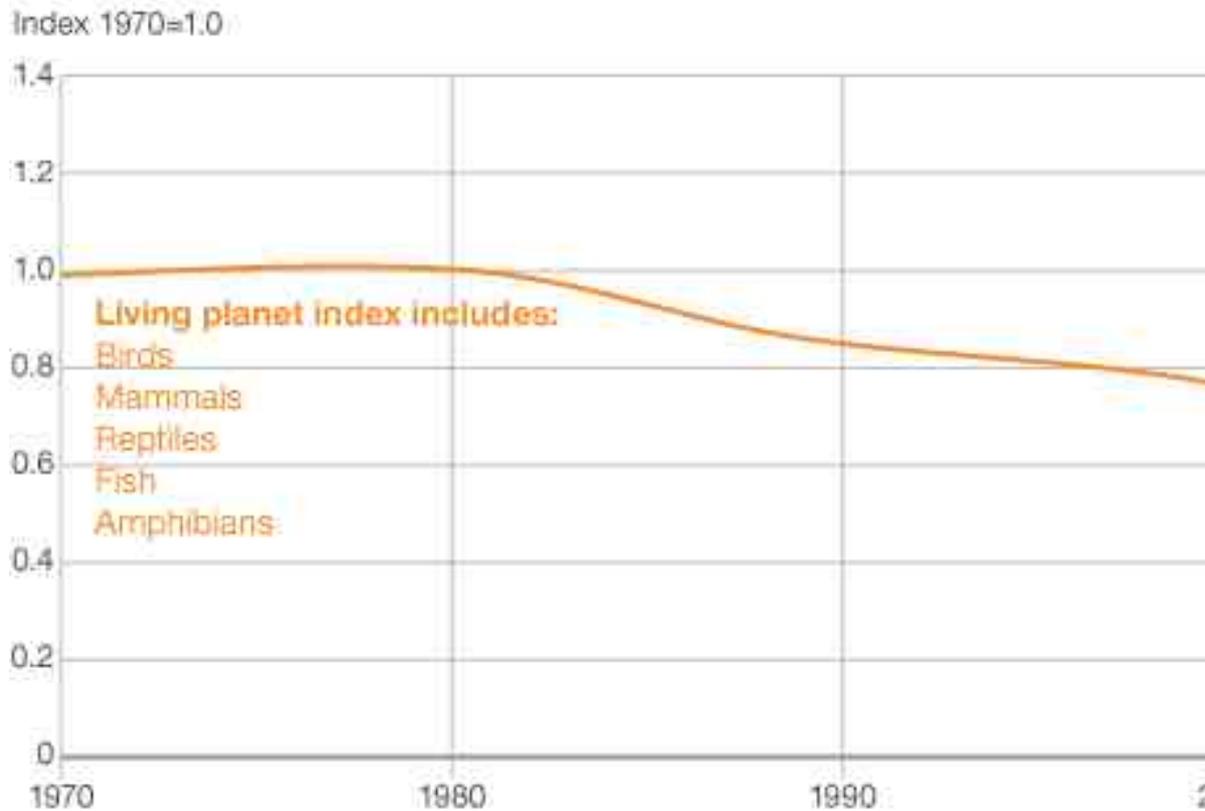
**This deficit can only be met by the depletion of renewable resources and increased pollution.**

Global hectares per person



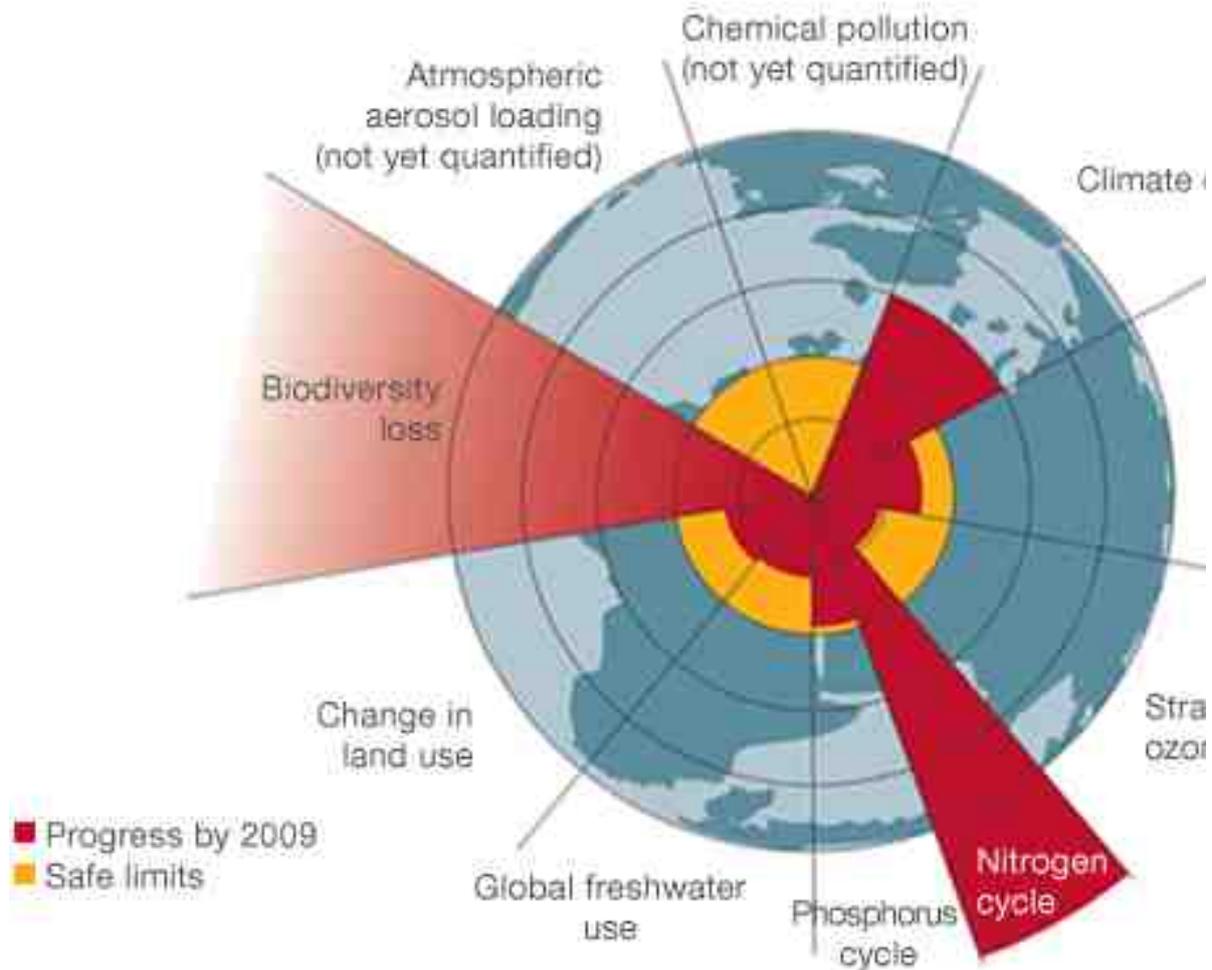
Source: Kitzes et al, 2006

- **Consumption isn't equal. North Americans and Europeans consume far more resources than are available solely within their borders.**



Source: WWF

- **As human populations increase, the number and diversity of birds and animals is falling.**
- **Decreasing biodiversity undermines the planet's ability to sustain humanity. Its reductions typically affect the poorest the most. These issues are right at the heart of the Rio talks.**



- **Some argue that the planet has limits to the stress its different systems can undergo, beyond which a stable future cannot be guaranteed.**
- **This graphic from the scientist and sustainability expert Johan Rockström suggests those limits have already been broken for climate change, biodiversity and the nitrogen cycle.**

However, after delegates had had a few days to discuss the Brazilian government's draft text that it issued on Friday evening, many concluded that on many points, a continuation of business as usual is exactly what it promises.

"There's little in this document that changes what happens next week when governments go home," said Jim Leape, director of WWF International.

"This was never going to be a conference that solved everything; but it still can be a conference

that puts the world on a different path."

European governments among others are understood to be seeking to strengthen the document.

However, tales from the talks - in which journalists are not permitted - suggest the Brazilians are taking a hardline approach to changes.

"I told our colleagues 'the match expired at the end of [Friday], and extra time is never longer than the match itself'," said Mr Figueiredo Machado.

Direct endorsement

It is believed that Brazilian President Dilma Roussef wants to present a completed document to G20 leaders meeting in Mexico on Monday and Tuesday.

This would allow leaders of G20 nations who are not coming to Rio, such as US President Barack Obama, UK Prime Minister David Cameron and Germany's Chancellor Angela Merkel, to give the document a degree of direct endorsement.

Among areas of disagreement on the current text, the US wants to avoid putting talks on protecting oceans under the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, the EU wants progress on sustainable development goals (SDGs) that go beyond merely agreeing the principle of having them, and African nations are looking for a specific pledge of finance to help them "green" their economies.

But it is unclear whether any of these blocs will object strongly enough to challenge the draft agreement once prime ministers and presidents are here.

Tarja Halonen, who co-chaired UN chief Ban Ki-moon's Global Sustainability Panel, said the Nobel laureates' declaration could and should encourage leaders to raise their ambitions.

"What this says to negotiators is they need to push harder, they must be encouraged to do more," she told BBC News.

"The most important thing we are telling them is the urgency."

17 June 2012 Last updated at 02:01 GMT

## **Rio+20 deal weakens on energy and water pledges**

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Rio de Janeiro



The draft text at the Rio meeting identifies poverty as the greatest challenge  
[Continue reading the main story](#)

## Related Stories

- [Uncertainty hampers Rio+20 talks](#)
- [Ecocide: A legal green high?](#)
- [Rio hears call for sustainability](#)

Governments are set to weaken pledges on boosting access to water and energy after a new draft negotiating text was issued at the Rio+20 meeting.

The text was issued by the Brazilian host government after it assumed leadership of the talks from the UN.

It affirms that nations must not slide back on prior pledges and names ending poverty as the "greatest challenge".

Brazil wants the text signed off before 130 heads of government and other ministers arrive on Wednesday.

The new text was not officially distributed to journalists, despite pledges that the meeting here was "accessible".

Preparatory talks were supposed to end on Friday evening, but at that stage only 37% of the UN's draft text had been agreed - which led to Brazil's decision to issue a revamped document.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

## “Start Quote

The text seems to have stopped us moving backwards”

Asad Rehman Friends of the Earth  
'Honouring commitments'

The 50-page text, obtained by BBC News, gives developing countries much of what they have been asking for in terms of principles without agreeing to their demands for firm pledges of financial and technological assistance from the West.

In response to charges that richer countries were attempting to weaken prior commitments on aid and other issues, the text is explicit: "We emphasise the need to make progress in implementing previous commitments... it is critical that we honour all previous commitments, without regression".

"Faced with the determined efforts by some developed countries, in particular the US, to rip up the Earth Summit agreement of 1992, the text seems to have stopped us moving backwards," said Asad Rehman, head of international climate at Friends of the Earth.

"But it certainly doesn't get close to addressing the concerns of the people or our planet.

[Continue reading the main story](#)

## Rio summit jargon buster

"Faced with a triple planetary crisis - climate catastrophe, deepening global inequity and unsustainable consumption driven by a broken economic system - the text is neither ambitious enough nor delivers the required political will needed."

In another move that should please developing countries, the text confirms the principle that developed and developing countries have "common but differentiated responsibilities" in moving towards sustainable development.

No firm numbers

But whereas developing countries have been demanding \$30-\$100bn per year in exchange for "greening" their economies, the draft text gives no firm numbers.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's Sustainable Energy for All initiative, which aims to provide everyone on the planet with modern energy by 2030 and increase progress on renewables and energy efficiency, is only "noted" - not endorsed.

And there is no commitment to end fossil fuel subsidies, as some countries have been advocating.

On economic indicators, the text "recognises the need for broader measures of progress to complement GDP in order to better inform policy decisions", and asks UN statisticians to begin work on the issue.

"It's good that the text still recognises that rich and poor countries have different responsibilities," said Erica Carroll, Christian Aid's policy analyst.



An entrance-hall poster greeting Rio+20

delegates to the talks

"But we'd like to see much stronger support for work to ensure that everyone in the world has sustainable energy, and much more enthusiasm on the need for alternatives to GDP."

Many campaign groups have been urging that this summit should at the least acknowledge everyone's basic right to food and water.

The right to food - to which the US has objected during talks - is enshrined in the draft text, but the language on water is vaguer.

"The right to water and sanitation is essential to the full enjoyment of life and other human rights," said Farooq Ullah, executive director-designate of Stakeholder Forum, a group working to involve all stakeholders in UN sustainable development processes.

"Previous UN resolutions have had hold-outs; and one of the successes of Rio+20 has been that Canada and the UK have for the first time recognised the universal right to water and sanitation respectively - so where the Brazilians have lost this agreement is a mystery."

Groups working on ocean conservation were however pleased that the text contains commitments to end illegal and exploitative fishing, support local small-scale fishers, and set up a process that would eventually regulate fishing and protect life on the high seas.

Health care guarantees

There is implicit criticism of the EU's recent move to charge airlines for their greenhouse gas emissions, with a clause saying that countries or regional blocs should not take "unilateral actions to deal with environmental challenges outside the jurisdiction of the importing country".

Other ingredients of the new text include:

- guarantees of gender equality in employment and health care
- no requirement for corporations to measure and report on the sustainability of their operations, as has been included in earlier versions
- a commitment to tackle youth unemployment
- a limited upgrade for the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), without the major elevation in status that many observers have been advocating

The Brazilian hosts say they want negotiators to finish work on the new text by the end of Monday - allowing one day's grace before the three-day summit involving heads of government begins.

Various delegations, especially the US, Canada and the powerful G77/China bloc of 131 developing countries, have previously put red lines through many elements of the new text.

They will have to give ground significantly if a deal is to be concluded.

Even if it is, it will not make the major strides towards a sustainable development path that many scientists and indeed many politicians say are necessary.

13 June 2012 Last updated at 23:33 GMT

## Scientists urge Rio moves on population and consumption

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News, Rio de Janeiro



Both population and consumption levels must be addressed to protect the planet, the scientists say

### Related Stories

- [Rio heads for economics with meaning](#)
- [Nations at odds on Rio+20 summit](#)
- [Rio: So much to do, so little time](#)

More than 100 science academies around the world have called on world leaders to take action on population and consumption at the Rio+20 summit.

They say past failures on these issues threaten the natural world and prospects for future generations.

The science academies include the UK's Royal Society as well as its peers in countries at all stages of development.

Preparatory talks for next week's summit have opened but sources report slow progress on

unresolved issues.

The science academies' public declaration is particularly notable as experts in both developed and developing countries have joined forces on what used to be a divisive topic.

"The overall message is that we need a renewed focus on both population and consumption - it's not enough to look at one or the other," said Prof Charles Godray from the Martin School at the University of Oxford, who chaired the process of writing the declaration.

"We need to look at both, because together they determine the footprint on the world."

'All time high'

The footprint is getting heavier and heavier, the academies warn.



The developed world is mainly responsible for the world's record consumption levels, the scientists say

"The global population is currently around seven billion, and most projections suggest that it will probably lie between eight and 11 billion by 2050," their declaration says.

"Global consumption levels are at an all time high, largely because of the high per-capita consumption of developed countries."

If the billion poorest people are to have adequate access to food, water and energy, the academies say, developed countries will have to reduce their own consumption of natural resources.

They say this can be done without reducing prosperity so long as different economic models are followed.

Failing to make these changes "will put us on track to alternative futures with severe and potentially catastrophic implications for human well-being".

The declaration builds on a [recent report from the Royal Society](#).

The topics of population and consumption are both mentioned in the draft agreement that negotiators are discussing in Rio.

But both crop up in a far weaker form than many observers would like.

As of now, governments are set to agree to "commit to systematically consider population trends and projections in our national, rural and urban development strategies and policies".

But the clause in the draft agreement pledging to "change unsustainable consumption and

production patterns" is so far being vetoed by the US and the EU.

#### Change in thinking

The new report is an indication of how things have changed on the population question.

In decades gone by, developing nations tended to see the issue as a ploy by rich countries to avoid talking about unsustainable consumption.

But Eliya Zulu, executive director of the African Institute for Development Policy in Nairobi who worked on the recent Royal Society report, said perceptions were changing.

"Many African countries are feeling the effects of population growth, and are finding they'll need to deal with it in order to continue developing as well as to address their environmental issues," he told BBC News.

"If you look at a country like Rwanda, it's one of the most densely populated in Africa and the government believes one of the reasons behind the genocide was high population density and competition for resources.

"And the economic downturn that started in the late 1980s made people realise that in order to reach the Millennium Development Goals [MDGs], you can't do it if your population is growing rapidly."

#### Talks extension

Dr Zulu also said that evidence accumulated over the last decade showed that overall, African women were having more children than they wanted - which gave politicians an incentive to increase family planning provision.

In the formal negotiations, government delegates convened on Wednesday for intensive talks aimed at securing consensus on key themes.

Currently only about 20% of the draft outcome document here has been agreed.

Preparatory talks had been scheduled to end on Friday this week, but are now set to continue through the weekend and probably up to the point where heads of government arrive for the summit next Wednesday.

Sha Zukang, the chairman of the talks, was optimistic that differences would be resolved in time.

"The determination to work for the common good is encouraging... the whole world is watching us and we cannot afford to let them down," he told reporters.