

Rio+20: Dealing with Disappointments

Written by David Brunnen

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As exhibitors packed away their tents, as politicians jetted off to check the states of their nations and thousands of NGO delegates prepared to unwind from weeks of intense pressure, the general sense of anti-climax left little cheer in Rio.



One of the chores of editing Groupe Intellex is the quarterly compilation of our index (due out at the end of June) and it leads inevitably to a sober reflection on the balance between dissent and delight.

Dissent was evident from long before the world's media attention homed in on Rio+20. From Richard Heinberg's April '[MuseLetter](#)' reporting on debates about statistical alternatives to GDP we read "*While all speakers seemed eager to include happiness and well-being economic indicators in those discussions, the prospects are not good. It's late in the game: the Rio agenda is already largely set*"

Dissent was also barely concealed in many of the video clips captured during the summit: the warning signs in Brittany Trilford's youth statement, the NGO/Civil Society rejection of the Summit's official text and the dismay evident from a speaker for Greenpeace – all featured in our [earlier editorials](#) - but you can also sense disappointment in the thoughts of more moderate minds and even from those whose core competency is to find a positive spin.

'What did we expect?'

The three top targets of dissenting voices were Political Leadership, Corporate Agenda and the UN's own process.

For politicians, present or absent, this was far from their finest hour. The expectations of leadership ran way beyond the most creative and imaginative 'art of the possible' – reinforcing in many minds the limitations of power and the need for a much wider empowerment. It is difficult to plead higher priorities as reason/excuse for non-attendance – the dates have never

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been secret – and yet some that did arrive were criticized for only unveiling things they could easily have announced at home. Much like the statue of Christ that overlooked the proceedings, the politicians seemed to have their heads in the clouds.

Many observers were taken aback by the lack of real political engagement in the environmental issues – a sense neatly captured by the Independent newspaper cartoon last Thursday with the discovery ‘of 150 new species of sloth’. But those who recognized the remit limitations of ‘leaders’, pointed to the potential for bottom-up ‘creative disruption’ that is a powerful feature of our increasingly digital world.

Next in the firing line – the corporate lobby. With much at stake (and often deemed ‘too big to fail’) it will always be an uphill struggle to encourage business minds to be open to fresh thinking. A former Archbishop of Canterbury once congratulated the top fee-paying UK schools (a breeding ground for future business brains) for turning out ‘*minds as sharp as razors - and about as broad*’.

But, whatever Machiavellian maneuvers were marshaled by market manipulators, we found remarkable evidence that many big businesses really do believe that their Corporate & Social Responsibility programmes are not always thin PR cover for failures to kick bad habits. Bringing better connectivity to communities – in the favelas of Rio or in the Amazon rain-forest - or just building networks that will inevitably enable smaller businesses everywhere to compete with larger rivals anywhere, all illustrate a clear and unstoppable trend towards ‘digital democratization’: we just need this to run faster and encourage greater disruption.

The UN’s own processes also met with some stick. Sure, there was procedural cover in the notion that the ‘*insipid*’ (to quote Nick Clegg) text would lead eventually to better-defined ambitions and a merger with the last effort of Millennium Development Goals – but, in the free air outside the rarified atmosphere of global diplomacy, this process sounded less than convincing.

Speakers like Mary Robinson from Ireland and New Zealand’s former PM Helen Clark, understand the digital empowerment of people and the consequences for a UN process that must surely now pay more regard to NGO’s and Civil Society organisations. In this video Marit Hendriks has brought together many of these [voices from Rio+20](#) .

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So what then for disappointed delegates? For those looking for a break with tired UN processes there is certainly no shortage of fresh ideas and opportunities for governments and businesses to re-engage with increasingly well-connected citizens and the next generation.

Even the imaginary prospect of four-yearly Environmental Olympics (complete with Award Ceremonies) is giving downhearted delegates something to lift their spirits: inventing the competition categories and working out which global organizations might best be fingered to sponsor the event – great scope, you might think, for taxing the minds of comedians.

Over the last 3 months our coverage of Rio+20 has taken readers on a great journey. We leave you now with Marit's final [video](#). Turn up the volume, enjoy spectacular views of Rio de Janeiro from Corcovado Mountain crowned by the impressive statue of Christ the Redeemer, and celebrate with us the digital connectivity that has spread these thoughts, events, ideas and the energy of empowered people to all sustainable corners of our world.

Compiled with additional reporting by Marit Hendriks.

Visitors to this editorial may also have visited our previous Rio+20 reports on the [Groupe Intellex blog](#)

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