



Rio+20 – The privatisation of democracy
by Craig Thomas

Rio de Janeiro is where the United Nations Earth Summit was born and appropriately in 2012 it has returned to its birthplace to die. Participating governments, overwhelmed by economic fear and corporate lobbying, were powerless to act. In their place, privately run, democratically unaccountable corporations and Non-Governmental Organisations (NGOs) dominated the global stage. What happens next is open to question, but here's my take on it.

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development was first convened in Rio in June 1992. More than 170 governments and 2,400 NGOs took part as well as 17,000 *citizens* that attended the accompanying consultative event Forum Global. Its scope was enormous, covering issues as wide as global warming, urban air pollution, water scarcity and deforestation. Despite the enormity of the challenges they faced, participants felt confident that they had both the capacity and the potential to succeed.

The summit was ambitious and delivered the **Framework Convention on Climate Change** (which led to the Kyoto Protocol),

Agenda 21

(an action plan related to sustainable development), the

Rio Declaration

(containing principles to guide sustainable development) and the

Forest Principles

. Most importantly, the 1992 Earth Summit represented a beacon of hope.

For the first time in history the issue of sustainability entered mainstream politics. Environmental issues were no longer solely an obsession of radical greens. They were now the concern of governments on the global stage, and politicians were in control of events, whilst the corporations attended to lobby government representatives. For some of them the conference represented a real threat and they recognised the power that our world leaders still possessed on the global stage.

On paper, 20 years later, **Rio+20** appears to continue the ambitious legacy of the original Earth Summit. Over 50,000 individuals were in attendance including representatives of 172 governments and 3,000 sideshows from NGOs and corporations. Yet something has changed - where hope once flourished there was now only deep seated fear.

The final agreement, aptly titled **The Future We Want** was dead before the conference had finished. Amongst its critics it is noted that the agreement's wording dilutes the significance of sustainability by applying it without compunction throughout:

development, energy, cities, communities, growth

and even

consumption

are targets for sustainability. The word 'encourage' is used 50 times, 'we will' only five; 'support'

is used 99 times, 'must' a mere three.

Where are the international agreements to update those of the 1992 conference? The underlying narrative hasn't changed, the environmental challenges that we face are still presented by politicians and media alike as man vs nature on a global scale. Yet after 10 days, politicians leave the conference virtually empty handed and seemingly neutered by a new world of governance over government. Governance is multiple stakeholders (including governments, corporations and NGOs) sharing roles originally associated with government.

Rio+20 has become a zombie, the lifeless remains of a once giant event of sustainable development negotiation.

What brought about this change? Well for starters (to quote Bill Clinton's former strategist), it's the economy, stupid! Speaking at the conference, a Chinese representative praised the agreement which did not threaten future economic growth in China. China's voice carries increasing weight at negotiations. There can be no doubt that Western influence at a global level has decreased considerably since 1992. As developing countries grow economically, they pressure the West to take greater responsibility for sustainable development, pointing to our historical emissions as justification for their own inaction.

That responsibility is no longer accepted. As the West recovers from its worst recession in almost a century self interest dominates and the green agenda suddenly appears risky and

potentially expensive. The UK's Green Economy (by its self appointed 'greenest government ever') is a prime example of the choice that Conservative governments across the Western world have already made. As the war of words continues, in policy terms budget cuts are still preferable to the investment and subsidies required to develop new markets.

This decision is as much political as it is economic. As NGOs recently pointed out in a prominent campaign, global fossil fuels, representing a mature market that can easily attract private investment, are currently subsidised to the tune of \$1trillion.

As well as economic concerns, the impotence of the agreement also reflects a global shift of power away from government and toward governance. On the global stage large corporations now enjoy dominant negotiating positions with government representatives. Faced with the might of corporate power and a pressing need for economic growth, the international political community has given in the fight altogether. Short term economic concerns have vanquished sustainable development, possibly interminably. For the first time in our history we are faced with problems so big our democratic institutions are overwhelmed by them. Corporate interests no longer lobby governments for change. Instead, they write the agendas and our political leaders serve only to rubber stamp them.

Does it matter that these organisations, effectively representing our interests, are privately run and democratically unaccountable?

As the political elites lose power and fight to defend short term self interest we would do well to consider what we want to replace them. Rather than accepting the watered down vision they so aptly named *the future we want* (but can't achieve) we need to recognise the truth. The Rio+20 was hijacked by corporate interests because our politicians no longer represent us but must bow to global economic pressures. Political power has been privatised and our new leaders reside in board rooms, not parliament. The power of democracy, to choose who controls our country and our wider role in the world is being marginalised by the exponential growth of corporate power. If we don't like that, then we should do something about it.