FACTS ABOUT...

Progress Since the Earth Summit

The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro, a landmark conference, put sustainable development on the map. The largest international gathering ever held at the time, the Summit brought 108 heads of State and Government to Rio, where they endorsed Agenda 21, the action plan for a sustainable future.

There is agreement that the Earth Summit—officially the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development—was a major success in raising public awareness about the need to fully integrate environmental and social considerations into economic development policy.

Since Rio, there have been extensive efforts to implement sustainable development by governments, international organizations, local authorities, business, citizen groups and individuals. Agenda 21 remains a powerful long-term vision for balancing economic and social needs with the capacity of the earth's resources and ecosystems. Ten years after Rio, the goals of Agenda 21 have not been fully realized—and there is universal agreement that efforts must be redoubled so that everyone can reap the benefits that sustainable development can offer.

Following are some of the major achievements since the Earth Summit.

Participation by Key Stakeholders

- Over 6,000 cities and towns worldwide have created their own "local Agenda 21" to guide their long-term planning.
- National Agenda 21s have been prepared by a range of countries, establishing how Agenda 21 will be translated into action at the country level. These strategies have frequently been developed by National Councils for Sustainable Development—multi-stakeholder participatory bodies set up in more than 80 countries, mostly developing countries.
- Ever-increasing numbers of businesses have embraced sustainable development and have adopted the "triple bottom line" approach that takes into account economic, social and environmental factors. Several major business organizations espousing sustainability—such as the World Business Council on Sustainable Development—have grown extensively.
- The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which was set up to monitor implementation of the Rio agreements, has met annually since 1993, and has pioneered innovative arrangements for the participation of civil society in UN talks, especially through multi-stakeholder dialogues.

Poverty Reduction and Social Development

- Conferences that have followed the Earth Summit — such as the 1994 Conference on Population and Development in Cairo, the 1995 Social Summit in Copenhagen, the 1995 Women's Conference in Beijing, and the 1996 Habitat II Conference in Istanbul — have reinforced the commitment to sustainable development and adopted action plans to build on Agenda 21 in specific areas.
- In September 2000 at the United Nations Millennium Summit, 147 world leaders agreed to a set of time-bound development goals central to the objectives in Agenda 21 (*see fact sheet on Millennium Development Goals*).

Financing and Trade

- The Global Environment Facility (GEF) — with the World Bank, the UN Development Programme and UNEP as implementing agencies — was launched experimentally in 1991 and, after the Earth Summit, was restructured to become the main source of multilateral lending to developing countries and countries in transition for global environmental projects. In its first decade, the GEF provided $4.2 billion to projects, and has attracted more than $11 billion in co-financing. At the last replenishment, in 1998, 36 countries pledged $2.75 billion to the GEF. The third replenishment is currently under discussion.
- The World Trade Organization, at its fourth Ministerial meeting in Doha in November 2001, adopted a declaration stating: "We are convinced that the aims of upholding and safeguarding an open and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system, and acting for the protection of the environment and the promotion of sustainable development can and must be mutually supportive."
- At the International Conference on Financing for Development, held in Monterrey, Mexico in March 2002, governments reaffirmed the commitment to sustainable development, and donor countries promised a total of $30 billion in additional resources through 2006.

Climate Change

- The UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, opened for signing

at the 1992 Earth Summit, entered into force on 21 March 1994. The Convention has 165 signatories and 186 parties, but most industrialized countries did not meet the voluntary goal of reducing their emissions of greenhouse gases to 1990 levels by 2000.

• In December 1997 in Kyoto, Governments agreed on a Protocol to this Convention by which industrialized countries would accept legally binding targets to reduce their emissions of six greenhouse gases by an average of 5 per cent below 1990 levels by 2008-2012. The Protocol, which has been signed by 84 countries and ratified by 54 parties, will enter into force when ratified by 55 countries representing 55 per cent of industrialized country emissions. Only two industrialized countries have ratified the Protocol.

Biological Diversity

• The UN Convention on Biological Diversity, opened for signature at the 1992 Earth Summit and since ratified by 183 nations, entered into force on 29 December 1993. The Convention obligates countries to protect plant and animal species through habitat preservation and other means. The Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, to reduce the risks of trans-boundary movement of living modified organisms and ensure the safe use of modern biotechnologies, was adopted in January 2000 and has been ratified by 17 countries. The parties to the Convention are now tackling issues concerning sharing the benefits of genetic resources with people in the country of their origin.

Desertification

• The UN Convention to Combat Desertification — which was called for at the Earth Summit — entered into force in December 1996. Desertification, or the degradation of arid and semi-arid lands, affects the livelihood and food supply of over 900 million people worldwide, especially in Africa. The convention calls for a truly participatory approach to the problems in drylands, and 179 countries have joined the Convention so far. But the resources available for implementation have been limited.

Marine Resources and Pollution

• The UN Fish Stocks Agreement to regulate fishing on the high seas, negotiated as an outgrowth of the Earth Summit, was adopted in December 1995 and entered into force in December 2000. The agreement aims to prevent overfishing and ease international tensions over competition for dwindling fish stocks by relying on regional fisheries management. It contains key conflict settlement provisions to deter illegal fishing.

• Recognizing that one billion people live in urban centres along coastlines, and that about 80 per cent of marine pollution comes from land-based sources, in 1995 governments adopted the Global Programme of Action for the Protection of the Marine Environment from Land-based Activities.

Toxic Chemicals

• To regulate the nearly 4 million tons of toxic waste that cross national borders each year, in 1989 countries adopted the Basel Convention on hazardous wastes, administered by UNEP and since ratified by 121 countries. In 1995, the treaty was strengthened to outlaw the export of toxic waste from developed to developing countries, which often do not have the technology for safe disposal. In 1998, over 100 governments adopted an international treaty, negotiated under FAO and UNEP auspices, on the sharing of information on trade in hazardous chemicals and pesticides.

• Growing out of discussions in the UN Commission on Sustainable Development on the need to contain and eliminate various toxic chemicals, countries agreed in 2001 on the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, concentrating on the elimination of 12 harmful chemicals known as the "dirty dozen", including PCBs, dioxins and DDT. The treaty now has 126 signatures and 5 ratifications.

Forests

• Building on the Forest Principles adopted in Rio, an Intergovernmental Panel on Forests, which met for two years under the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, adopted over one hundred action proposals in March 1997. To monitor implementation and build consensus on further steps — for example, a possible forest treaty — the Panel became the Intergovernmental Forum on Forests at the Earth Summit+5 session in June 1997. Starting with its first session in 2001, the UN Forum on Forests has focused on proposals to limit deforestation and generate more resources for the forestry sector. The Forum is working to determine an international legal framework for forests by 2005.

Ozone Depletion

• In a highly successful process that predated the Earth Summit, countries have been phasing out ozone-depleting substances in accordance with the 1987 Montreal Protocol, which was strengthened in 1996. Largely as a result of the treaty, total consumption of chlorofluorocarbons declined from about 1.1 million tons in 1986 to 156,000 tons in 1998.

Small Islands

• As decided at the Earth Summit, in 1994 a UN conference was held in Barbados to address the special concerns of small island developing States. Recognizing that small islands, because of their size and isolation, were vulnerable to many development constraints, climate change and natural disasters, over 100 countries agreed to tackle the challenges faced by the islands in a partnership. In 1999, in a five-year review of the Barbados Conference, the UN General Assembly found that, while small island nations had pursued the conference's objectives, the international community still had not committed the resources needed.