

Reflections on Rio ? reaffirming and renewing rhetoric but has anything really changed?

Title

As the 50,000 participants travel home after ten days of discussing *The Future We Want*, the outcome document from the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), it's time to reflect on the substance of what was agreed. For the first few days in Rio it looked as though there was only a slim chance of agreement, with just 40% of the document achieving consensus. However as the host country (Brazil) took over the reins, the text was further distilled, miraculously agreed upon, and made ready for heads of state to rubber-stamp on their arrival. But many observers have grave concerns. Much of what was agreed in Rio merely reaffirms commitments that governments had already made, some dating back 20 years to the first Rio Earth Summit in 1992. Governments continue to operate in the shadows of the inconclusive and often acrimonious climate change negotiations in Copenhagen in 2009. Worried that talks could break down completely, they appear content to settle for less, and to agree the lowest common denominator rather than compromise and reach consensus. 'One would have hoped that, given the substantial knowledge on the state of our planet, the unacceptable poverty of billions, the continued steep declines in biodiversity and the changing climate, governments would have approached Rio+20 with a renewed sense of urgency?', said Melanie Heath, Head of Policy at BirdLife International. 'Bold and decisive actions were needed to steer us along the pathway to sustainable development.' This pathway should recognise the value of the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. But the necessary integration of these continues to be held hostage to economic fortune, perhaps more than ever given the financial uncertainty in the West. Finance to support sustainable development at the scale required was simply not on the table in Rio, as signalled through the [weak statement on phasing out fossil fuel subsidies from the G20](#). 'Many great and inspiring words were spoken by over 100 Heads of State. New schemes supporting sustainable initiatives were announced and a lot of good 'thinking' outlined', commented Carolina Hazin, Global Biodiversity Coordinator at BirdLife International. 'But we need more than thinking - we need implementation and action.' Positive points in the outcome text include the affirmation of the importance of the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020, agreed in 2010 by the 192 Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, which encompass the Aichi Biodiversity Targets that integrate economic,

social and environmental concerns. Carolina Hazin, said "This reaffirmation of these targets as a part of *The Future We Want* is very welcome. Governments must now work with urgency to realise these targets, which if reached will make a significant contribution to sustainable development." Other positive points in the outcome text include GDP+, which recognises that we need broader measures of progress to complement GDP (Gross Domestic Product) and asks UN statisticians to begin work on this. Steps were taken towards developing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to replace the Millennium Development Goals which expire in 2015. The contribution of the green economy to sustainable development and poverty eradication was recognised. "But for all these initiatives, the outcomes do not give nature the recognition it deserves", said Melanie Heath. "Further methods of accounting for natural wealth and social well-being must be incorporated within any new measure of GDP. The SDGs must readdress the balance between development and environment, and clearly recognise the underpinning role of nature and biodiversity; and the green economy must operate in harmony with nature, and respect environmental limits." Governments could and should have been braver, and listened to the voices of civil society, who have contributed considerably to the process. More ambitious decisions were needed on oceans and harmful subsidies. Instead of negotiating an implementing agreement to the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS) that would address sustainable use of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction, including effective safeguards for ecologically and biologically significant areas, Rio+20 passed the buck to other processes to take forward. "There was not strong enough redirection of the perverse incentives that act to undermine sustainable development, such as subsidies that stimulate overfishing, destructive agricultural practices and the use of fossil fuels", said Robert Munroe, BirdLife's Climate Change Officer. "Such key decisions have been pushed down the line to potential future processes - we hope they don't get lost and further diluted along the way," added Carolina Hazin. "There is no shying away from the fact that these are the most difficult and complex issues today's society faces. It was heartening to hear of many **great examples of local scale and community-led sustainable development**. This is the future, but in order for local actions to lead to global change, we need a fair and just society that lives within environmental limits. Our leaders must stand ready to make bolder and more ambitious commitments, and do everything in their power to work with civil society, businesses and individuals to implement them."