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Abstract

Agenda 21 adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 is a global action plan for sustainable development. Its sections on pollution consider sources of pollution, environments subject to pollution, and pollution impacts. It does not directly address climate change, since it is complementary to the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, but it places climate change responses in the larger framework of sustainable development actions. Despite the global consensus of governments on its contents, Agenda 21 has not led to a significant reduction in negative global change because of government failures in implementation. This implementation challenge has continued to be addressed at follow-up United Nations conferences, most recently Rio + 20.

Keywords

Agenda 21 • Sustainable development • Global change • Pollution • Climate change • United Nations

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Definition

Agenda 21 provides a coherent international policy framework for actions on global change, including climate change, to achieve sustainable development. It addresses how to meet the needs of human society within the limits of the biosphere, the thin layer of rock, water, and air on the surface of the planet within which life exists.

What Is Agenda 21?

Agenda 21 (an agenda for the twenty-first century) is a program of action for sustainable development negotiated by all the governments of the world at the United Nations and adopted by more than 178 governments at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED), also called the Earth Summit, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 3–14 June 1992 (UN 1992). It contains 40 chapters and 120 program areas, each with a basis for action, objectives, activities, and means of implementation, grouped into sections on Social and Economic Dimensions, Conservation and Management of Resources for Development, Strengthening the Role of Major Groups, and Means of Implementation. It resulted from two and a half years of negotiations among governments with support from working parties involving experts from international organizations, governments, the scientific community, and civil society. It can be considered as the global consensus of governments on an extended definition of sustainable development. It has been built upon but not replaced by subsequent international action.

The term Agenda 21 has also been applied to national and local processes of planning for sustainable development, inspired by the spirit if not the form of the international process and resulting document and called for as one of its implementing actions.

Agenda 21 and Pollution

Environmental pollution in its many forms is a major theme of Agenda 21. One section calls for reducing health risks and hazards from environmental pollution. The sectoral chapters treat atmospheric pollution, land pollution, ocean and coastal pollution, and freshwater pollution. Others discuss pollution prevention through the environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes, solid wastes, sewage, and radioactive wastes. Together, these form a comprehensive international action plan for pollution looking at sources of pollution, environments subject to pollution, and pollution impacts.

For example, the Oceans and Coastal Areas chapter summarizes the state of marine pollution and calls for detailed activities to prevent, reduce, and control the degradation of the marine environment from both land-based and sea-based activities, such as point and nonpoint land-based pollution sources, shipping, dumping, offshore oil and gas platforms, and ports. It calls for regional agreements, systematic observations and

data sharing, research on pollution control technologies, and training, supported by about \$200 million per year in international financing.

Climate Change in Agenda 21

There is no separate chapter on climate change in Agenda 21. The term is only mentioned 33 times, mostly in the chapters on Oceans and Coastal Areas and on freshwater resources. This is logical since Agenda 21 was negotiated and adopted at the same time as the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), signed in Rio de Janeiro at the same Earth Summit in 1992 (as was the Convention on Biological Diversity). Agenda 21 was therefore intended to complement and not duplicate the climate change convention. In several places, it refers to the UNFCCC and mentions this complementarity, specifying that it does not in any way replace the convention. A convention is a “hard law” that is binding on its parties, whereas an agreement like Agenda 21 is a “soft law” that is not enforceable except through peer pressure.

What Agenda 21 provides is the broader context of global action for sustainable development, within which the response to climate change is only one dimension. In fact, since global change is a complex multidimensional process with many different interacting driving forces and responses, it would make little sense to address climate change in isolation. Climate change is only one symptom of more fundamental imbalances in human economic and social systems impacting on the environment. Sustainability provides the conceptual framework for policy action in the holistic perspective of an evolving world civilization, and Agenda 21 is one of the best expressions of that framework.

Various dimensions of Agenda 21 do contribute to the broader purpose of reducing greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the consequences of global change. Its actions for scientific assessment include those relevant to climate change. Its chapter on the Atmosphere includes sections on energy development, efficiency and consumption, transportation, industrial development, and terrestrial and marine resource development and land use. The Oceans chapter has a program area addressing critical uncertainties for the management of the marine environment and climate change and another on contingency planning in coastal areas for the likely effects of climate change and sea level rise. It calls for studies of the role of the oceans as a carbon sink and calls attention to the risks of increasing storm damage in coastal areas and small islands due to climate change. The Freshwater chapter also has a program area on impacts of climate change on water resources, droughts, and floods.

Agenda 21 and Global Change

Since sustainability is a dynamic concept aimed at ensuring the long-term future well-being of humanity, Agenda 21 can be considered a blueprint for managing global change. It identifies and proposes actions to remove damaging and unsustainable dimensions of human impacts on the environment and society,

often driven by economic activities. It identifies the stakeholders who should be involved, called the Major Groups, each of which has a separate chapter. It also specifies the institutional, scientific, technical, and financial means of implementation and the necessary processes of using information for decision-making.

In spite of the effort to prepare Agenda 21 and its acknowledged quality, it has not prevented negative global change from continuing and even accelerating. As with many other multilateral agreements among governments, the major failure is in implementation. Governments often do not respect their international agreements and obligations and fail to provide the means for their implementation. The UNCED Secretariat calculated that about US\$120 billion per year would be required internationally to implement Agenda 21 fully, but set a reasonable target of \$20 billion to be pledged at the Earth Summit. However, pledges in Rio amounted to only a third of that, and even less was actually provided. Good intentions are not sufficient to achieve major change. International meetings on sustainable development are largely attended by environmental representatives and ignored by economic and financial centers of power in governments. Global management of the planetary biosphere and world economy is not easy in a multilateral system still founded on principles of national sovereignty and values that give primacy to self-interest.

In 1997, the UN General Assembly adopted a Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 (UN 1997). Ten years after Rio, the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, 26 August–4 September 2002, discussed further means of implementation, including partnerships with the private sector and civil society to make up for government failures to act (UN 2002). The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, 20–22 June 2012, referred to as Rio + 20, focused again on implementation, with an emphasis on institutional arrangements for sustainable development, and the green economy, to try to integrate environmental and economic actions which have largely gone their separate ways in the two decades since Agenda 21 was adopted.

While Agenda 21 had a strong scientific basis, and the scientific evidence for environmental damage to the planetary systems on which human civilization depends has grown stronger, the gap between scientific urgency and political expediency has only widened. The decision at the Conference of the Parties to the Framework Convention on Climate Change in Durban in 2011 to postpone any further international action on climate change mitigation until 2020 illustrates this (UNFCCC 2012).

Conclusions

Agenda 21 is a comprehensive global action plan for sustainable development, including pollution control and global change, endorsed by governments at the highest level and adopted by the United Nations in 1992. However, it has proven difficult to implement since governments still give priority to national interests over the collective needs of humanity and of the natural systems that maintain the biosphere.

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