
INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENTAL BRIEF

RIO 1992 - UNCED CONFERENCE 3-12 JUNE 1992, RIO DE JANEIRO, BRAZIL

The United Nations Conference on the Environment and Development (UNCED) is being held in Rio De Janeiro between 3 and 12 June, 1992. Australia will be represented by the Minister for Arts, Sport, the Environment and Territories, Ros Kelly; the Minister for Trade and Overseas Development, John Kerin; and the Minister for Resources, Mr Alan Griffiths. The delegation from Australia will also include representatives from the States, government departments, non-government organisations, industry and trade unions.

150 Heads of State are expected to attend UNCED, which has been heralded as the "Earth Summit". The aim of the Summit is to develop global strategies and agreements to promote sustainable and environmentally sound development throughout the world, and to put an end to environmental degradation.

Governments have participated in Preparatory Sessions to draft the UNCED agenda over the past 3 years. The protracted negotiations were difficult and tense, with differences tending to reflect the interests and concerns of developed as opposed to developing countries. However, the following agreed outcomes of the Preparatory Sessions will be presented for adoption and approval by Heads of State at UNCED:

An "Earth Charter" which will be known as the **Rio Declaration**. This document is oriented towards relations between nations and responsibility for global environmental problems. It contains principles on:

- * the integration of environment and development
- * internationalisation of costs
- * polluter pays
- * environmental impact assessment
- * the precautionary principle - where possible avoid choices which may involve longer term damage
- * public participation
- * national environment legislation
- * the special roles of women, youth and indigenous people.

Agenda 21 - a program of action to take the world into the 21st Century. Agenda 21 is made up of more than 30 documents (called "Chapters") and provides a comprehensive summary of the environment and development issues likely to confront all countries. The underlying theme is the promotion of national policies, plans and strategies based on the principles of sustainable development, developed in consultation with all affected sectors of society. Agenda 21 contains chapters on:

- * International policies to accelerate sustainable development in developing countries, and related domestic policies
- * combating poverty
- * changing consumption patterns
- * human health promotion and protection
- * integration of environment and development in decision-making
- * protecting the atmosphere

- * land resources issues - soil loss; combating deforestation/forest principles; desertification and drought
- * conservation of biological diversity
- * environmentally sound management of biotechnology
- * protecting the oceans, seas and fresh water resources
- * environmentally sound management of toxic chemicals, hazardous wastes, sewage and radioactive wastes
- * international institutional arrangements and international legal instruments and mechanisms.

Agreement on the funding of Agency 21 has not been reached and this aspect will be negotiated at UNCED.

Other issues which will be considered at UNCED include technology transfer, and conventions on climate change and biodiversity.

It is envisaged that UNCED will be a springboard for future global cooperation and commitment to the principles of ecologically sustainable development.

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AUSTRALIAN ACCESSION BRINGS HAZARDOUS WASTES CONVENTION INTO FORCE

On 5 February 1992, Australia was the 20th country to join the Basel Convention, thereby bringing it into force internationally on 5 May 1992.

In the last two decades the management of hazardous waste has become an issue of great concern to the international community. It has been estimated that globally 325-375 million tonnes of hazardous waste are generated each year.

In the 1980s, there were a number of serious incidents which resulted from the illegal dumping of hazardous waste in developing countries. Arguably the worst was the dumping of 3,800 tons of hazardous waste in Nigeria.

An Italian businessman resident in Nigeria had forged documents and permits to import drums of waste PCBs and radioactive materials. The drums were stored at a site at Koko and the owner did not know the contents of the drums but had rented his land to the importer for over five years. Many drums were damaged and leaking. Labourers packing the drums into containers for movement back to Italy suffered very bad chemical burns. Some were hospitalised and one man was paralysed. While the waste was eventually removed, there were grave concerns about surface and groundwater contamination.

Incidents such as this led to the negotiation of the Basel Convention on the Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, 1989. Australia was active in the negotiation of this agreement which is the first multilateral treaty imposing legal obligations on states in relation to the transboundary movement of hazardous wastes.

The main elements of the Convention are:

- obligations on Parties to minimise the generation and movement of hazardous waste;