

A RIO RETROSPECTIVE



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Media reports in Europe and North America were downbeat about the outcomes of Rio+20. But a more sober analysis points to some significant successes, not least for IGBP, reports **Owen Gaffney**.

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development – Rio+20 – attracted 50,000 people and 188 heads of state and ministers. Though no internationally binding agreements emerged, Rio+20 laid out the direction of international policy on global sustainability in the next decade and beyond. Its outcomes will have a direct bearing on the global-change research community as it steers towards the new ten-year initiative Future Earth: Research for global sustainability.

Rio was an ideal location to officially launch Future Earth. The summit provided a unique opportunity to engage a broad range of potential Future Earth stakeholders, from business and government, through to non-governmental organisations and UN departments.

Future Earth was a key part of the scientific community's input to Rio, but not the only one. An important goal for IGBP's engagement with Rio+20 was to provide an update on the scientific developments since the 1992 Earth Summit. For example, concepts such as the Anthropocene and the so-called Great Acceleration,

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which have emerged from IGBP research in the last ten years or so. As it turned out, the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon opened the summit with a short speech and then introduced the film *Welcome to the Anthropocene* – co-produced by IGBP – to the assembled dignitaries. IGBP, the Anthropocene and Planet Under Pressure received prominent mention in his remarks.

IGBP's former Chair Carlos Nobre helped develop the programme of a week-long science and technology forum led by the International Council for Science (ICSU). Mercedes Bustamante (IGBP Scientific-Committee member) chaired a morning session dedicated to Earth-system research, which included talks by Professor Nobre and Chuluun Togtokh, Vice-chair of IGBP's Mongolian National Committee. The science forum made extensive use of the nine policy briefs and the *State of the Planet Declaration* published for Planet Under Pressure. In the same week, Professor Nobre wrote the lead editorial in the journal *Science* (15 June issue;) arguing that the development

of Sustainable Development Goals, backed by sound science, offers the prospect of creating a more sustainable global society.

Much of the work to inform Rio+20 was done in advance, not least through the Planet Under Pressure conference. In April, IGBP Executive Director Sybil Seitzinger highlighted outcomes from Planet Under Pressure at a UN side event in New York during the final Rio+20 negotiations. This was one of three preliminary events organised by the UN to develop the Rio+20 agenda. IGBP participated in all these meetings.

The IGBP secretariat has been promoting the *State of the Planet Declaration* to the UN and national negotiators through UNESCO, ICSU and others. Indeed, over 1000 copies were distributed at Rio+20 by the IGBP regional office in Brazil. Several key recommendations arising from the global-change programmes and ICSU either made it into the final text of the outcomes document or have been taken forward independently by the UN Secretary-General.

For example, the outcomes document – entitled *The Future We Want* – includes the proposal from the global-change community to “strengthen the science-policy interface through review of documentation bringing together



dispersed information and assessments, including...a global sustainable development report" that builds on existing assessments.

This proposal could improve the fragmented science-policy landscape by tying together and building on the large existing assessments such as the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and the new Intergovernmental Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES). Such a new report could create strong policy links to Future Earth.

The global-change research community, through Planet Under Pressure, also proposed improving the international links between science and policy by creating a high-level, independent scientific advisory panel, possibly headed by a Chief Scientific Advisor reporting directly to the UN Secretary-General. Before Rio+20, Ban Ki-moon set up a small sub-committee led by UNESCO and including ICSU to develop this proposal. This committee has now met and proposed the establishment of such an advisory panel. In addition, the outcomes document includes a recommendation for scrapping the Commission for Sustainable Development and replacing it with a high-level Forum for

Sustainable Development. This new forum would report to the General Assembly, and thus would operate at a much higher level than the Commission. It is envisaged any new assessment report would fall under the forum, which could provide a strong international policy platform for Future Earth.

As with all major events of this nature, the Rio+20 process was chaotic and at times unfathomable. The original "first-order draft" was weak on global-change science and the urgency to act, but it included much mention of science and technology and several firm proposals, such as the need for a new international research programme focusing on global sustainability. As the weeks dragged on and negotiators haggled over grammar it was clear this long and unwieldy document would never gain broad acceptance. Late in proceedings the draft was scrapped and a new document thrust on negotiators by Brazil and the UN. This was shorter and snappier and easier to agree. But significantly, much of the reference to science and technology had been wiped out, including the need for an international research programme on global sustainability.

This is a major issue. Had Future Earth been included in

the final document there would be a strong political mandate for the initiative and, crucially, direct links to international policy on sustainable development for the next decade. Without this mandate, Future Earth is going to have to work a lot harder to ensure it is relevant and achieves its ten-year objectives for society.

As many media have noted, the big-ticket, lasting legacy of Rio+20 is a commitment to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Although international agreements on climate and biodiversity have failed to gather traction during the past two decades, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have caught the imagination of both the public and policymakers. By 2015, most countries will have made meaningful progress towards most of the goals, according to the economist Jeffery Sachs who spearheaded the MDG process from 2002 to 2006. Several goals will be met, including halving the number of people living in extreme poverty (though China's rapid economic growth takes the most credit for this achievement). But critics of the MDGs argue the goals were rushed through and not underpinned by the best available science.

In the next 18 months the new set of goals will be developed - in consultation with the scientific community. Indeed, the first science-policy workshop on the SDGs was at Planet Under Pressure, and the conference co-chair, UNESCO's Lidia Brito, is part of the team developing the science-policy interface for the goals. Close alignment with this process may help enumerate the policy implications of IGBP's forthcoming synthesis and provide an essential international science-policy interface for Future Earth. ■

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