

Analysing the effects of the earth summits politics essay



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As early as the 1960's governments began to realise that human activity was damaging the environment. Governments around the world recognised that something had to be done, which resulted in the first international gathering about the human interaction with the environment, known as the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, which was held in Stockholm in June 1972. This was the first of several global environmental meetings and it laid the foundation for international action to protect the environment. Three major treaties were drawn up in subsequent international environmental conferences; these were the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, the Kyoto Protocol and the Copenhagen Accord.

In 1992, five years after the Brundtland Report was published, the Rio Earth summit was held. It was held from the 3rd - 14th June in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The aim of the Rio Earth summit was to review the Declaration of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, implemented at Stockholm on 16th June 1972 and look for more ways to work together to create a more sustainable future. The Earth summit was the largest environmental conference ever held with over 100 heads of state attending.

Five agreements were drawn up during the Earth summit; The Convention on Biological Diversity, The Framework Convention on Climate Change, Principles of Forest Management, Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development.

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, often shortened to the Rio Declaration, builds on the basic proposals set out in 1972 at the UN

Conference on the Human Environment. It consisted of 27 principles designed to guide governments on ways to 'halt the destruction of irreplaceable natural resources and pollution of the planet' (United Nations Department of Public Information, 1997) and 'to guide sustainable development around the world' (Towards-Sustainability, 2000). One key point of the Rio Declaration was that current development must not damage the environmental and developmental requirements of the present and future generations. Therefore, environmental protection should no longer be thought of as independent from the development of a nation. Also, nations should make a concerted effort to 'reduce and eliminate unsustainable patterns of production and consumption' (C-FAM, 1992). As a result a great deal of research is ongoing to create alternative sources of energy to replace fossil fuels.

Another key principle was that nations could explore their own resources provided that they did not cause environmental damage outside their borders and that international laws needed to be set up to compensate for damage caused by nations to areas beyond their borders. This led to the proposal that 'The polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution' (C-FAM, 1992).

A further key principle of the Rio Declaration was that 'eradicating poverty and reducing disparities in living standards in different parts of the world are essential to achieve sustainable development' (International Institute for Sustainable Development, 1997). Reducing the difference in living standards around the world is important for future sustainable development because if each nation has the same standard of living they will be more inclined to

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share the latest scientific findings and new technologies to protect the environment.

The main message of the Rio Declaration was that nation's attitudes and activities would have to be adjusted, to ensure that long term economic progress would be linked with the protection of the environment. Also, international agreements that were designed to protect the environment, while allowing the development of a nation, would have to be created. The Rio Declaration 'committed countries, including the UK, to be more sustainable whilst creating guidelines for a more sustainable future' (Atmosphere, Climate & Environment Information Programme, 2000). This has been beneficial because governments and businesses have become more eco-efficient and are creating eco-friendly products. During the Rio earth summit five agreements had been established, making it the most extensive and obliging plan of action ever accepted by the international community.

The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) negotiated the Kyoto Protocol treaty in the Japanese city of Kyoto in December 1997. It was originally ratified by 140 countries and it came into effect on the 16th February 2005. By 18th April 2006 168 countries had signed the Kyoto Protocol and by 3rd December 2007 this number had risen to 175. It is a legally binding international agreement imposing limits on emissions of greenhouse gases that are blamed for rising world temperatures. The gases that were considered to be greenhouse gases were carbon dioxide, methane, nitrous oxide, sulphur hexafluoride, HFCs and PFCs.

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Industrialised countries agreed to 'reduce their collective emissions of greenhouse gases by 5.2%' (UNFCCC, 1997) compared to their emissions in the 1990. Through the Kyoto protocol 37 industrialised countries were set binding targets, the UK committed itself to reducing its emissions to 12.5% below its 1990 levels by 2012. The European Union agreed to reduce its emissions by 8%. The US, the world's largest emitter of greenhouse gases (approximately 25%), had approved a 7% reduction in emissions, however in 2001 this was denounced by President George Bush stating that 'it would harm the economy and is flawed by the lack of restrictions on emissions by emerging economies China and India' (The Guardian, 2005).

Not all industrialised countries were set goals of reduced emissions, Australia's greenhouse gas emissions were permitted an increase of 8% compared to their 1990 levels and Iceland's emissions were allowed an increase of 10%.

The commencement of the Kyoto protocol was delayed by the requirement that at least 55 countries, accounting for at least 55% of the world's 1990 carbon dioxide emissions must ratify it. This was reached when Russia signed up on 18th November 2004, nearly seven years after the treaty was negotiated.

The Kyoto Protocol established three mechanisms for nations to reduce their emissions; Joint Implementation, Clean Development Mechanism and International Emissions Trading. Joint Implementation allowed a nation that had committed itself to an emission reduction target under the Kyoto Protocol to earn emission reduction units (ERUs) when they invested in

projects that reduce emissions in another country with an emission reduction target under the Kyoto Protocol. Each ERU was equivalent to one tonne of carbon dioxide, which could be used to help the investing country towards reaching their emission reduction target. This offered countries a flexible method of reducing their emissions while also helping another country to develop emission reducing technology.

The Clean Development Mechanism allowed a country with an emission reduction target to earn certified emission reduction (CER) credits when they invested in projects to reduce emissions in developing countries that do not have an emission target. Each CER was equal to one tonne of carbon dioxide. Both ERUs and CERs could be sold and traded like any other commodity, encouraging governments to invest in emission reducing projects and technologies.

Countries emission reduction targets are stated as assigned amounts, these were divided into assigned amount units (AAUs) to cover the 2008 - 2012 commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol. International Emissions Trading allowed countries with spare AAUs to sell them on an international carbon trading market.

In the opinions of many climate scientists the 5% reduction in emissions from industrialised countries set out by the Kyoto Protocol does not do nearly enough, they claim that ' a cut of around 60% is needed to avoid the worst consequences of global warming' (The Guardian, 2005). Also currently a number of countries have not met their emissions targets, so even the 5% reduction in emissions planned by the Kyoto Protocol may not be reached.

Furthermore without the support of the US, who accounts for approximately 25% of the global greenhouse gases emissions, climate scientists have described the agreement as ‘“ toothless” and virtually obsolete’ (The Guardian, 2005).

However it can be argued that the legally binding Kyoto Protocol has set out a ‘ framework on which future negotiations could be based’ (The Telegraph, 2005) and has encouraged sustainable development by creating several market mechanisms allowing emissions trading. It has also promoted sustainable development by supporting renewable energy advances and other environmentally friendly technologies. The symbolic value of the Kyoto Protocol may have been its greatest asset because to see governments attempting to work together to provide sustainable development is better than to see no attempt at all.

The UNFCCC held the Copenhagen Climate Conference at the Bella Center in Copenhagen, Denmark from 8th - 17th December 2009. It is often known as COP15 as it is the 15th Conference of Parties, to which nearly 200 countries attended in an attempt to ‘ find a global consensus on how to most effectively structure a post-Kyoto regulatory framework to cap greenhouse gas emission’ (Climatelab, 2009). The aim of the conference was to negotiate an agreement to come into effect when the commitment period of the Kyoto agreement expired in 2012.

The conference resulted in the creation of the Copenhagen Accord, which called on participating countries to ‘ pledge specific actions they will undertake to mitigate greenhouse gas emissions’ (Pew Center on Global

Climate Change, 2009); however the accord is a non-binding agreement so nations have no legal obligation to carry out these pledges. The Accord recognised that the global temperature rise should be limited to 2°C; however this was not adopted as a target. The original draft had included targets for 2020 for industrialised countries and 2050 for global and industrialised countries, though these were omitted from the final draft of the accord. The accord included a commitment from industrialised countries to provide 'climate financing for developing countries of \$30bn for 2010-2012' (The EFA Group, 2009).

As of 16th September 2010, 111 parties had either submitted 2020 emissions targets, submitted mitigation actions or associated themselves with the accord. The EU agreed to reduce their emissions by 20 - 30% compared to their 1990 levels, 'provided that other developed countries commit themselves to comparable emission reductions' (UNFCCC, 2009). The US agreed to reduce their emissions by approximately 17% below 2005 levels. A breakdown in negotiations prevented a text that would have created a market mechanism to credit reduced emissions from deforestation and degradation from being adopted in the Accord.

A problem with the Copenhagen Accord is that it allows industrialised nations to set their own emission reduction targets. The Pew Center on Global Climate Change analysed the Copenhagen Accord and found that 'the pledges are inadequate to achieve a 2-degree goal... Pledges by developed countries would reduce their emissions 10 percent to 13 percent below BAU (business as usual) in 2020' (Pew Center on Global Climate Change, 2009).

An analysis by PricewaterhouseCoopers concluded that these promises made <https://assignbuster.com/analysing-the-effects-of-the-earth-summits-politics-essay/>

by developed countries would only provide half of the emission reduction requirements to avoid a global temperature rise above 2°C.

The Copenhagen Accord is very different from the Kyoto Protocol as it is not a legally binding agreement and if the accord is used as a foundation to new climate change treaties, the number of countries complying with the Kyoto Protocol is like to be reduced as there is little incentive to trade carbon credits. The Accord threatens the establishment of a global carbon market due to its lack of progression towards a legally binding climate agreement.

Environmental protection is always going to be challenging due to the different attitudes of nations. Many of the developed nations want environmental sustainability while developing countries want to be allowed to develop economically and socially. It is also going to be difficult due to the increasing global population and the resulting increase in consumption rates.

However, in my opinion the Kyoto Protocol has been the most effective treaty designed to provide a sustainable future. This is because was a legally binding agreement that committed industrialised countries to reduce their collective emissions of greenhouse gases by a set amount (5. 2%). Also, the Kyoto Protocol created market mechanisms allowing emissions trading, encouraging nations to strive to reach their emission reduction target. One of the main drawbacks of the Kyoto Protocol is that it is not backed by the US who is a major emitter of greenhouse gases.

The Rio Declaration was admirable because it caused governments and businesses to change the attitudes they had toward environmental

protection and led to them becoming more eco-efficient and creating eco-
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friendly products. Nevertheless, there were still many negative incentives offered by countries and businesses that promoted people to continue being wasteful consumers. In my opinion the least effective environmental treaty has been the Copenhagen Accord because its non-binding goals are inadequate to stop a global temperature rise of 2°C. Also, the need to create a global carbon market has not been met.