
The Big Greenwash Circus

At the end of this month the world's nations, businesses and civil society will gather in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development. They accept the seemingly impossible task to come up with solutions for the environmental challenges we are facing. Deforestation, desertification, depletion of the oceans, pollution of the rivers and the air, loss of biodiversity and global warming are a real threat for all life on earth.

The time, nor the place for the summit is a coincidence. Exactly two decades ago Rio de Janeiro hosted the momentous Earth Summit, known as Rio '92. This UN conference triggered a global sense of urgency: the planet and its inhabitants are in danger and there is little time left for action. The world needed a new model based on 'sustainable development'. Governments, companies and NGO's all agreed that only through cooperation this great challenge could be achieved.

But corporations didn't want new rules for mining, fishing, agriculture or forestry. They argued that voluntary targets are far more efficient than binding environmental and social laws and regulations. In the business vision of sustainability economic growth, free trade and open markets remain the core pillars. Only if environmental protection is linked to profitability the world's vibrant ecosystems could be saved. This narrow-minded approach to 'sustainable development' gained a lot of support throughout the world.

Before Rio '92 corporations and industry were widely seen as the main drivers of environmental loss and injustice in the world. Mining companies were held responsible for the pollution of rivers, indigenous movements protested against deforestation and banks were criticized for their controversial investments all over the world. Logos were linked to forest destruction, air pollution and human rights abuses. The corporate world had a major credibility problem.

The Earth Summit was a turning point in history. Governments promised to create green jobs and subscribed to a green economy, consumers started buying sustainable products and multinationals advertised their Corporate Social Responsibility. Oil companies sponsored clean water projects, investment banks financed education programs and mining companies planted trees.

If Rio '92 was such an eye opener, you'd think we'd live in a green, fair and sustainable world by now. Or at least you'd expect that the world is a better place than it was two decades ago. But the facts and figures are quite sobering. In spite of all the sustainability claims the overall material extraction increased by 40% since the Earth Summit. The production of plastics doubled. Today we live and consume as if we have two planets earth at our disposal. And rich countries and regions are still using five times more resources than their poor counterparts. Oceans are more exploited than they were twenty years ago and we are emitting 40% more CO₂ than we did in '92.

The Earth Summit triggered other UN conferences addressing the issues of climate change, disappearing biodiversity and desertification. But all of these conferences have failed, because they always seem to come up with false solutions for real problems. The greening of the economy, will it actually tackle the core of the problem?

This will be debated in Brussels during “The Big Greenwash Circus” on June 23th. Coinciding with the Rio+20 Summit this conference organised by the Belgian NGO Climaxi, wants to focus on some of the false solutions for the climate crisis. 'Greenwashing' has often been a succesfull strategy for companies and organisations to make the public believe that they are dealing with the problems in a serious way. They can use the logo of a well-known NGO or trusted label, but meanwhile in reality unsustainable practices just continue.

On this conference several topics will be discussed in workshops by international speakers; the green image of banks to disguise their dirty investments, GMOs and RTRS ('responsible' soy), carbon trade and clean development mechanisms, the myth of labels like FSC, MSC, RTRS, etc.

Beside the workshops there will also be two provoking documentaries shown: 'Gasland', a film about shale gas in the US and 'The Silence of the Pandas-what the WWF isn't saying'. This last documentary, made by Wilfried Huismann and the German television WDR, was very controversial when released in Germany because of its criticism against the WWF. The nature conservation organisation went to court with claims of false accusations and inaccuracies and demanded to forbid the film being shown. Climaxi invited the filmmaker to show the film and explain about the research he did about this world-famous organisation. A representative from the WWF will join the debate after the film.

At this conference a Greenwash Award will be granted to the company or organisation that manages to mislead the public the best with a green and sustainable image to cover its dirty practices and negative impact. The five nominees are listed on the Climaxi website to vote and the winner will be announced at the end of the conference in Brussels.

By journalists An-Katrien Lecluyse and Leo Broers