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## From Rio to Rio: The path they have stolen from us

In just a few days, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, or Rio+20, will begin in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Rio+20 is taking place in the same city, 20 years later, as the 1992 United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development, better known as the Earth Summit. Considered the first international mega summit, this 1992 meeting was attended by 8,000 officially registered delegates and 108 heads of state and government. A parallel civil society forum drew more than 5,000 participants.

The Earth Summit was viewed as the landmark event where the link between the environment and development was established. But discussion around how to address the evident contradiction between capitalist/industrial development and its environmental and social costs, as well as the imminent exhaustion of the planet's natural resources, dated back at least 20 years prior to that event. The environmental movement was flourishing and enriching ways of interpreting reality.

In 1972, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment was held in Stockholm, Sweden to discuss the state of the global environment. From that time forward, debate around the ecology vs. economy dilemma continued to develop.

Subsequently, in the 1980s, there was a move away from the idea of adapting development to the environment with the growing emergence of the concept of “sustainable development”, which recognized the urgent need to rethink development by incorporating environmental and social dimensions. In 1987, the United Nations World Commission on Environment and Development, better known as the Brundtland Commission, published the report known as “Our Common Future”, which stated: “Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” It noted, “Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life,” and stressed, “A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises.”

In 1992, as mentioned above, the United Nations convened the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. Both the summit and the processes to which it gave rise became the settings for an ongoing concerted battle between a genuinely ecological and social vision, on one side, and on the other, the attempts of big capital to maintain the system and structures that sustain it – and that have led to the current crisis.

Perhaps the most noteworthy outcome of the 1992 summit was the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities between the countries of the North and the South. This signified acknowledgement of the historical responsibility of the wealthy nations in generating the environmental crisis.

Other outcomes of the 1992 Earth Summit included a Declaration of Principles (the Rio Declaration) that highlighted the relationship between the environment and development; an Action Plan (Agenda 21); three international conventions (the Framework Convention on Climate Change, Convention on

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Biological Diversity, and Convention to Combat Desertification); a statement on Forest Principles; and a mechanism for financing projects known as the Global Environment Facility (GEF).

Ten years after the Earth Summit, the Rio+10 conference was held in Johannesburg, South Africa. This is where corporate power succeeded in advancing its own interests within the United Nations process itself, by taking over the space and the discourse, emptying it of any real content.

More than 100 executive directors and a total of some 700 business delegates from over 200 companies played an active part in the Johannesburg summit, pushing the line of “corporate responsibility” as a means of avoiding the implementation of binding rules. During the last preparatory conference before the summit, Ricardo Carrere wrote in the WRM bulletin editorial: “People around the world are increasingly concerned about the process and asking themselves questions about the relevance of the upcoming Johannesburg Summit to address the problems being faced by humanity. Those questions are the result of what has (not) happened during the past ten years after the 1992 Summit, when governments agreed on implementing a large number of actions to address the Earth's environmental problems. Sadly enough, the fact is that, apart from holding numerous international meetings and signing a number of agreements, very little has been done. ‘Sustainable development’ appears to have simply become a meaningless catchword tossed around by governments and corporations in their intent to fool the public”. (See WRM Bulletin N° 58).

Indeed, Rio+10 adhered to the agendas of the Doha Declaration (of the World Trade Organization, WTO) and the Monterrey Consensus (endorsed by the IMF, World Bank, WTO and prominent business leaders), placing emphasis on concepts like economic growth, foreign direct investment and trade liberalization as requirements for “sustainable development”.

The people's response soon made itself heard: some 20,000 people marched from the humble Johannesburg neighbourhood of Alexandra to the summit venue in upscale Sandton to protest against what they called “global economic apartheid”.

As the popular struggles continued, big capital dressed up in green to exploit every last opportunity. An ever growing proliferation of certification schemes turned destructive activities like large-scale monoculture plantations into purportedly “sustainable” or “responsible” initiatives. In a cunning move of sleight-of-hand, the erstwhile obligation of the countries of the North to reduce their carbon emissions became a business opportunity through the creation of the carbon market. Suddenly, transnational corporations went from being part of the problem to being a key part of the solution.

For example, Schrodgers, a leading global asset management company based in the UK, launched a “climate change fund” in 2007. Company director Robin Stoakley spoke enthusiastically about the potential profits offered by the environmental crisis: “We believe there are excellent returns available by investing in companies that will benefit from efforts to mitigate and adapt to climate change. Dealing with climate change is likely to be the biggest global investment theme of the next 20 years” (quoted in “Economía verde. El asalto final a los bienes comunes”, [http://www.wrm.org.uy/temas/Economia\\_Verde/asalto\\_final\\_a\\_los\\_bienes\\_comunes.pdf](http://www.wrm.org.uy/temas/Economia_Verde/asalto_final_a_los_bienes_comunes.pdf)).

And this is how we have arrived at Rio+20, another United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, in a context in which economic and financial globalization have dragged societies towards growing competition, where commodification and privatization have spread to unimaginable areas. The issue of rights has disappeared from the discussion table, while the market, under its cloak of science and technology, has imposed itself as the only possible solution to every problem.

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Rio+20 is not a cause for celebration or hope among civil society organizations and social movements, who have chosen to look beyond Rio+20 and construct the Peoples Summit, also taking place in Rio de Janeiro on June 15-23, parallel to the official conference. In pursuit of social and environmental justice, against the commodification of life and nature, and in defence of the commons, the participating organizations, networks and movements are fighting back against the destructive corporate architecture that the official conference aims to impose: the so-called “green economy” that we have frequently discussed in this year’s WRM bulletins.

That is why this Peoples Summit will focus on themes like the structural causes of the environmental crisis and the false solutions proposed by governments and the private sector; the solutions proposed by the peoples; and the interconnection of campaigns and common struggles. Experiences and projects that show how it is possible to live in a society based on solidarity and sustainability will counteract the individualism and destruction of the prevailing paradigm. Because, although they have stolen the path from us, there are still hearts that beat with the desire to break new paths towards a world in which hope can flourish again.