

50 years of the United Nations Environmental Conferences: what is the legacy on human health conditions?

Cinquenta anos das Conferências Ambientais da Organização das Nações Unidas: qual é o legado para as condições de saúde humana?

50 años de las Conferencias Ambientales de las Naciones Unidas: ¿cuál es el legado en las condiciones de salud humana?

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In 1972, 50 years ago, the United Nations (UN) Conference on the Human Environment occurred in Stockholm, Sweden. This conference inaugurated the set of world conferences on the environmental issue, which would later take place in the city of Rio de Janeiro, Brazil (1992), in Johannesburg, South Africa (Rio+10, 2002), and once again in Rio de Janeiro (Rio+20, 2012). Therefore, this year we celebrate the anniversary of environmental conferences and it is possible to take notes of their challenges and legacies ¹.

Also, Rachel Carson's publication of *Silent Spring* ² – considered a pioneering critic of the use of agricultural pesticides – celebrated 60 years in 2012. Similarly, *The Limits of Growth* ³ completed 50 years of age in 2012, and this is the work of a research team at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT; United States) on the problems of the global development model. Both books were central to the ecological problem and remain essential in the midst of the environmentally overwhelming development, which is careless to the destruction of natural environment. The year of 2022 is, for several reasons, a symbolic year for the modern environmental issue.

Undoubtedly, the environmental issue ceased to be a secondary subject and is now becoming a central and organic theme in international geopolitical and geoeconomic scenario. Sweden presented a more modest conference, whereas in Brazil, both in 1992 and 2012, major conferences were made that brought together the world's main heads of state and government. The gigantic participation of civil society was evidenced by the activities of non-governmental organization (NGOs) and the general population in the downtown of Rio de Janeiro, both in Rio 92 and Rio+20, although part of the diplomats gathered about 40 km away.

The birth of the contemporary environmental issue is relatable to the outbreak of the Hiroshima and Nagasaki nuclear bombs in Japan at the end of World War II, when the effects of detonation claimed more than 100,000 lives. In a recent study ⁴, the International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC) showed that most of Hiroshima's atomic bomb survivors still suffer from its effects and at least 63% of those who witnessed its detonation died of cancer by 2014. It became impossible to separate politics and ecology, present and future generations, and human health and well-being.

Other significant facts also fostered the post-World War II environmental debate: the leaks of radioactive substances in nuclear power plants, such as in Kyshtym (Russia, 1957), Windscale (United Kingdom, 1957), and Three Mile Island (United States, 1979); mercury poisoning from industrial waste, affecting hundreds of people in Minamata (Japan, 1956); the illness of Americans due to

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exposure to lead found in paints, among other products, only regulated in the United States in 1972; and the occurrence of heat waves, such as that recorded in August 1965 in the Iberian Peninsula – in Seville (Spain), the temperature exceeded 45°C –, promoting debates on the implications of anthropic actions in the world climate.

Pollution in its various forms, unmeasured economic growth, forest devastation, climate change, and biodiversity loss are all socio-environmental issues that are directly related to politics, economy, and human health and well-being. Workers suffer from industrial air pollution, developing respiratory problems, whereas the traditional, indigenous, and quilombola populations suffer mostly from the forest devastation and biodiversity loss. Unmeasured, segregating, and belligerent economic growth affects especially the poorest who struggle for survival amid the technological advances and enrichment of the few.

Thus, the first conference had many victories: from the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) to the *Stockholm Declaration*, with 26 political and environmental principles, but, beyond all achievements, the conference was still unable to combine economics and ecology. Unlike Stockholm – without an aggregating idea and clear post-event lines of action – Rio 92 created *Agenda 21* ⁵, a central document that defined a roadmap for all countries in the world for a century based on sustainable development combined with economic growth and environmental protection.

In the midst of the Cold War and the pressures of the Third World, countries participating in the 1972 Conference presented a great resistance to suggestions of slowing growth, especially those that wanted economic development. The UN document, *Our Common Future* (1987), although presenting a priority for the satisfaction of the needs of current and future generations ⁶, solved this equation by proposing a type of environmental neoliberalism ⁷, replicated in *Agenda 21*, based on the advancement of clean technologies, free trade, and protagonism of large corporations. The proposition not only inhibited the incisive performance of the Nation States, but also made environmental protection a business, focusing on corporate sustainability.

Furthermore, there are several obstacles to an international environmental policy, from the fragility and malleability of global agreements and goals to social, economic, political, and cultural differences between the countries. The environmental agenda is, by its nature, antagonistic to the sovereignty of nations, because the atmosphere, oceans, forests, and water courses do not necessarily obey the lines of political maps ^{8,9}.

Thus, *Agenda 21* is the central document on which we can conduct a brief critical analysis, as it establishes global policies, action plans, strategies, and implementation mechanisms. *Agenda 21's* 40 chapters assure the need for market opening and adds the sustainable thinking in agriculture, demographic dynamics, human settlements, industrial production, science, education, childhood, youth, women's action, waste treatment and tailings, among many others. Chapter six is entitled *Protecting and Promoting Human Health* and reinforces, since the introduction, that “*action items under Agenda 21 must address the primary health needs of the world's population, since they are integral to the achievement of the goals of sustainable development and primary environmental care*”.

The chapter presents a program that prioritizes the satisfaction of primary health needs of population (especially in rural areas), the control of infectious diseases, the protection of vulnerable groups, the urban health challenge, and reduction of health risks from environmental pollution and hazards. Among the many promises, we can highlight “*within the overall strategy to achieve health for all by the year 2000, the objectives are to meet the basic health needs of rural peri-urban and urban populations*” and “*provide the necessary specialized environmental health services*”.

Obviously, an ambitious program tends not to be fully completed, and the COVID-19 pandemic revealed the weakness and insufficiency of health service conditions worldwide, especially in peripheral nations. Recalling the geographer Mike Davis's important question ¹⁰: how would the almost helpless Third World cities react to a pandemic? Very badly, is our answer. With dense populations, largely with precarious living conditions, with insufficient health facilities and equipment in their territory, and difficulties in promoting social distancing, cities on the peripheries of the world have suffered deeply from the impacts of COVID-19. After all, half of the world's population does not have access to essential health services, according to the World Health Organization (WHO) and The World Bank ¹¹.

Rio+20 happened in 2012, soon after a severe economic crisis – initiated in the United States due to the failure of subprime mortgages – and intended to take stock of the 20 years of Rio 92. In an atmosphere of crisis, it would be strange if, after a few decades, the expectation that a meeting of the world's presidents and diplomatic bodies, that are much more focused on finance, would be able to change the future of the planet. The disbelief of positive transformation became evident and it was caused by the inoperability, ineptitude, and disinterest of the “rulers of the world” about agreements for the socio-environmental improvement of the planet. At the same time, temporal elasticity, method malleability, little ambition of results, and discrepancy between the realities of the world's countries – in Germany, a possibility of fully electric public transport fleet by 2030 is estimated; whereas in India, an estimation of 750 million people do not have access to toilets or sewage networks – also weighed negatively on fostering hope for a better world.

Rio+20 was also responsible for a false step further: the use of the term Green Economy, a formulation incapable of presenting a serious, genuine, and sincere alternative to the ills of the segregating and overwhelming development. Green Economy meant the beginning of the sustainable economic development, proposing a superficial adjustment of the current model. The greenwashing of companies, States and other organizations is the certainty that environmental care is frivolous for them, not aiming to promote a real change in the ecological conditions of the world.

The term “health” appears several times (48 times) in the central document of Rio+20. *The Future We Want*¹² states: “We are deeply concerned that one in five people on this planet, or over 1 billion people, still live in extreme poverty, and that one in seven – or 14% – is undernourished, while public health challenges, including pandemics and epidemics, remain omnipresent threats”. The document presents 48 citations of recognition of little that has been done from the growing challenges and the call for “holistic and integrated approaches”, “access to credit and other financing services, markets”, and “provision of equitable universal coverage”. Important commitments regarding means of implementation, deadlines, and forms of funding are still open.

After three years of Rio+20, the World Sustainable Development Summit (WSDS) took place at UN headquarters in New York (United States), where the new agenda entitled *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*¹³, which included the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was officially approved¹⁴. Agenda 2030 is an action plan that alters the temporality from a century to just 15 years, but which again seems thought, written, published, and endorsed by the most economically powerful nations only. Environmental agendas, with increasingly flexible and soft deadlines, propositions and regulations, have gradually proved weak and aroused the indifference of many countries in the world.

Goal 3, *Ensure Healthy Lives and Promote Well-being for All at All Ages* presents a set of untouchable propositions: “by 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births”; “by 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases”; “by 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being”; “by 2020, halve the number of global deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents”; “by 2030, ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health services”; and “achieve universal health coverage” are examples of actions that would surely transform the lives of the inhabitants of the planet. However, there is not a single person who believes that by 2030 any of the actions highlighted above will actually be implemented.

The report *Shaping the Covid Decade: Addressing the Long-term Societal Impacts of COVID-19*¹⁵ reinforces that pandemics are social and economic; that the time and spatial dimensions of our response play a significant role in combating the effects of the disease; that relationships, lives, livelihoods, and their interconnections are essential in overcoming the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic revealed not only how the spread of infectious agents such as coronavirus is the result of an environmentally violent and inconsequential model of life, but also the fragility of the economic, social, political, environmental, and public health structures on which our civilization is founded. There is a lot of work to be done, no time for further celebrations.

Additional information

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