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Rio+20: What's the point?

By **Meryl Burgess**

Research Analyst, Centre for Chinese Studies

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also known as the Earth Summit in 1992 was meant to create positive impacts for the future. When the first Rio conference on environmental sustainability took place in 1992, issues such as environmental sustainability, and global development without excessive environmental harm, let alone establishing treaties on climate change, desertification and biodiversity were not on my mind. I had just turned 5 years old, with few cares for anything but Barbie dolls and ice-cream. I had no idea what was taking place in the world at that time. Did this big event change something to the positive?

Big issues at mega events

Today, 'mega events' (as they are now referred to) such as world summits have become more numerous year in-year out. And certainly, anyone with an inkling at modern current affairs knows that China has been the world's fastest growing economy for quite a while, so we can move beyond the basic level of discussing these events. A tremendous amount of development, including industrialisation and urbanisation has taken place in China, with concurrent damaging effects on the country's ecosystems. What might be less in focus is that China and parts of Africa are home to some of the world's richest and most biologically diverse areas. China is known as one of the seventeen mega-diverse countries in the world, moreover, the continent of Africa has some of the most famous biodiversity hotspots in the world. The problem remains that this biodiversity is under (human) siege.

Among Africa's primary needs are development and poverty alleviation. This will increase the use of natural resources, for instance via more extensive agriculture, as the sector is feeding the growing population and is creating employment opportunities in China and in Africa. This is the difficult challenge for China and Africa, also seen in other developing parts of the world: the need for development versus the need to conserve already depleting natural resources. In order to develop, developing countries need their economies to grow, likewise to lift their populations out of poverty, they need that growth to create jobs for their people. But what role for protection of natural resources? We've seen problems with such single minded development in the past industrialisation period among the so-called developed nations: the more industrialisation occurs, the more the environment is harmed. Biodiversity that is lost is just gone – and no attempts at recoup or repair after reaching higher levels of development can restore it. China is a good (or rather, bad) example for this practice once again.

The more the environment is harmed and biodiversity lost, the fewer natural resources are left to help us feed each other, or simply breathe clean air and maintain our health. Let us not forget the effects of climate change on our environment and the need to develop – actually a much less urgent issue 20 years ago. So what exactly is the point of world summits like Rio+20 when it appears as if things have gotten worse since that first conference?



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Why should we care about these summits, or why should we not?

Speaking pejoratively, these summits are little more than big pageants that mainly involve heads of state coming together in a room full of media to discuss global issues. As can be expected with pageants, very little gets done beyond the histrionics of procedure and diplomacy. Heads of state will sign a new convention with a flourish – and yet, time and again they fail to find the political wherewithal to implement the plans of action back home. According to the UN, more than 130 heads of state, vice presidents, heads of government and deputy prime ministers were on the speakers list for the Rio+20 summit. By now, many of them (not to mention their constituents) will have grown weary of environmental meetings after disappointing events like the 2009 climate talks in Copenhagen where leaders failed to agree on a new, binding treaty on climate change. Diplomatic shows of force around the conference table make great headlines, and appease voters, but where is the real progress towards the issues at stake? Is it a simple case of too many chefs spoiling the broth?

In a positive light, summits like these set out clear conventions for countries which also serve as guidelines for countries. The Convention for Biological Diversity, for instance, calls on countries to establish national biodiversity plans that include setting out protected areas that covers at least 10 percent of the country's land. This gives me and other academics the opportunity to remind government of their pledges – time and time again. In the build-up to the summit, more than 40 countries met in Dakar (Senegal) at an inter-regional learning workshop to share experiences and define implementation approaches post-Rio. Rio+20 thus creates platforms for countries to share ideas and address similar challenges together. Could we see some learning?

The life of the future generation depends on how the world is looked after today. At the Rio+20 summit, world leaders, along with thousands of participants from governments, the private sector, NGOs and other groups, will come together to shape how we can reduce poverty, advance social equity and ensure environmental protection on an ever more crowded planet to get to the future we want. The real work, however, will have to be done at home. And that's where we have to push our governments – and get over Barbie dolls and "ice-cream for all" slogans. 