

By Invitation

Assessing the Earth Summit's legacy

Despite daunting challenges, the 1992 summit produced many landmark principles and agreements on the protection of the environment, the importance of which has grown with time



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For The Straits Times

I will never forget the date – June 14, 1992 – for as long as I live. On that day, the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, popularly known as the Earth Summit, came to a successful conclusion in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.

In March 1990, the UN elected me as chairman of the preparatory committee (prep com) for the Earth Summit. The prep com met five times between March 1990 and April 1992. At the Earth Summit in June 1992, I was elected to chair the main committee. This challenging but important assignment took 27 months to accomplish.

There were many challenges:

- there were 178 participating governments, hundreds of non-governmental organisations and thousands of delegates;
- all decisions had to be taken by consensus;
- nature and the environment had become heavily politicised; and
- there was a deficit of trust between the negotiating groups, especially between the developed and developing countries.

What did the Earth Summit accomplish?

It produced the following:

1. The Rio Declaration of Principles on Environment and Development;
2. The 300-page programme of action, called Agenda 21;
3. A non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles on forests;
4. The UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD); and
5. The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The Earth Summit also gave birth to the following two agreements: the UN Convention to Combat Desertification; and the UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks.

Twenty-seven years have passed since the Earth Summit. Looking back, I see both areas of progress and areas of regress. Let me begin with the positive.

AREAS OF PROGRESS

First, until the Earth Summit, there was no meeting of minds between those who champion the environment and those who champion economic development. In Rio, we managed to bring about a reconciliation between the two camps, with the unifying concept of sustainable development.

Second, the Rio Declaration of Principles is non-legally binding. However, three of the principles – precaution, polluter pays and environmental impact assessment – have become part of international environmental law.

Third, the Statement of Forest Principles was the first global consensus on the contentious issue of how best to manage, conserve and sustainably develop the world's forests. The statement has enabled global cooperation to continue on this important question.

Fourth, on the issue of global warming and climate change, the UNFCCC is the mother agreement with 197 parties to it.

It gave birth to the Kyoto Protocol, which has been succeeded by the Paris Agreement of 2015.

Can we achieve our target of not exceeding 2 deg C warming? The policymakers think so but the climate scientists are doubtful. I think the answer depends on whether or not the Paris Agreement will be faithfully implemented.

Fifth, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification was adopted in 1994 and came into force in 1996. It has 197 parties. This convention is of particular

importance to Africa, which faces the threat of much of their marginal lands turning into desert.

Sixth, the UN Agreement on Straddling Fish Stocks and Highly Migratory Fish Stocks was adopted in 1995 and came into force in 2001. It has 84 parties.

"Straddling fish" is a term for fish like salmon that migrate through, or occur in, more than one exclusive economic zone. "Highly migratory fish" refers to species like tuna and marlin that undertake ocean migrations and also have wide geographic distributions.

The agreement fills a gap in the UN Convention on the Law of the Sea. However, the impact of the agreement depends on the effectiveness of the various regional fisheries commissions. Regrettably, there is no such commission for the South China Sea.

AREAS OF REGRESS

First, the biggest area of regress is in biodiversity.

Notwithstanding the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Decade on Biodiversity and the International Year of Biodiversity, the situation is a disaster.

The UN has recently published a report authored by 145 experts from 50 countries. The report states that up to a million species are threatened with extinction. It goes on to warn that "unless we act now to reduce the loss of biodiversity, we will undermine human well-being for current and future generations".

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Second, the main reason for the mass extinction of species is the loss of habitat and ecosystems.

One of the primary culprits is deforestation. The Statement of Forest Principles, adopted in Rio, has had no impact on the ground.

In South-east Asia, the forests have been destroyed by oil palm plantations and logging companies. In South America, the forests have been cut down by cattle ranchers and soya bean plantations. The bottom line is that the world's remaining forests are in danger.

Third, the oceans and marine resources are under serious threat.

Global warming has affected the oceans in two ways: by raising their temperature and acidity. In many parts of the world, including South-east Asia, coral reefs are being destroyed by the change in the temperature and increasing acidity of the waters.

As for the world's fisheries, in spite of the best efforts of the Food and Agriculture Organisation

(FAO) and the UN agreement on fish stocks, they are in a very poor state. The reasons include over-fishing, the use of destructive fishing technology and weak regional fisheries organisations.

A new threat is posed by marine plastics. The FAO has warned that if the present trend is not stopped, there will soon be more plastic than fish in our oceans. And this will affect fish populations as well as add to our risks of eating fish (microplastics are pollutants).

WHAT CAN SINGAPORE DO?

I want to conclude by asking what can Singapore do to fulfil the legacy of the Earth Summit.

First, on climate change, the Singapore Government is working seriously, by itself and in partnership with industry and civil society, to honour the commitment we have made under the Paris Agreement.

Solar energy is being scaled up, led by the Housing Board and national water agency PUB. The Building and Construction Authority has done an excellent job in promoting green buildings. The zero-energy building of the School of Design and Environment, National University of Singapore, is an important role model.

My sense is that industry and the people sector are not doing enough. We are wasting energy in over-airconditioning our indoor spaces. The joke is that Singapore has two seasons: summer outdoors and winter indoors.

Second, on biodiversity, Singapore has made impressive progress. The return of the otters and hornbill birds is proof of this success.

Singapore has been a thought leader in galvanising the cities of the world to support biodiversity. As a result, the UN has named the City Biodiversity Index after Singapore.

What more can we do? We should follow the examples of China and Hong Kong and ban the trade in ivory. We should request the practitioners of traditional Chinese medicine to organise a campaign to educate consumers of Chinese medicine that there is no medicinal value in consuming rhino horn, the scales of pangolin, the bile of bears and the bones of tigers and lions. We should also make it socially unacceptable to eat shark's fin and giant reef fishes.

Third, on oceans and fisheries, I would like to see Singapore play a leadership role in Asean to ban marine plastics. I would also like to see Singapore taking the lead to convene a conference of the littoral states of the South China Sea, to better understand, manage and protect its marine environment.

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