

Implementing the Rio Conventions: Implications for the South

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This paper reviews the implications of implementing the Rio Conventions for Southern countries and identifies key challenges for the future, focusing in particular on issues and challenges that are common to the three Rio Conventions. It draws on the views and experience of the following staff at IIED, partners in the South and international organisations:¹

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Introducing the Rio Conventions

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, 1992, was the biggest ever gathering of world leaders, who came together to agree a common agenda for environment and development. The Conference gave rise to two international environmental agreements:

- the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), whose objectives are the conservation and sustainable use of biodiversity and the equitable sharing of benefits arising from its use; and

- the Framework Convention on Climate Change (FCCC), which aims to reduce greenhouse gas emissions.

At Rio, countries also agreed to develop the Convention to Combat Desertification (CCD), which was signed in 1994, and aims to address the problem of land degradation in dryland countries.

Underpinning the three Conventions, and elaborated in Agenda 21, are a number of cross-sectoral priorities for sustainable development. These include: the integration of environment and development objectives, poverty reduction, civil society participation, decentralization and good governance. Agenda 21 also emphasized the need for technology transfer and improved trade terms for Southern countries.

The Rio Conference sought to balance the global environmental priorities of Northern countries with the *development* priorities of poorer Southern countries. The Conventions on Biological Diversity and Climate Change emerged from an agenda shaped by powerful Northern environmental interests, while the Convention to Combat Desertification, which was proposed by Southern countries, addresses an important development concern for many of the world's poorest nations. Developed countries also agreed to provide additional financial support for implementing the Conventions³ in the South, and to enhance overall levels of development assistance.

KEY CHALLENGES:

- Far more work is required to integrate the Conventions into mainstream development planning, public investment and business activities.
- This will require much stronger political commitment to the Conventions, and the development and wide dissemination of tools for integrating environmental, social and economic objectives, and making trade-offs between them.
- There is a need to enhance coherence between the Conventions by identifying conflicts and synergies, and developing sustainable development criteria which can be widely applied to development plans and processes.
- Much more work is needed to implement the Conventions on the ground, by supporting activities of local authorities, organizations and communities to implement the Conventions in their local context, and improving feedback mechanisms from local to national and international levels.



Together, the three Conventions and Agenda 21 provide important elements of a broader strategy to steer the world away from an economic model often characterised by unsustainable exploitation of natural resources, widening inequality and social injustice. The Conventions themselves, and the international processes established to implement them, have provided a number of useful policy guidelines and concepts for addressing global environmental problems and have led to important advances in technical and scientific understanding. However, they have also raised important questions about the way in which the priorities of Southern countries are addressed, and the efficacy of their implementation.

To what extent have the priorities of Southern countries been addressed?

In the ten years since Rio, the North has played an important role in *financing* the implementation of the Conventions in the South. Donors have provided support for the CBD and FCCC through the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and have financed activities relating to all three Conventions through their bilateral aid programmes. However, overall levels of development assistance have declined since 1992, and the EU's Rio pledge to provide additional financing of \$3 billion has not materialized.

In addition, efforts to *eliminate poverty* – a core challenge for sustainable development in the South – have had limited impact in many of the poorest countries, despite considerable investments made through aid programmes over the last few decades. Reasons for this are many and complex, but tend to include financial mis-management and poor governance, coupled with huge debt burdens and unfavourable trade terms. In some countries, a significant proportion of resources from development programmes has stayed with elite networks that are reluctant to share resources and thus empower poor and marginalised groups.⁴ This means that poverty reduction remains the key priority and the focus of attention lies more with poverty reduction than global environmental issues.

The GEF was established to fund global environmental priorities, and bilateral assistance has tended to tackle local environmental priorities as these affect people and their livelihoods more directly. While this is a logical approach, many of the 'global priority' activities financed by the GEF have had implications for the livelihoods of local people, and it should be considered whether such an exclusive focus on global priorities is indeed always appropriate, especially in the South.

For example, national biodiversity strategies have focused mainly on conserving rare species of global value, and have paid much less attention to biodiversity which is principally of local value because it helps to sustain the livelihoods of the poor. This lack of emphasis on livelihoods issues is not simply a function of Northern concern. The environmental debates both internationally and in the South have tended to be dominated by narrowly focused conservation and scientific agendas. And, amongst NGOs, the capacity to apply for GEF funding often rests with

organisations promoting a strict conservation agenda, rather than those with a more people-centred approach.

A key concern for Southern countries is the marked imbalance in the *negotiating capacity* of rich and poor countries, which means that Northern countries often dominate the international processes established to implement the Conventions, particularly for biodiversity and climate change. The effort that countries are able to put into the negotiations – in terms of size of delegations, negotiating skills, information and research to support their participation – typically reflects their economic status.

Delegations can range from 40 people to just 2, and, when a number of thematic sub-groups are working in parallel, it can be very difficult for the priorities of Southern negotiators to be properly articulated. Furthermore, developing country delegations are not always sufficiently well informed to safeguard their best interests, and have at times been subjected to coercive tactics from more powerful delegations. Thus, although the UN structures and procedures promote equity, in practice, the Least Developed Countries (LDCs) are often at a serious disadvantage.

A further concern is the enormous cost and time implications of the large number of international meetings held under each of the many international environmental agreements, which draw on already limited resources and *capacity for implementation* in-country. There will always be a need for international processes to drive implementation and address new issues as they emerge, and much of the value of the Conventions lies in the process of arriving at a common understanding. However, a lot of time is spent negotiating detailed text which is rarely referred to or implemented, and the same results could probably be achieved with fewer meetings.

In general, there has been sufficient elaboration of the Conventions at international level, but much more work is now needed to make the Conventions work at national and local levels.

Achievements at country level: new plans, policies and projects

Official efforts to implement the Conventions have mainly focused on the development of national action plans (NAPs). Many countries have developed NAPs for Desertification and Biodiversity, and some have introduced NAPs for Climate Change. Most countries have completed their National Communications under the FCCC, containing emissions inventories and initial assessments of vulnerability and adaptation needs. Several studies have also been conducted, for example, to develop inventories of biodiversity or review approaches for dryland management, and information exchange networks have been established.

Some countries have introduced new policy and legal frameworks to implement the Conventions, for example laws on biodiversity and access to genetic resources, and policies on climate change. The translation of the Conventions into national policy and law has, however, generally been slow. Whilst ten years is a relatively short period within which to undergo significant policy and institutional change, much 'ground' work has been done, and the next ten years should see more rapid progress.

Several new projects have also been launched, for example to improve resource management in dryland areas, expand protected areas, promote the commercial use of biodiversity, and enhance the use of clean energy technology. Carbon trading is emerging in a few countries, which, under the Clean Development Mechanism, has the potential to become a major instrument for sustainable development if promoted correctly. Some activities have also been initiated at community level, such as community-based wildlife management and tourism, and the integration of Desertification Action Plans into community development plans.

NGOs have often been involved in these activities. In a number of countries, the development of NAPs for Desertification has seen quite active involvement of NGOs and resource users. Civil society has also played a fairly active role in some policy processes, such as the development of South Africa's 1997 Biodiversity Policy. In Costa Rica, grassroots organisations are participating in the National Commission for Biodiversity Management, and an extensive civil society consultation, involving campesino and indigenous people's organisations, has been initiated to develop a system to protect intellectual rights at community level. In India, the government sub-contracted an NGO to manage the recent Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan process, which involved a participatory process to develop state, sub-state and thematic action plans, with an explicit focus on biodiversity *and* livelihoods issues. In many countries, NGOs have also initiated their own independent activities to implement the Conventions.

Changes on the ground have yet to become widespread

Clearly, important progress has been made since Rio. Environment departments in both governments and donor agencies have worked hard to implement the Conventions. Many countries have developed good quality NAPs and launched promising initiatives to implement the Conventions on the ground, despite the prevailing policy, institutional and resource constraints.

However, in many cases, NAPs have had limited impact and, overall, progress on the ground has been slow and patchy. Many NAPs have only recently been approved and encompass complex challenges, which means that it will take time for them to deliver tangible changes on the ground. In addition, environment departments are often seriously underfunded, and there is rarely sufficient finance available for NAP implementation. While some countries are advancing in the right direction and have developed the political will to implement the Conventions, commitment to the Conventions tends to be concentrated in environment departments. This is partly because NAPs have often been more about identifying national priorities, than about establishing systems and processes for action which engage different government departments and civil society sectors.

Integrating the principles and actions articulated by the Rio Conventions into routine development activities will require far greater commitment from finance, planning and sectoral departments which control the bulk of financial resources. Commitment needs to be made not only to the

environmental objectives of the Conventions, but also to cross-sectoral priorities of Rio which were developed precisely because the environmental objectives are unachievable in their absence – integration of environment and development, poverty reduction, participation, good governance and decentralization.

Taking each Convention in turn ...

In all countries, North and South, progress with implementing the CBD's objectives in important economic sectors (energy, transport, land use planning, urban planning etc) has generally been slow. Biodiversity issues have also been very neglected in national development planning. A recent review in South Africa shows that biodiversity is poorer than ten years ago, even though cultivation and grazing have decreased and protected areas have considerably expanded.⁵ Local communities are still excluded or evicted from many protected areas without adequate compensation, whereas key economic interests such as tourism may be allowed in. In addition, community-based conservation has not yet delivered as much as people hoped, often because of insecure land or resource tenure, yet governments have often been slow to address such constraints.

Under the CCD, NAPs and initiatives on the ground have so far not been very effective because they have not been accompanied by the structural changes needed to improve natural resource management, nor have they been effectively linked to mainstream development programmes. In a number of countries, desertification is still seen largely as a physical problem (erosion, overgrazing etc) rather than a political/institutional problem (eg. lack of access to, and control over, natural resources and land for local farmers and graziers). There has also been a tendency to focus on non-cultivated areas rather than implementing the CCD in agriculture and rural development programmes.

The transformation of Desertification Action Plans into community development programmes is still widely lacking and local communities do not have sufficient access to funding or capacity to develop and implement coherent resource management plans. In general, local communities have not been sufficiently represented at national or international levels and their interests have not yet been adequately addressed. Although some NGOs have helped to link civil society to the implementation process, they cannot speak on behalf of local communities and therefore only partially represent them. Furthermore, NGOs have at times tended to be opportunistic in their participation, seeking to further their own interests, rather than truly representing community knowledge and interests.

For climate change, much of the effort so far has focused on the international negotiations to agree the Kyoto Protocol, which if ratified at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, will bring legally binding emission reduction targets. While this and the decision to establish an Adaptation Fund for LDCs and Small Island Developing States (SIDS) are encouraging, Kyoto is unlikely to be able to deliver sufficient cuts in emissions to prevent serious impacts on SIDS and LDCs, the most vulnerable countries. At country level, there has been little integration of climate change considerations with mainstream

development sectors, although there have been some small changes within the energy sector (eg. investments in green technologies). Furthermore, only a few countries have so far developed detailed investment plans for adaptation to enable them to cope with the impacts of climate change, and, in general, the FCCC implementation process has responded very poorly to the needs of local communities.

Common constraints to implementation

Looking across the three Conventions, two key issues emerge: at national level, the lack of integration with development planning, public investment and business, and at local level, the lack of integration with community development interests and activities. This lack of integration means that the objectives of the Conventions continue to be undermined by mainstream development activities (e.g. land is degraded by unsustainable farming practices, and biodiversity is undermined by rapidly expanding road networks). National Action Plans are supposed to promote cross-sectoral integration, but often fail to identify clear links with development policy and practical approaches to promote greater coherence. They are usually developed by environment sector specialists alone, who lack the capacity to engage economic sectors and link NAPs with mainstream development planning.

The Conventions may have brought about a boom for consultants, academics and NGOs. But very little funding has reached local communities or activities on the ground. If the Conventions are going to have a significant impact, financial management and governance will need to improve. Yet financial management has often been poor. For example, in some cases, funding for implementing the Conventions has gone to administrations which have been known to engage in corrupt activities.

For each of the Conventions, the implementation processes at national and international levels have not provided sufficient opportunity for civil society organizations which represent local communities to make a meaningful contribution. While there has been increasing support for more decentralised approaches, particularly in the context of the CCD, as well as a growing acceptance of the need for participation in project design and management, in practice decisions are still often taken unilaterally by financing organisations.

What approaches have worked for implementing the Conventions?

Under the CBD, some of the most exciting developments have been where civil society organisations have used the Convention to shape their activities at local level, or played an active role in planning processes, for example, through Local Agenda 21 initiatives. In India, NGOs and academics have worked closely with local communities to develop People's Registers of Biodiversity and related traditional knowledge (PBRs). Driven by motives ranging from conservation to democratisation, such registers are emerging as potentially useful tools for addressing the triple objectives

of the CBD. Similarly, decentralised gene banks have been developed with the active involvement of local farmers to strengthen local control and conservation of agro-biodiversity. In the State of Kerala, the development of PBRs is included as a priority for the next Five Year Plan. There is, however, some concern that PBRs could facilitate access to biodiversity without benefit-sharing unless ownership of PBRs by local communities is legally recognized.⁶

Several initiatives to improve the decentralized management of natural resources in degraded dryland areas are helping to implement the objectives of the CCD. For example, SOS Sahel has initiated a project in the Takieta Forest Reserve in Niger, to ensure genuine participation of all the people who use the area in the creation of a local management structure and strategy. The project has offered facilitation in the form of finance, advice, training and facilitating contacts.⁷ In the Kishi Beiga pastoral zone of Burkina Faso, the Burkina Sahel Programme (supported by GTZ) began with participatory land-use planning, but conflicts between different local groups meant that a new approach was needed based on social groups rather than territorial units. The challenge has been to create a situation in which all stakeholders would agree to participate in the consultation process, and to facilitate dialogue, using participatory methods.⁸ In the Kelka region of Mali, local village associations have been established to manage the Kelka forest lands in association with the local forestry department.⁹

Under the FCCC, the National Communications prepared by many Southern countries have paid little attention to vulnerability and adaptation options, and have not been linked with other environment and development plans. The exceptions to this rule tend to be countries where the adverse impacts of climate change were expected to be very severe, including some SIDS, which have regular experience of disaster planning in the face of hurricanes and typhoons. For example, Jamaica was able to develop its National Communication with some integration into other environmental plans as well as the national development planning process. The lesson seems to be that climate change will tend to be better integrated into national planning processes where its significance to the development of a country can be clearly demonstrated.¹⁰

Integrating environment and development objectives

The sectoral structure of governments, and in particular the separation of units or departments responsible for the Conventions from finance, planning and sectoral departments which control the bulk of investment, acts as a significant constraint to their implementation. Environment departments are usually weak policy units which tend not to have sufficient influence to mobilise action by other departments to integrate the Conventions into their activities.

Some countries have established inter-departmental committees to improve environmental integration, but these have not always worked effectively. In Bangladesh, for example, the Inter-Governmental Committee on climate

change only operates when it is approached by a donor with funding for a particular project. In Mali, the Inter-Ministerial Committee for environmental integration established in 1995 has never met.

Enhancing inter-departmental collaboration is difficult because of turf battles and tensions between departments. In all administrations, different departments have a tendency to jealously guard their interests and to avoid coming to agreement with potential 'competitors', since they are often vying for scarce resources. Furthermore, compartmentalization is reinforced by the educational system which rarely encourages cross-sectoral thinking or approaches. There are also conceptual barriers to overcome when economic departments are pursuing market liberalisation and neoliberal development models which tend not to incorporate environmental and social objectives.

In addition, neither the Conventions themselves (and the responsible authorities), nor the many groups with obligations under the Conventions, operate with adequate sustainable development frameworks, which include social and economic as well as environmental objectives. This inhibits integration conceptually, institutionally and operationally.

Nevertheless, a number of steps could be taken to improve cross-sectoral integration:

- capacity building for environment experts to undertake multi-stakeholder planning processes;
- awareness raising for finance, planning and sectoral departments;
- holding discussions with different departments to identify opportunities for integration in their programmes;
- integrating the Convention objectives into existing planning procedures and tools (eg. guidelines for municipal planning, EIA);
- developing tools and incentives for integrating economic, social and environmental objectives and managing the trade-offs between them where integration is not possible.

It should be noted that these steps are integral to the development of national strategies for sustainable development (Nssds),¹¹ initiatives which are aimed primarily at cross-sectoral integration.

Cross-sectoral integration is unlikely to improve in the short term, or indeed significantly, unless more fundamental structural and operational changes are introduced which incorporate clear responsibility for the Conventions into the different sectoral departments. Nssds offer one process to do this.

Improving integration is also likely to require greater commitment to true decentralisation of power and resources, and to securing the participation of local people. Opportunities for integration become most evident at more local levels, as the very nature of 'livelihoods' at these levels is cross-sectoral. NAPs could be translated into community level resource management strategies and in this way integrated into mainstream development

At international level, there is a need to focus more explicitly on the linkages between the Conventions and mainstream economic and development policy, so that the

Conventions can also become meaningful to economic actors. In addition, further work is needed to develop practical tools and approaches that can be used to improve integration. This will require greater participation from mainstream development departments in the delegations sent out to negotiate international agreements.

Donor agencies have started to examine how to improve integration in their sectoral programmes through the OECD/DAC Working Group on the Environment, which has recently produced draft policy guidance on mainstreaming the global environmental Conventions in development cooperation.

Improving coordination between Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs)

Developing countries are faced with so many different international agreements and cross-sectoral priorities that it is difficult to integrate them all into mainstream development. Greater coordination between the Conventions at international, national and local levels would make the task of integration easier, as well as reducing duplication of effort and improving coherence. The issue of improving coherence between MEAs is being addressed as part of the ongoing Ministerial review of International Environmental Governance, supported by UNEP, which is due to provide its recommendations to the Ministerial level meeting of the WSSD Preparatory Session in May 2002.

There are two issues to contend with: the technical conflicts and synergies between the Conventions, which requires improved coordination both between international secretariats and between national secretariats; and mainstreaming, which requires the various Conventions to be considered together by the authorities, civil society and private sector bodies concerned with development.

Different MEAs have different international requirements which do not take into account the need for national level convergence. At national level, responsibility for MEAs is often left to a handful of staff who are faced with a huge workload and have little time left for coordination activities. Where there are larger units, there tends to be little interaction between those responsible for different MEAs, even if they are in the same department, often because there are no formal structures or mechanisms for this. However, some countries (eg. Burkina Faso) have established technical committees to enhance coordination between the Conventions, while others have begun to examine synergies in preparation for the WSSD.

To facilitate coordination, countries will need to harmonize MEA-related activities (reporting, planning etc), and develop an agreed set of practical criteria for sustainable development, which incorporate key elements from the Conventions and Agenda 21, and can be applied to all plans, programmes and projects.

But the fundamental problem lies in mainstreaming the objectives of the Conventions into different sectors, without which there is unlikely to be the necessary discussion between the different Conventions to introduce coherent

approaches that are mutually supportive. The best opportunities for real integration and synergies are likely to emerge through the development of national level strategies for sustainable development, as well as through initiatives to implement the Conventions at community level, in a decentralized system.

Constraints at international level

International agreements which emanate from the UN system and address global concerns on the environment, social development and human rights, are considered by economic and trade departments as secondary to free trade agreements negotiated through the World Trade Organisation (WTO), and are often undermined by such agreements. Unless the Conventions assume a much more prominent position, their impact will be limited.

For example, the Agreement on Trade Related Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPs) in many ways conflicts with the CBD's objectives on access to genetic resources and benefit-sharing. Designed to grant monopoly rights over 'inventions', it allows the appropriation of genetic resources and traditional knowledge from the South without benefit-sharing with the countries and local communities of origin, whilst at the same time limiting access to technology for Southern countries.

At the WTO, the CBD has struggled to gain observer status, and OECD countries have resisted calls from developing countries for IPR regimes to incorporate the CBD's objectives. Indeed the structure of the WTO is skewed towards the interests of powerful economies, which have the greatest influence over the agenda and negotiations. This imbalance also affects the implementation of the CCD and other MEAs, and poverty reduction in general, since it is difficult for poor countries to gain more favourable trade terms.

In addition, international attention has been diverted to new initiatives associated with the Millennium Development Targets, including Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). It appears that OECD countries have agreed only to finance priorities identified in the PRSPs (we hope only temporarily). Nonetheless, such initiatives could provide an important opportunity for implementing the Rio Conventions. Indeed certain aspects of the Conventions

Lastly, foreign direct investment, which far surpasses development assistance levels, also poses a significant constraint to realising the objectives of the Rio Conventions. Countries need to work together to introduce regulations and incentives which can harness private investment in support of sustainable development. So far, private sector involvement in Rio follow-up processes has been limited both internationally and in the South, although certain companies and sectors have made some progress towards adopting sustainable development objectives.

Making sustainable development a political priority

While important progress has been made since Rio, there remains an enormous amount of work to be done, particularly at country level, if Conventions are going to make a significant difference. This will require much stronger commitment from political leaders and the international community to sustainable development as the overarching framework for development, trade and private investment. We need to demonstrate that sustainable development is not a marginal 'green' concern, but one which is central to the key concerns of poverty, social marginalisation, conflict and instability. At the same time, we need to better understand how to move towards sustainable development in an efficient and equitable way – what processes, mechanisms and tools can be used to integrate economic, social and environmental objectives.

Priorities for the future

This review has identified a number of specific priorities which need to be addressed to make the implementation of the Rio Conventions more equitable and effective.

At international level, there is a need to strengthen the negotiating capacity of Southern countries so that they can promote their interests more effectively. Resources need to be made available to enable larger and better informed delegations, with good negotiating skills. Making the Conventions adopt a more 'Southern' development agenda will also require greater participation from development sectors and civil society organisations representing the

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