

Fulfilling the Rio+20 Promises:

Reviewing Progress since the UN Conference on Sustainable Development

SETTING THE STAGE FOR A NEW GLOBAL ARCHITECTURE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The June 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, also known as Rio+20, brought together leaders from government, civil society, and the private sector for the most participatory and socially inclusive U.N. conference to date. Rio+20 built upon the commitments made 20 years ago when world leaders gathered to stimulate political will toward sustainable development at the first Earth Summit, held in Rio in 1992.

Rio+20 resulted in the outcome document “The Future We Want,” which laid out a number of negotiated commitments intended to spur action toward sustainable development. In addition, the Rio Summit mobilized more than 700 voluntary commitments with an estimated valuation in excess of USD\$500 billion. These commitments have now grown to more than 1,400 with a value greater than USD\$600 billion—or nearly 1 percent of global annual GDP.

Stakeholder Forum and the Natural Resources Defense Council have partnered to conduct an initial review of the progress made on key negotiated and voluntary commitments made at Rio+20.



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GLOBALLY NEGOTIATED AGREEMENTS

While merely a year and a half has passed since Rio+20, significant progress has been made on some of the key negotiated outcomes. The formation of a set of Sustainable Development Goals is now well underway—a process that will play a critical role in shaping the U.N.'s vision for sustainable development when the Millennium Development Goals expire in 2015. A new, high-level political forum for sustainable development has been established at the U.N., and a process to develop an effective and ambitious financing strategy for sustainable development has begun; both initiatives will be crucial to the implementation of the SDG framework. In addition to these landmark steps, good progress has been seen in preparations for the Third Conference on Small Island Developing States, to be held in 2014, and in efforts to develop broader measures of progress on sustainable development that go beyond GDP. However, the headway made on other commitments—such as those relating to oceans and seas and the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development—has been much less marked.

In terms of negotiated commitments, Rio+20 is perhaps best seen as a starting point rather than an ending point for action on sustainable development, with the true impact of many commitments yet to be felt due to the long implementation times required.

VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS

There's been real progress on a number of the key voluntary commitments made at Rio+20. We've seen Microsoft fulfill its pledge to become carbon neutral just one year after Rio+20, and the promise by eight multilateral development banks (MDBs) to commit USD\$175 billion toward more sustainable transportation is well on track. Brazil's groundbreaking USD\$235 billion commitment to Sustainable Energy for All is spurring huge investments in renewable energy, energy efficiency, and energy access, and Australia has nearly tripled its marine reserves, fulfilling its pledge to create the world's largest network of marine protected areas.

Rio+20 highlighted more than ever the significance of voluntary commitments as a means of achieving the goals set forth by globally negotiated agreements; however, it remains for the United Nations to fully recognize their importance and create strong framework to support and encourage commitment-makers.

THE WAY FORWARD

Action through just one of these elements—globally negotiated agreements or voluntary commitments—is not sufficient if we are to address the myriad environmental, social, and economic issues we face today. While significant progress has been made on many of the negotiated and voluntary commitments established at Rio+20, stakeholders have a responsibility to maintain the momentum initiated at the Summit and hold governments and other commitment makers to account on their promises. In support of this, mechanisms that facilitate accountability and transparency are needed for both types of commitment, in order to encourage the support, drive, and ownership of all actors and to ensure that the promises made at Rio+20 are indeed fulfilled.