



## Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments: delivering promises on sustainable development?

Céline Ramstein (IDDRI - Sciences Po)

*This study was realised between July and August 2012.*

### ENHANCING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT EFFORTS

Rio+20 voluntary commitments may be considered as a key legacy of the conference, which has otherwise been criticized for its low level of ambition and official outcomes. Presented as a complementary tool to international conferences aiming at enhancing sustainable efforts, they might involve a wide audience of stakeholders, not limited to national governments, in a more participatory approach and in a large range of sectors, and mobilize more funding needed to enforce sustainable strategies and policies.

### QUESTIONING THE DELIVERY OF PROMISES

Designed as such, however, voluntary commitments leave room for skepticism, if not fears, as to whether they can deliver their promises. What is their level of ambition? How are they selected? Is their relevance and feasibility properly assessed? How will they be monitored and verified? Given their non-legally binding character, will they be used by governments to avoid their responsibilities and stricter regulations?

### A NEW GOVERNANCE MODEL AHEAD?

In order to ensure that promises are kept, a first step should consist, as stated in the Rio+20 final outcome, in aggregating Rio+20 voluntary commitments and other registries of commitments in a global registry. Acting as a pledge-reminder, inside and outside international conferences, this compilation would need to be based upon regular, solid, and pragmatic selection and reviewing processes. Thematic advisory boards, including different types of actors, could be established to assess common indicators and progress on specific areas. The transparency and accessibility of this registry would allow “bottom-up accountability”, which would ensure the commitments’ sincerity and avoid “greenwashing” initiatives.

Copyright © 2012 IDDRI

As a foundation of public utility, IDDRI encourages reproduction and communication of its copyrighted materials to the public, with proper credit (bibliographical reference and/or corresponding URL), for personal, corporate or public policy research, or educational purposes. However, IDDRI's copyrighted materials are not for commercial use or dissemination (print or electronic).

Unless expressly stated otherwise, the findings, interpretations, and conclusions expressed in the materials are those of the various authors and are not necessarily those of IDDRI's board.

Citation: Ramstein, C., *Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments: delivering promises on sustainable development?*, Working Paper N°23/12, IDDRI, Paris, France, 28 p.

Special thanks to Jean-Christophe Carteron (Euromed Management, France), Patricia Chaves (UN DESA DSD), Henry de Cazotte (Agence Française de Développement, Special Advisor to the Rio+20 Executive Coordinator Brice Lalonde), Michael Davidson (Natural Resource Defense Council), Jonas Haertle (PRME and UNGC), Meng Li (UN DESA DSD), Jacob Scherr (Natural Resource Defense Council) and James Tee (former UN DESA DSD) for their time and precious advice that have been critical to this study. Any errors and views expressed here are the author's alone.



For more information about this document,  
please contact the author:  
Céline Ramstein – [celineramstein@gmail.com](mailto:celineramstein@gmail.com)

ISSN 2258-7071

# Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments: delivering promises on sustainable development?

Céline Ramstein (IDDRI - Sciences Po)

---

<b>ABSTRACT</b>	<b>4</b>
<b>INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>1. THE RIO+20 VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS INITIATIVE</b>	<b>5</b>
1.1. Background	5
1.2. Rationale for voluntary commitments	6
1.3. What can we learn from Johannesburg type II partnerships?	7
1.4. Characteristics of Rio+20 voluntary commitments	10
<b>2. DECIPHERING RIO+20 VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS: FOCUS, SCOPE, AND AMBITION</b>	<b>11</b>
2.1. How many commitments do we really have?	11
2.2. Commitment-makers	12
2.3. Areas of commitments	12
2.4. Deliverables of commitments	12
2.5. Diversity of commitments	13
2.6. Commitment resources	16
2.7. The “additional” aspect of commitments	16
2.8. The “voluntary aspect” of commitments	17
2.9. The motivations of commitment-makers	18
2.10. Transparency, reporting and accessibility	18
<b>3. TOWARDS A GLOBAL REGISTRY OF VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS</b>	<b>20</b>
3.1. Purpose of a global registry of voluntary commitments	20
3.2. The “Cloud of Commitments” as a first version of a global registry	21
<b>CONCLUSION</b>	<b>22</b>
<b>APPENDIX</b>	<b>24</b>
The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative as a paradigm	24

## ABSTRACT

While the official outcome of Rio+20 has been criticised for its low level of ambition, the voluntary commitments are considered by the Rio+20 Secretary-General and many actors as a success and a key legacy of the conference. More than 700 voluntary commitments had been received by the date of the conference and the Rio+20 secretariat announced that a total of \$513 billion had been pledged by the different actors. An in-depth analysis of these commitments shows considerable heterogeneity in their focus, scope and ambition. The precision of their deliverables and of their timeline is also highly varied. Some are excellent examples of non-state actors committing to work towards a more sustainable future and are producing some promising results, such as the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative; others appear more like descriptions of on-going projects or advocacy initiatives by a specific group, institution or organisation. In order to avoid repeating the disappointing results of the Johannesburg type II partnerships, it will be crucial to follow up these commitments to make sure they deliver their promises. The Rio+20 outcome document mentions a global registry to compile all the existing commitments from different platforms.

Developing such a registry is a considerable challenge. As past examples have shown, databases alone are not sufficient to ensure the efficient and regular follow-up of commitments. A multi-stakeholder advisory board could help to develop a user-friendly registry to allow everyone to transparently follow the implementation of commitments. Overall, the diversity and large number of commitments currently make it difficult for the general public to follow the commitments. Therefore, an accessible, interactive platform with thematic indicators could be established to specify more clearly the significance of the commitments and to track their progress. This should ensure a strict selection and evaluation of the commitments published. It should also allow dynamic exchanges and sharing of best practices between all actors. Annual reports on achievements and on remaining gaps to deliver sustainable development could be presented during the future forum on sustainable development to help governments to better target the most crucial efforts. It is essential that the Rio+20 voluntary commitments are not forgotten. In a context of rather disappointing results within the official sustainable development and climate negotiations, they offer a chance to further advance a sustainable future, with all the actors willing to do so.

## INTRODUCTION

The very last words of the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development,<sup>1</sup> Rio+20, entitled *The Future We Want*, mention an “internet-based registry” to record the commitments gathered during the Rio+20 preparation process and the Conference, and to facilitate “access to other registries that have compiled commitments”. The Rio+20 Secretariat had received over 700 voluntary commitments by the date of the Conference and commitments will be accepted until the end of 2012. Mr. Sha Zukang, general secretary of the conference, said that these commitments represent a pledge of \$513 billion<sup>2</sup> and that they are “a major part of the legacy” of the Rio+20 Conference. Given the success of this initiative, it is interesting to study these commitments to see what they comprise and whether they can reinforce the results of such conferences, enabling more diverse actors to take part in the global efforts for sustainable development. In Johannesburg, type II partnerships were already meant to gather “a series of commitments and action-oriented coalitions focused on deliverables” and to “contribute in translating political

commitments into action”, but many actors considered the results to be rather disappointing. It is vital to learn from the Johannesburg experience to avoid repeating similar mistakes. A 1.0 version of this registry currently exists on the Rio+20 website as a database presenting the commitments, but discussions are needed with all stakeholders in order to envisage a global accessible, transparent and updated registry, to ensure that promises are kept and to assess the progress made.

This study will first recall why the Rio+20 voluntary commitments initiative was launched and its ambition. It will then review the content of the commitments currently<sup>3</sup> listed on the Rio+20 platform, and will attempt to determine the nature of these commitments and of the actors involved. Although it is still quite early to be able to make an assessment of these commitments, we will try to identify the challenges of aggregating all the commitments made by so many actors in so many different areas. This study will also discuss the conditions for a global registry of voluntary commitments to be delivered, and will attempt to sketch out, from past experience, what a successful registry might look like.

## 1. THE RIO+20 VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS INITIATIVE

### 1.1. Background

Back in late 2011, the Rio+20 secretariat and its executive coordinators were concerned about the pace of the official negotiations and wanted to shape a positive message around Rio+20 to avoid repeating the Copenhagen experience. They added the subtitle “The Future We Want” to the

1. The Future We Want, paragraph 283, “We welcome the commitments voluntarily entered into at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and throughout 2012 by all stakeholders and their networks to implement concrete policies, plans, programmes, projects and actions to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication. We invite the Secretary-General to compile these commitments and facilitate access to other registries that have compiled commitments, in an internet-based registry. The registry should make information about the commitments fully transparent and accessible to the public, and it should be periodically updated.” available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/6439868.21174622.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

2. <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/usg/statements/commitment-press-conference.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

3. As of 20 August 2012.

draft outcome document; Mr. Sha Zukang insisted that Rio+20 was a conference about implementation<sup>4</sup> and the secretariat wanted to present positive, concrete initiatives from different actors in order to demonstrate progress and efforts towards sustainable development. Through discussions and cooperation with numerous United Nations agencies and initiatives, including the UN Global Compact (UNGC), the Sustainability Energy for All initiative, the UN Development Programme (UNDP), the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) and many other actors such as the Natural Resources Defense Council international team, a voluntary commitments initiative was developed and all the different actors (major groups including women, children and youth, farmers, indigenous peoples, NGOs, trade unions, local authorities, science and technology, business and industry, as well as Member States and UN Agencies) were invited to submit their commitments. The idea was to register as many voluntary commitments as possible and, as mentioned in paragraph 283 of the Rio+20 outcome document, to develop a global registry where all the voluntary commitments made through different platforms could be compiled and transparently presented so that everyone could verify their implementation.

## 1.2. Rationale for voluntary commitments

The idea of recording voluntary commitments is not new and has been the centre of numerous debates within the climate negotiations. As an example, during COP12, Russia suggested encouraging voluntary commitments from non-Annex I countries by giving them more flexibility in their accession to Annex I,<sup>5</sup> and during COP16, parties presented numerous pledges in the Cancun Agreements.<sup>6</sup> In the context of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, after controversial

discussions back in 2002 during the preparatory session of the *World Summit on Sustainable Development* in Bali,<sup>7</sup> voluntary commitments were encouraged in Johannesburg in the form of partnerships.

The rationale for voluntary commitments lies in the insufficiency of so-called “mandatory” or “required” decisions and in the incapacity, in recent years, of Member States to agree on any bold decisions during sustainable development or climate negotiations. Voluntary commitments have been presented as a complementary tool to enhance sustainable development efforts, alongside official agreements or declarations.

Voluntary commitments have several strengths. First, they involve a wider audience, not limited to national governments, and propose a more participatory approach at different levels to expedite implementation and cover implementation gaps, following the approach of Agenda 21. This greater outreach may also potentially mobilise more funding. Because of their flexibility (non-negotiated, collaborative projects and partnerships), these commitments are also more attractive to stakeholders wishing to become involved but rejecting overly rigid constraints. On the whole, voluntary commitments can be seen as a rather pragmatic “nothing to lose approach”. As they are voluntary initiatives that complement existing agreements, they are additions to the global efforts towards sustainable development. Even if they failed to achieve what was expected, this would already be a net gain because had the commitments not been made, nothing would have happened anyway.

Nevertheless, the absence of an effective framework for verifying and monitoring these commitments and the flexibility left to the actors to commit only to what they want (and probably what is the most effortless for them), leave considerable room for criticism. Numerous non-governmental organisations (NGOs) denounce a drift towards “greenwashing” or “bluewashing”. The controversy over UN Global Compact activities in the past few years illustrates the potential dangers of the lack of proper selection and monitoring of these commitments and also of the confusion between a registry for voluntary commitments and a certification mechanism.

Fears that these commitments are simply an opportunity for governments to avoid their responsibilities and for companies to avoid stricter (and

4. <http://www.unccd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/721sha4.pdf> last visited 16 August 2012.

5. Basically, instead of requiring lengthy procedures (ratification on an amendment to Annex B to the Kyoto Protocol by 3/4 of the Parties to the Kyoto Protocol) for a party to accede to Annex I, Russia wanted the elaboration of “new provisions under the Convention to convey formal political recognition of national actions to further the objective of the Convention undertaken by non-Annex I Parties on their own initiative”. For more details, see the coverage of COP12 at <http://www.iisd.ca/climate/cop12/nov13.html>, the Russian proposal [http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/workshops/other\\_meetings/application/pdf/rusproposal\\_en.pdf](http://unfccc.int/files/meetings/workshops/other_meetings/application/pdf/rusproposal_en.pdf) and the workshop organised to further discuss the Russian proposal [http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced\\_search/items/6911.php?preref=600004321#beg](http://unfccc.int/documentation/documents/advanced_search/items/6911.php?preref=600004321#beg).

6. <http://cancun.unfccc.int/> last visited 6 August 2012.

7. For more details, see United Nations, Report of the Commission on Sustainable Development acting as the preparatory committee for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Fourth session, A/CONF.199/4, 27 May-7 June 2002 available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/1680742.80023575.html>.

potentially more costly) regulations are also often expressed (reinforced by the strong support of the United States for this kind of approach)<sup>8</sup>. However, some suggest that any international agreement is, by definition, *voluntary*, with nothing constraining governments to commit or to sign agreements. Moreover, even though they committed to legally binding agreements, parties' efforts in terms of implementation are often disappointing. This does not mean that voluntary commitments are to be seen as equivalent to legally binding agreements, nor that they could replace them. As highlighted by the World Watch Institute,<sup>9</sup> General Motors' commitment to "achieve landfill-free status at 100 manufacturing sites and 25 nonmanufacturing sites"<sup>10</sup> is all very well, but General Motors's main environmental impact depends on its vehicles' fuel efficiency, and this is driven by national governments. Voluntary commitments are intrinsically tied to international, regional and national negotiated agreements, standards and levels of ambition. They should certainly retain initiatives from stakeholders willing to commit beyond what they are already required to comply with and should not serve as trade-offs to avoid legally-binding obligations. What this means, however, is that an assessment of what voluntary approaches have achieved is critical. As the Johannesburg example shows, it is precisely this lack of global assessment and data relative to the implementation of commitments that prevents us from drawing clear conclusions on the efficiency of voluntary initiatives for sustainable development. The future Rio+20 global registry for voluntary commitments could be a useful tool in providing such information.

### 1.3. What can we learn from Johannesburg type II partnerships?

#### 1.3.1. Background of type II partnerships

During the *World Summit on Sustainable Development*, in 2002, more than 250 so-called "type II partnerships"<sup>11</sup> were presented, and the Johannesburg

Plan of Action mandated the UN Commission on Sustainable Development<sup>12</sup> to follow up these partnerships. In Johannesburg, the focus was more on "implementation and compliance"<sup>13</sup> than on creating any new treaty or institution. Therefore, in close cooperation with the private sector, the WSSD aimed to promote initiatives by various actors, both non-governmental and governmental, and to encourage them to engage in "type II partnerships" for sustainable development, a sort of "coalition of the willing". These partnerships were presented as a new form of governance that was broader and more inclusive, alongside intergovernmental negotiated agreements.

#### 1.3.2. Parallel between type II partnerships and voluntary commitments

It is interesting to note that in both Johannesburg and Rio, the very same words and reasoning were used. The Johannesburg documents (including the explanatory note by the Chairman of the Preparatory Committee for type II partnerships<sup>14</sup> and the criteria and guidelines for the partnerships that promote sustainable development<sup>15</sup>) mention:

"a series of commitments and action-oriented coalitions focused on deliverables" that "would contribute in translating political commitments into action", which should "contribute to the implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation", and be "new", "based on predictable and sustained resources", "transparent", and "accountable". Moreover, these "partnerships should submit a regular report, preferably at least on a biennial basis; The Secretariat is requested to make information available on partnerships, including their reports, through a database accessible to all interested parties, including through the Commission website and other means".

If necessary, we can recall here the criteria for accepting the Rio+20 voluntary commitments<sup>16</sup>

8. J. Scherr and J. Gregg, *Johannesburg and Beyond: The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Rise of Partnerships*, *The Georgetown International Environmental Law Review* Volume 18, Issue 3, Spring 2006 p.440-441.

9. See the World Watch Analysis of Rio+20 voluntary commitments at <http://blogs.worldwatch.org/sustainableprosperity/voluntary-commitments-the-way-forward-after-rio20/> (last visited 14 August 2012).

10. See the commitment at <http://business.un.org/en/commitments/1082> (last visited 18 August 2012).

11. [http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/sustainable\\_dev/sustainable\\_dev.html](http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/sustainable_dev/sustainable_dev.html).

12. Paragraph 147(b), part E, Chapter XI of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, available at [http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD\\_POI\\_PD/English/POIToc.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/POIToc.htm) (last visited 6 August 2012).

13. J. Foti, *Promises kept: ensuring ambition and accountability through a Rio+20 "compendium of commitments"*, Working paper, WRI, March 2012 p.3 available at [http://pdf.wri.org/working\\_papers/promises\\_kept.pdf](http://pdf.wri.org/working_papers/promises_kept.pdf) (last visited 6 August 2012).

14. [www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/prep2final\\_papers/wssd\\_description\\_of\\_partnerships2.doc](http://www.johannesburgsummit.org/html/documents/prep2final_papers/wssd_description_of_partnerships2.doc) (last visited 6 August 2012).

15. Available at [http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd\\_aofw\\_par/par\\_critguid.shtml](http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_aofw_par/par_critguid.shtml) (last visited 6 August 2012).

16. [http://www.unccd2012.org/content/documents/524Info%20Note\\_Registry%20of%20Commitments%20120712.pdf](http://www.unccd2012.org/content/documents/524Info%20Note_Registry%20of%20Commitments%20120712.pdf)

and article 283 of the Rio+20 outcome,<sup>17</sup> 10 years later:

“All commitments to be registered should be specific, measurable, funded, new (or extension of an existing commitment) (...) In order to facilitate periodic reporting on progress of implementation, it is important that at least one tangible deliverable is specified, along with the estimated timeline for completion. Resources devoted to the delivery of commitments should also be specified, including financing, staff or technical expertise, and in-kind contribution”.

“283. We welcome the commitments voluntarily entered into at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and throughout 2012 by all stakeholders and their networks to implement concrete policies, plans, programmes, projects and actions to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication. We invite the Secretary-General to compile these commitments and facilitate access to other registries that have compiled commitments, in an internet-based registry. The registry should make information about the commitments fully transparent and accessible to the public, and it should be periodically updated”.

We can see (highlighted in corresponding colours) that all the key elements were already present in 2002. The only difference is the obligation for the Rio+20 commitments to provide a date of completion and secure funding, whereas the Johannesburg partnerships only required “predictable and sustainable funding”. This high degree of resemblance suggests that if there are no differences between the follow-up process for the Johannesburg partnerships and the one for the Rio+20 commitments, the results will not be different and, precisely, the outcome of the type II partnerships is quite disappointing. We must then learn some lessons from type II partnerships.

### 1.3.3. Outcome of type II partnerships

It is not easy to assess type II partnerships because of the lack of periodic evaluations and reviews of these commitments. Several studies<sup>18</sup> emphasised

(last visited 6 August 2012).

17. <http://daccess-ods.un.org/access.nsf/Get?Open&DS=A/66/L.56&Lang=E> (last visited 6 August 2012).

18. See L. Andonova and M. Levy, *Franchising Global Governance: Making Sense of the Johannesburg Type II Partnerships*, Yearbook of International Co-operation on Environment and Development 2003/04 available at <http://graduateinstitute.ch/webdav/site/admininst/shared/iheid/800/andonova/Andonova-Levy2.pdf>, F. Calder, *Developing an effective follow-up process for WSSD Partnerships: the role of the Commission on*

the efforts needed to make the follow-up process more efficient, as did reports from the UN Secretary General in 2003<sup>19</sup> and 2008.<sup>20</sup> The Commission on Sustainable Development was supposed to monitor these partnerships, but it failed to provide regular evaluations or quantitative analyses to assess the achievement of these commitments. In the space of 10 years, not only have type II partnerships not managed to become a model for achieving sustainable development objectives, but, on the contrary, they have encouraged scepticism about the efficiency of voluntary-based initiatives.

To discuss these partnerships in more details, we can first see that it appears that expectations related to the level of diversity among the actors of the partnerships have not been met: most of these actors are governments, UN agencies and large NGOs that were already involved in progress for sustainable development. According to a study from Princeton University, six countries (Australia, France, Indonesia, the United States, Italy, and Japan) are present in 70% of the partnerships led by governments, and most of the NGO partnerships are led by large, powerful, northern NGOs.<sup>21</sup>

From a finance point of view, while one of the main objectives of public-private partnerships is to raise additional funding, it is interesting to see that, according to this same study, in 2004 “corporations accounted for less than 1% of the partnerships’ funding” and according to the Secretary-General’s

Sustainable Development, Discussion paper, Sustainable Development Programme, Royal Institute of International Affairs, April 2003 available at [http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Energy,%20Environment%20and%20Development/csd\\_partnerships\\_final.pdf](http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/public/Research/Energy,%20Environment%20and%20Development/csd_partnerships_final.pdf), J. Foti, *Promises kept: ensuring ambition and accountability through a Rio+20 “compendium of commitments”*, Working paper, WRI, March 2012 available at [http://pdf.wri.org/working\\_papers/promises\\_kept.pdf](http://pdf.wri.org/working_papers/promises_kept.pdf), T. Hale, D. Mauzerall, *Thinking Globally and Acting Locally: Can the Johannesburg Partnerships Coordinate Action on Sustainable Development?*, Journal of Environment & Development, Vol. 13, No. 3, September 2004 220-239 available at <http://jed.sagepub.com/content/13/3/220.short> and J. Scherr and J. Gregg, *Johannesburg and Beyond: The 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and the Rise of Partnerships*, The Georgetown International Environmental Law Review Volume 18, Issue 3, Spring 2006 p.425-463 (last visited 6 August 2012).

19. UN Secretary-General, *Follow-up to Johannesburg and the Future Role of the CSD - The Implementation Track*, UNITED NATIONS E/CN.17/2003/2, 18 February 2003 available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/4397796.98848724.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

20. UN Secretary-General, *Partnerships for sustainable development*, UNITED NATIONS E/CN.17/2008/10, 6 February 2008 available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/482768.1183815.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

21. T. Hale, D. Mauzerall (2004) p.231.

report in 2008, “2% [of the partnerships registered by 2008 were] receiving funding from private sector donors exclusively”. Moreover, this report shows that six years after the Summit, less than half of the partnerships had secured financial resources and almost half of them were “seeking additional funding for their initiatives”.<sup>22</sup> In this respect, we can hope that Rio+20 voluntary commitments will be more successful, as secure funding was one of the conditions of acceptance.

The objective of a database presenting transparent information has not been met either. The partnerships website<sup>23</sup> and database,<sup>24</sup> launched in 2004 and redesigned in 2006 and 2007, is still not really user-friendly or updated, the latest list of new participants dating from 2009. It includes only 349 partnerships, which is an increase of 40% since 2002, but of only 4% since 2008, demonstrating a loss of impetus over the years. In addition, it is interesting to note that on the Rio+20 website, a registry for partnerships is also displayed, with only 199 partnerships recorded.<sup>25</sup> Indeed, the UN General Assembly’s resolution on Rio+20<sup>26</sup> in 2010 called for the undertaking of “voluntary multi-stakeholder partnership initiatives”, and a partnership initiative and forum were therefore organised during the Summit. If we take a closer look, it seems that this updated platform for partnerships aims to replace the older database, but many of the partnerships presented here have expired end dates, such as 2009 for the “Competence Platform on Energy Crop and Agroforestry Systems for Arid and Semi-arid Ecosystems - Africa (COMPETE)”, or 2007 for the “Abu-Dhabi Global Environmental Data Initiative”. After questioning the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs Division for Sustainable Development (UN DESA DSD), it seems that there are on-going discussions to further develop the global registry for voluntary commitments and to modernise the partnerships database. Hopefully in the future we will be able to further connect these initiatives. Indeed, the difference between partnerships (that generally

consist in several actors getting together to commit to something) and voluntary commitments (that generally involve several actors) may be quite confusing.

Beyond the quantitative analysis, the lack of monitoring and of standardised reporting, highlighted by the 12<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD),<sup>27</sup> makes the evaluation of type II partnerships very complex. As acknowledged by the Secretary-General, “information on the partnerships database is based solely on registered partnerships’ voluntary self-reports”. As shown in an email<sup>28</sup> sent in 2003, and as explained in the report, “requests for updates are sent out annually; however, obtaining current information remains a challenge”.<sup>29</sup> In September 2003, only half of the partnership answered the UN DESA request for updates on progress, and by 2004, only two thirds of the registered partnerships (172 out of 266) had done so.<sup>30</sup> The CSD has not been given sufficient means to keep this register updated or to properly follow up the commitments, and this led to disappointing results, most of the type II partnerships having been forgotten or never fully realised over the last 10 years.

#### 1.3.4. Successes of type II partnerships

Despite a rather disappointing global result, type II partnerships have produced some positive outcomes. First, they were certainly one of the key innovations of the Johannesburg Summit. Second, the partnership fairs regularly organised during the Commission on Sustainable Development, as well as the international forum on partnerships for sustainable development and the secretariat summary reports on partnerships, are certainly useful tools to enable the exchange of best practices and knowledge. Third, as reported by the Secretary-General, since 2002, “a number of Government partners have used partnerships as an innovative approach to increasing effectiveness in their development cooperation frameworks. The partnership model has also been used to enhance national sustainable development strategies and policies and as a tool to harness relevant resources for their implementation”. Indeed, both for governments and for UN entities, a “partnership culture”

22. UN Secretary-General (2008), p.11-12.

23. [http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd\\_aofw\\_par/par\\_index.shtml](http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_aofw_par/par_index.shtml) (last visited 6 August 2012).

24. <http://webapps01.un.org/dsd/partnerships/public/welcome.do> (last visited 6 August 2012).

25. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/partnerships.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

26. UNGA, 64/236. Implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, United Nations, A/RES/64/236, 31 March 2010 available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/2452522.81427383.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

27. UN CSD, Commission on Sustainable Development, Report on the twelfth session, E/2004/29 E/CN.17/2004/21, UN Economic and Social Council Official Records, 2004 available at <http://daccess-ods.un.org/TMP/1074328.571558.html> (last visited 6 August 2012).

28. <http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/partnerships/quest-partnerships212.doc> (last visited 6 August 2012).

29. UN Secretary-General (2008), p.23.

30. *Ibid.*

seems to have developed over the last decade, recognising the importance of integrating civil society into their projects. Finally, some successful partnerships are worth mentioning, among many others. To take just two examples:<sup>31</sup>

- **the Partnership for Clean Fuels and Vehicles**<sup>32</sup> launched in Johannesburg has been successful, enabling 26 national ministries and agencies, 52 groups from civil society (including the private sector) and 7 UN agencies/international governmental organisations to work closely together. Led by UNEP, this partnership aims to help developing countries to adopt clean fuels and vehicles in order to reduce air pollution. The most successful story is the campaign for a global phase-out of leaded petrol. Whereas in 2002 about “half of the countries around the world” were using leaded petrol, only 6 countries may still be using it today.<sup>33</sup> UNEP showed that this accomplishment contributed “US\$2.4 trillion (4% of global GDP) to the global economy” and translated to “1.2 million fewer deaths per year”.<sup>34</sup> The website is still updated and the progress tracked.
- **The Congo Basin Forest Partnership**<sup>35</sup> launched in Johannesburg brings together 15 national governments, the World Bank and numerous civil society organisations. It aims to encourage the sustainable management of the Congo Basin forests and wildlife. Partners ensure capacity building, training, investment to develop various projects such as ecotourism, better timber harvesting, new protection laws and regulations, as well as sustainable forestry management by new logging companies. It has been quite successful and has led to an increasing number of natural parks being created and hectares protected. In cooperation with many research institutes, the partnerships delivered several studies on the state of the Congo Basin forests and monitored tools, including the WRI Global Forest Watch initiative.<sup>36</sup> A meeting of the partners was held in March 2012.

31. For more examples, see Foti (2012) and for a US partnerships assessment, see Scherr and Gregg (2006).

UN Secretary General, Follow-up to Johannesburg and the Future Role of the CSD - The Implementation Track, UNITED NATIONS E/CN.17/2003 /2, 18 February 2003.

32. <http://www.unep.org/transport/pcfV/> (last visited 7 August, 2012).

33. [http://www.unep.org/transport/PCFV/PDF/Maps\\_Matrices/world/lead/MapWorldLead\\_January2012.pdf](http://www.unep.org/transport/PCFV/PDF/Maps_Matrices/world/lead/MapWorldLead_January2012.pdf) (last visited 7 August 2012).

34. <http://www.unep.org/transport/PCFV/news/hatfield.asp> (last visited 7 August 2012).

35. <http://www.pfbc-cbfp.org/> (last visited 7 August 2012).

36. <http://www.globalforestwatch.org/english/about/faqs.htm> (last visited 7 August 2012).

### Box 1. Lessons learnt from Johannesburg type II partnerships

In conclusion, it seems that the overall disappointing results of the type II partnerships are due to the lack of initial funding and clear deliverables, of a consistent monitoring process and of a dynamic, accessible and updated platform. But this should not be interpreted as proof that the partnerships or commitments approach does not work. Several success stories show that partnerships or voluntary initiatives per se are not the problem, but if not well managed, encouraged and monitored, they are in danger of never delivering their promises. Therefore, as Rio+20 experiments with voluntary commitments, we should keep in mind the lessons from Johannesburg, including:

- Developing a solid framework for regularly reviewing commitments, ensuring they keep their promises and continue to be relevant, in a transparent and accessible way;
- Ensuring the means for such a follow-up process to be achieved;
- Making sure that the commitments are funded when they are posted on the registry;
- Creating the conditions for dynamic exchanges on the platform to keep the commitments alive. As a promising signal, we can consider the dynamism of the Rio+20 social media campaign. In 2008, the Secretary-General expressed his pleasure about the 259 162 visits to the partnerships database platform in 4 years<sup>1</sup>. If we compare this to the 50 million people who have joined The Future We Want campaign on social media since November 2011, i.e. in 8 months, including 1 billion uses of the #RioPlus20 hashtag on Twitter<sup>2</sup>, we can hope for better results for the future registry of commitments.
- Maintaining regular “in-person” meetings to allow experience sharing through workshops, the presentation of challenges and opportunities encountered by the different actors to help them to move forward (including raising additional funding), to enable new initiatives to emerge and to promote some outstanding projects.

1. UN Secretary-General (2008) p.23.

2. <http://blogs.un.org/blog/2012/06/22/rio20-wrap-up-vital-stats/> (last visited 7 August 2012).

## 1.4. Characteristics of Rio+20 voluntary commitments

Building on the lessons of Johannesburg, the Rio+20 secretariat wanted to make sure that the voluntary commitments registered would be followed up and accountable, and it therefore established several criteria to “facilitate periodic reporting on progress of implementation”.<sup>37</sup> To be accepted on the Rio+20 website, commitments must be “specific, measurable, funded, new (or extension of an existing commitment)” and should

37. Information Note Registry of Commitments for Sustainable Development available at [http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/524Info%20Note\\_Registry%20of%20Commitments%20120712.pdf](http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/524Info%20Note_Registry%20of%20Commitments%20120712.pdf) (last visited 14 August 2012).

contain “at least one tangible deliverable”, “along with the estimated timeline for completion”.<sup>38</sup> Finally, these commitments were categorised under 23 headings:<sup>39</sup> Water, Mountains, Gender Equality, Sustainable Cities, Poverty Eradication, Sustainable Transport, Sustainability Management, Green Jobs and Social Inclusion, Natural Disaster Preparedness, Sustainable Consumption and Production, Biodiversity, Forests and other Ecosystems, Education, Climate Change, Oceans and Seas, AIDS, Sustainable Energy, Chemicals and Waste, SD Strategies and Policies, Technology and Innovation, SD Economics, Finance and Trade, Land Degradation and Desertification, Food Security and Sustainable Agriculture, Measuring SD Progress (through indicators), and Public Awareness and Communications on SD. As of 14 August, the Rio+20 website includes 745 voluntary commitments (which is 30 more than the 715 announced at Rio)<sup>40</sup>. In accordance with paragraph 283 of the Rio+20 outcome document, commitments will continue to be accepted until the end of 2012.

It is important to note that these commitments differ from individual voluntary actions that can be shared on another website,<sup>41</sup> and that we will not discuss here. It is however interesting to see that 64 million voluntary actions had been registered on this website by the date of the Rio+20 Conference.

## 2. DECIPHERING RIO+20 VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS: FOCUS, SCOPE, AND AMBITION

We will examine several criteria to get a clearer picture of what the Rio+20 Conference’s 745 commitments represent. First, we will provide a general analysis of the commitments, focusing on certain areas to better understand the nature of these commitments and of their actors. This will raise some challenges and will lead us to envisage how we might resolve them in the future global registry of voluntary commitments.

### 2.1. How many commitments do we really have?

The number of commitments recorded is an interesting question because it all depends on

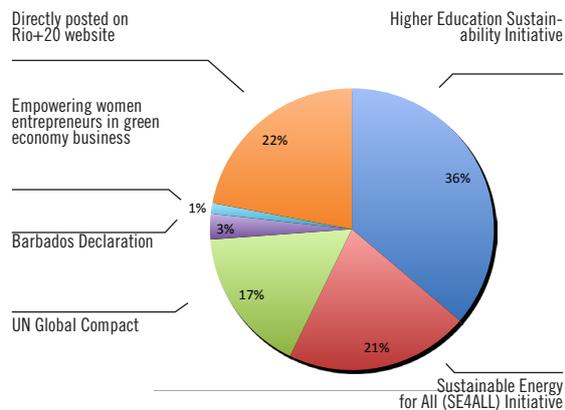
38. *Ibid.*

39. *Ibid.*

40. <http://uncsd.iisd.org/news/voluntary-commitments-total-715-after-rio20/> (last visited 17 July 2012).

41. <http://volunteeractioncounts.org> (last visited 17 July 2012).

**Figure 1.** Distribution of the commitments by origin



how we count them. As an example, several entities presented all their initiatives in one commitment (most of the universities and companies, for instance, or the Global Environment Facility)<sup>42</sup>. Conversely, Mauritius and Suez Environment presented one commitment per initiative, amounting to 10 commitments each. UNDP participates in 39 commitments, for 6 of which it is the only actor, and UN-Habitat in 11, being the only actor in 7 of these. This means that the number of commitments per se is not a good indicator of the success of the initiatives.

Another important aspect to consider is that the Rio+20 secretariat has been able to compile so many commitments in a short period thanks to the use of different initiatives, as shown in the graph below. Some of these already existed, such as the United Nations Global Compact (UNGC) and Sustainable Energy for All (SE4All), while others are new, such as the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI), the commitments to empower women entrepreneurs in green economy businesses and the ones from the Barbados Declaration. Overall, as shown in the graph below, only 22% of the commitments were directly posted on the Rio+20 website.<sup>43</sup>

The wide range of sources should not be a problem if they all use the same format (as is the case for all of them except the UNGC and Sustainable Energy for All, which still represent 280 commitments that were reformatted for the purpose of this study).<sup>44</sup> The absence of homogeneity in the formats of the commitments also leads to

42. <http://www.thegef.org/gef/rio20> (last visited 8 August 2012).

43. All the statistics come from calculations based on an analysis of the commitments, available upon request.

44. These figures may differ from the official ones announced during Rio+20 because they have been calculated more recently.

some mistakes: several commitments such as the Deutsche Post DHL initiative for biodiversity or the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative commitments were counted twice on the UNGC and the Rio+20 websites. Moreover, some commitments have broken links or do not exist anymore and we could discuss whether or not they should be counted, such as the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative's commitment by Tsinghua University (on the Rio+20 platform) and the "Red de Mueblistas en Latinoamerica" (on the UNGC).

In conclusion, **if the number of commitments is not strictly verified** (in particular to avoid duplicates) and the **definition of commitments clearer** (to explicitly determine what is involved in one or several commitments), then the **number of commitments is not a suitable unit to determine the success of such an initiative**.

## 2.2. Commitment-makers

The commitments are mostly made by one actor (in particular because this is the format used by the others platforms: universities for the HESI or companies for the UNGC, for example). **Only 15% of the commitments involve more than one actor, 12% more than 2 actors and 3% 3 actors or more.** Unsurprisingly, universities (or more generally higher education institutions, think tanks and research institutes) are the most represented group, with **44% of the commitments including at least one university, institute or think tank, closely followed by the private sector, being part of 35% of the commitments.**

Partnership (including more than 2 different actors)

Their geographical distribution is rather unbalanced too. Although it may be difficult to determine the scope of a commitment and the origin of the funding (especially when there is no website associated with the commitment or the commitment-maker), we can approximately establish geographical impacts and funding origins.<sup>45</sup> **Most of the commitments (38%) are financed by Northern institutions and have impacts in the North** (this reflects in particular the high number of Northern universities participating in the HESI), **whereas the proportion of commitments financed by Southern institutions with global impacts (18%) is similar to that of commitments financed by global organisations with global impacts.** A very limited number of commitments financed by Northern institutions have impacts in Southern ones because most of the Northern

institutions' commitments had global impacts and most of the commitments having an impact in specific Southern countries were made by global, international organisations.

## 2.3. Areas of commitments

Only the commitments made directly on the Rio+20 website have already been categorised according to the 23 areas defined by the Rio+20 secretariat. Only 38% of the commitments are presented in a global spreadsheet sent by the platform they come from (UNGC and SE4All). For the purpose of this study, we analysed all the commitments from other sources to determine the category to which they belonged. Some areas had more commitments than others: **194 commitments (26%) are related to sustainable energy and 287 commitments (39%) are related to education**, showing the huge success of the HESI and SE4All.

## 2.4. Deliverables of commitments

The deliverables vary a great deal among the commitments. Below is an overview of the main categories of deliverables mentioned in the commitments (one commitment may have several kinds of deliverables).<sup>46</sup> Unsurprisingly, education/research, RSE, efforts to reduce companies' carbon footprints and investment in clean energy are the largest categories. Once again, this reflects the success of the UNGC, Sustainable Energy for All and the HESI. It is therefore also interesting to look at the types of deliverables of the commitments made directly on the Rio+20 platform, as they are very different from the other types.

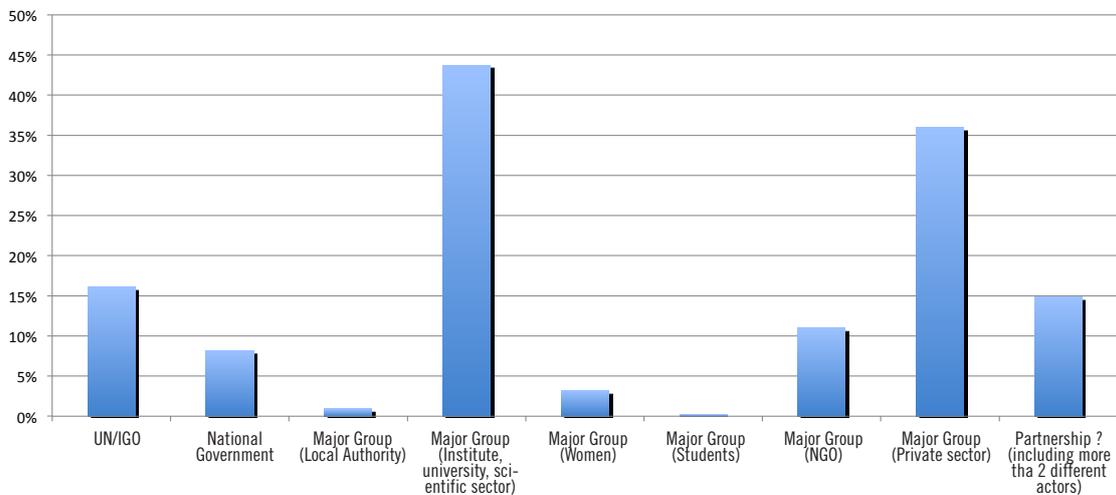
As we can see below, when we remove the commitments from the three main initiatives, the results are quite different. While the majority of the commitments concern capacity building projects, a significant number are also aimed at public awareness (31%), creating a new network or partnership (17%) or can be seen as equivalent to public policy (19%). Although these are important outcomes, as we will show with tangible examples in specific areas, they are not necessarily the most appropriate for a global registry of commitments.

The specificity of the deliverables as well as their levels of ambition vary greatly. **Although the criteria established by the Rio+20 Secretariat are**

45. Note that the amount of funding has not been considered for this estimation.

46. Please note that the categories mentioned here have been established for this study and can be discussed. The commitment-makers did not specify the type of their deliverables. A commitment may have several deliverables and encompass several categories.

**Figure 2.** Proportion of the commitments including the different types of actors

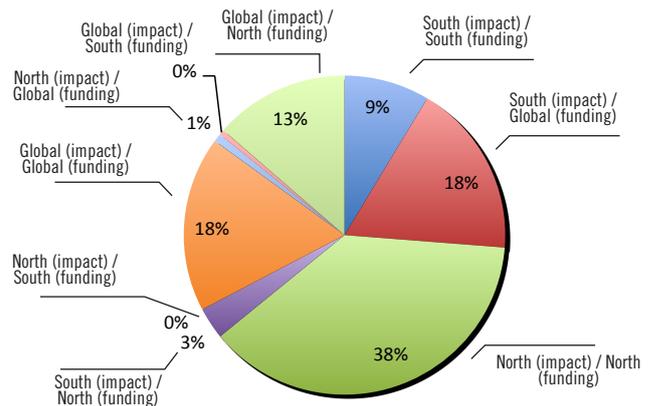


quite clear, and although the Secretariat has reviewed all the commitments individually, some of them do not respect these criteria. Most of the deliverables include specific targets and deadlines,<sup>47</sup> but others, perhaps because of technical difficulties, have expired deadlines (around 50 commitments give 1969 as their date of completion) or very vague deliverables.<sup>48</sup>

### 2.5. Diversity of commitments

Overall, the range of the commitments is so broad that it is important to question this aspect. Their scope includes such areas as: encouragement to adopt a vegetarian lifestyle, practicing yoga and promoting peace,<sup>49</sup> planting up to 100 million

**Figure 3.** Geographical distribution of impacts and funding



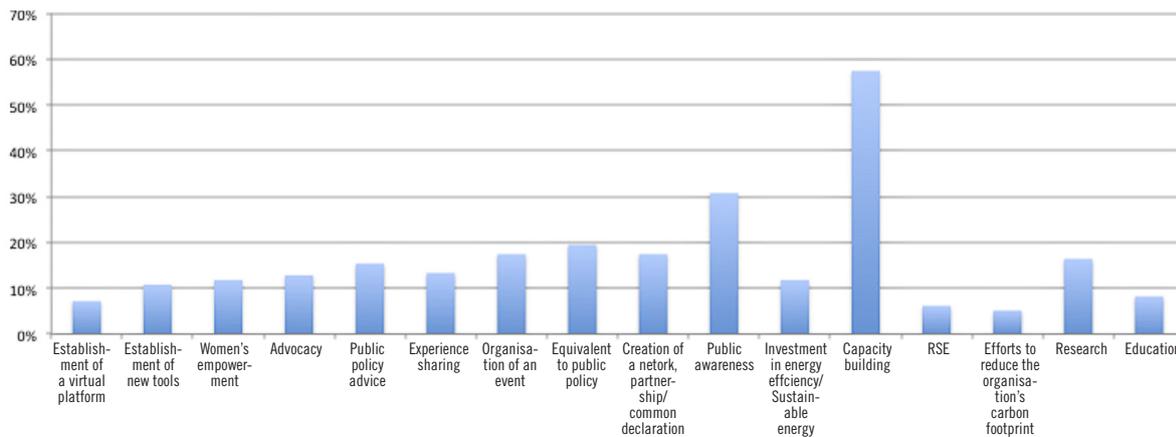
47. Among many examples, those of companies promising in UNGC or SE4All to reduce their carbon footprints are generally quite specific.

48. See for example the deliverables of the University of Valladolid “Current projects already underway by 31 December 1969”, of IUCN “The proportion of the most important areas for biodiversity effectively managed for the conservation of species, ecosystems and genetic diversity increases to sustain livelihoods and a green economy by 2016”, or of the Japanese Ministry of the Environment “Input to the Rio+20 Outcome Document by 2011” and “Promote greening of the economy and implement initiatives regionally and globally by 2012”, respectively accessible at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=540>, <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=480> and <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=439> (last visited 9 August 2012).

49. See the commitments by Sri Swami Madhavananda World Peace Council at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=519> (last visited 9 August 2012).



Figure 6. Types of commitments (Without HESI, UNGC and SE4All)



trees,<sup>50</sup> companies going carbon neutral,<sup>51</sup> countries achieving 100% renewable energy by 2020,<sup>52</sup> providing energy services to 500 million people by 2030,<sup>53</sup> publishing books,<sup>54</sup> organising advocacy campaigns or events,<sup>55</sup> and mobilising 100 million euros to promote sustainable finance. This diversity is not surprising, since the registry was open to a wide range of commitments, but it may make the follow-up process and the accessibility of the registry more complex. It was already a huge task for the Rio+20 secretariat to review such a variety and large number of commitments that were put together in different ways, sometimes in different languages, and to try to make them adopt a common format. Indeed, it was not easy to find a common form and common requirements that would fit all the commitments, but the Rio+20

secretariat managed to do so, establishing a form broad enough to be filled by any kind of commitment, clear enough to not alarm the commitment-makers and specific enough to gather the key information and to ensure at least one funded deliverable with a completion date.

For the follow-up process, **if we ask commitment-makers to report on their deliverables when their dates expire, or even beforehand, in order to obtain a progress report, then the diversity of the commitments will probably not be a problem.** However, **if we want to go further and to try to compare the commitments or to establish overall assessments of what the Rio+20 commitments have achieved, then such diversity will become a problem and it may prove easier to think about common indicators and compatible reporting, at least within some thematic areas.**

Finally, the advocacy nature of certain commitments raises some concerns, as instead of specifically committing to self-improvement, it deals with campaigns to get other people to achieve something. In total, 13% of the commitments posted directly on the Rio+20 website (excluding HESI) have deliverables related to advocacy, with some of them even aimed at organising advocacy during the Rio+20 process.<sup>56</sup> These are not particularly hard to follow up, as they always have clear deliverables, but their completion would not necessarily mean that something has actually been achieved, only that the advocacy campaign is over. Moreover, the question of which causes should

50. Rio+20 Secretariat, Summary of Voluntary Commitments registered at Rio+20 available at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/790Summary%20of%20Voluntary%20Commitments%20Registered%20at%20Rio20%20v6.pdf> (last visited 9 August 2012).

51. See Microsoft's commitment at <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/actions-commitments/commitments/single/carbon-neutrality> (last visited 9 August 2012).

52. See Tuvalu's commitment at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=253> (last visited 9 August 2012).

53. See European Commission's Commitment at <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/actions-commitments/commitments/single/energizing-development-initiative> (last visited 9 August 2012).

54. See the commitment by the International Institute-Association of Regional Ecological Problems at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=76> (last visited 9 August 2012).

55. As an example, the commitment of the Students on Ice Alumni Delegation at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=60> (last visited 9 August 2012).

56. Such as the World Environmental Constitution's supporters, who wanted to ensure that it would be part of Ukraine's official proposal for Rio+20 at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=76> (last visited 9 August 2012).

or should not be supported is highly political and complex given the number of possible advocacy campaigns and could lead to some very sensitive situations. Therefore, **pure advocacy commitments should be avoided.**

## 2.6. Commitment resources

The Rio+20 registry insisted on the need for existing and precise funding to support commitments. Some exceptions exist,<sup>57</sup> but most of the commitments specified their resources. The Rio+20 secretariat announced a total pledge of \$513 billion from the different stakeholders to achieve their commitments in the coming years. It is not easy to establish a global amount. **The commitment-makers were asked to specify the resources devoted to the commitments, but most of them (90%) did not express these in a monetary form, but rather in an in-kind manner.** It is difficult to know, for example, what “2-3 staff”, “all requisite engineering and other staff requirements” or “all requisite company requirements”<sup>58</sup> mean in dollars.

**It is even harder to establish how much of the resources promised are new and additional.** Staff and in-kind resources, for example, may not be new. Even when estimated in dollars, it is not clear if they are additional or not, as they may have already been part of the budget of an organisation. The fact that among the partnerships estimating their funding in dollars the IGO and national government ones represent only a small part of the funding tends to indicate that most of the \$513 billion comes from additional sources (private sector, NGOs). An estimation of the amount indicated by IGO or Member States’ commitments shows that they pledged around \$33 billion, which represent 6% of the total indicated by the Rio+20 secretariat. If we add to this the commitment of the development banks to mobilise an additional \$175 billion in investment for sustainable low-carbon transport,<sup>59</sup> the percentage goes up to 40%, but the latter commitment is clearly a “game changer”<sup>60</sup>

57. Several commitments indicate “n/a” for their resources, such as the United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs’ commitment at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=367> (last visited 9 August 2012) and numerous SE4All commitments that did not specify their resources.

58. See <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=62> (last visited 9 August 2012).

59. See the commitment at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&nr=1291&type=230&menu=38> (last visited 9 August 2012).

60. Statement by Holger Dalkmann, Director of EMBARQ, at <http://www.wri.org/press/2012/06/>

and is new funding. Contrary to the Johannesburg partnerships, **NGOs<sup>61</sup> and the private sector<sup>62</sup> are responsible for most of the funding pledges.**

## 2.7. The “additional” aspect of commitments

The question of whether or not a commitment is new is quite important if we aim, as stated by the Rio+20 Secretariat note on voluntary commitments,<sup>63</sup> to measure only “new” commitments “or extension of an existing commitment”. However, this is not always easy to determine. As an example, very few of the 745 commitments were actually created during the Rio+20 summit and very few commitments, except the ones consisting in advocacy, side-events or joint declarations<sup>64</sup> for the Rio+20 summit, actually mention “Rio+20”. Most of them, in particular the ones by UN Global Compact, were part of the companies’ environmental responsibility strategies but were announced or launched in Rio, as part of the UN Global Compact’s *Rio+20 Corporate Sustainability Forum* or of other UN agencies’ events and efforts to shape a positive message around the summit. Some other commitments<sup>65</sup> are part of on-going programmes, but consist in greater achievements or the launch of specific projects, such as the major initiative by Schneider Electric, Bipbob, which has been aiming for several years already at “developing access to safe, reliable, affordable and clean energy for people at the Base of the

statement-development-banks-announce-game-changer-sustainable-transport-rio20 (last visited 9 August 2012).

61. Such as IUCN, which pledged around \$740 million.

62. We can mention in particular the Bank of America’s pledge to commit \$50 billion over the next 10 years, Renault-Nissan Alliance’s pledge to commit 4 billion euros to commercialise affordable zero-emission vehicles and the EDP Foundation’s pledge to commit 20 million euros for energy projects with solar solutions and capacity building in off-grid communities, respectively at <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/actions-commitments/commitments/single/50-billion-10-year-environmental-business-initiative>, <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/actions-commitments/commitments/single/mass-production-of-affordable-electric-vehicles> and <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/actions-commitments/commitments/single/access-to-energy-for-development> (last visited 9 August 2012).

63. See supra 19.

64. See the following examples: The SustainAGRO Initiative at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=73> and the MDB Joint statement for Rio+20 at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=506> (last visited 9 August 2012).

65. See, for example, the commitments by UNDP or other UN agencies.

Pyramid worldwide”. It committed during Rio+20 to new goals and presented a new partnership with Grameen Shakti, founded by Muhammad Yunus, 2006 Nobel Peace Prize, to create a social business, Grameen Schneider Electric,<sup>66</sup> that will provide electric services to disadvantaged people in Bangladesh. Others were simply not precise enough to determine whether they were a new commitment or just the continuation of on-going efforts. However, some were clearly new and launched during Rio+20, such as the initiatives by the State of Paraná (Brazil) to commit to adopting sustainability strategies in its 399 municipalities, training its employees and investing in broadband internet,<sup>67</sup> as well as the endorsement by 200 CEOs of Brazilian companies of the “Business Contributions to the Promotion of a Green And Inclusive Economy”, which lays out 10 commitments to be made over the next 20 years.<sup>68</sup>

After discussions with the Rio+20 Secretariat, it seems that the key element taken into consideration to ensure the “additionality” of commitments has been the fact of holding deliverables to a future date. As long as the deliverables had future dates of completion, and that the other conditions (specificity, measurability, budget) were met, the commitment was accepted. A tremendous amount of time and information would be required to check the “new” nature of a commitment, given the variety of actors and commitments, and this would not necessarily be a good use of resources. Moreover, if a commitment was decided several months before Rio+20 but its authors want to formally register it in the registry, should it be refused because it was decided beforehand? Probably not, because this would not make a great deal of sense, because experience sharing is also an important aim of the registry and, in this respect, the date on which the commitments were elaborated does not really matter. However, the aim of the registry is not to list all the voluntary commitments ever made. Commitments **should have been established during the Rio+20 period (up to several months before). In the future, the registry should be developed**

**on an on-going basis and this problem will be avoided, as it will be possible to register commitments as they are made.** There will not be the “retroactive” effect we saw with the launch of the registry.

Finally, **Rio+20 helped to create momentum** to register new commitments, to launch new initiatives and to encourage existing ones to move forward. **Some may have used this opportunity to recycle their old commitments or their regular programmes,** but they are a **minority and may be identified over the next years thanks to the transparency of the registry.** The “new” aspect **should be encouraged and should remain a condition.** If it is clear that a commitment is not new or if someone demonstrates that it is not new, **it should not be accepted or should be removed from the platform.**

## 2.8. The “voluntary aspect” of commitments

The question of whether a commitment is purely voluntary or not, meaning that the actor concerned is making a real effort rather than simply respecting its mandate or complying with an already existing legislation, is also important. The idea behind the registry for voluntary commitments is to compile supplementary efforts and to evaluate their accomplishments. However, if we were merely to follow the enforcement of legislation, this registry would be just a kind of “international police”, assuming Member States’ roles, which is not its aim and is not really possible. However, as with the “new” aspect, it is very difficult to determine the “voluntary” aspect. So many regulations exist in so many different areas and countries that enormous amounts of resources and knowledge would be needed to decide whether a commitment is additional or not. (See Annex 1, *The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative*, for more details on this aspect).

In the future, **if the registry is organised by thematic areas or by regions, it could be possible to work with experts and to use existing knowledge on sustainable development policies in different countries to better discuss the additional aspect of the commitments.** For now, given the variety and the number of commitments, we can only count on **commitment-makers’ sincerity and on transparency to enable public monitoring** (so that, for example, a local/national NGO can denounce a commitment that is only compliance with a local/national regulation).

Moreover, some commitments, including many by UN specialised agencies and programmes, do not seem to be fundamentally different from their

66. [http://www2.schneider-electric.com/sites/corporate/fr/presse/communiqués/viewer-communiqués.page?c\\_filepath=/templatedata/Content/Press\\_Release/data/fr/shared/2012/06/20120620\\_schneider\\_electric\\_et\\_grameen\\_shakti\\_creent\\_grameen\\_schneider\\_electric.xml](http://www2.schneider-electric.com/sites/corporate/fr/presse/communiqués/viewer-communiqués.page?c_filepath=/templatedata/Content/Press_Release/data/fr/shared/2012/06/20120620_schneider_electric_et_grameen_shakti_creent_grameen_schneider_electric.xml) (last visited 9 August 2012).

67. See its numerous commitments at <http://business.un.org/en/commitments/1592>, <http://business.un.org/en/commitments/1572> and <http://business.un.org/en/commitments/1582> (last visited 9 August 2012).

68. See the commitment at <http://business.un.org/en/commitments/1632> and the declaration at <http://business.un.org/es/assets/8d892524-e3ac-4bb6-a5be-6d34f9f3852.pdf> (last visited 9 August 2012).

regular activities, except maybe in that they are related to sustainable development. Is this a sufficient condition? We can wonder why 100% of the commitments made in the category “gender equality” are by UN Women and 50% of the “sustainable cities” commitments are by UN-Habitat. It does not seem that a global registry for voluntary commitments is intended to monitor the implementation of UN specialised agencies or programmes’ mandates. This is simply not its role, as a mandate is not a voluntary commitment, but is in fact an imposed agenda. Therefore, commitments made by UN agencies or programmes should be welcomed, but only when they actually represent additional efforts or partnerships with other entities, such as most of those made by the UNEP, GEF or Development Banks. On the same note, the deliverable from the Japanese Ministry of the Environment consisting in providing “Input to the Rio+20 Outcome Document”<sup>69</sup> is not really appropriate as all countries were invited to provide input, and a UN global registry is not intended to monitor the Members States’ participation in the UN process. In this regard, the commitments equivalent to public policies require careful selection. As long as they are made specific enough to be reported on and consist in new and ambitious efforts by the countries (such as most of the numerous commitments by Mauritius), these commitments demonstrate good examples for other countries and create good synergies, as the Barbados Declaration commitments show, with governments committing to increase the share of renewable energy in their countries. Finally, some commitments by think tanks and NGOs also consist in a presentation of their ongoing programmes rather than commitments to supplementary efforts.<sup>70</sup>

As a rule, the registry **should not be used as a mere showcase for an organisation’s programmes, but should instead promote additional efforts with clear added value compared to the institution’s “business as usual” work.**

69. See <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=439> (last visited 9 August 2012).

70. See the commitments by IUCN with the aim that “The proportion of the most important areas for biodiversity effectively managed for the conservation of species, ecosystems and genetic diversity increases to sustain livelihoods and a green economy 2016” and “Trends in benefits that people derive from selected ecosystem services e.g. food security and access to water increase. 2016” at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=480> and <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=479> (last visited 9 August 2012).

## 2.9. The motivations of commitment-makers

We can only speculate as to the motivations of the commitment-makers when posting their commitments on the Rio+20 registry. We can build on what we know from the UNGC.<sup>71</sup> The companies presenting their commitments there aim to improve their reputation and build more customer trust. Others want to share practices and to show what they are doing. Some NGOs and think tanks have also used the Rio+20 registry as a showcase for their projects, but most of them have presented partnerships to develop monitoring or joint research on new aspects. Finally, some seem to use the registry as a label, advertising the fact that their commitment is posted there,<sup>72</sup> which is a problem that the UNGC also faced. It is important to highlight **that getting a commitment posted on the UNGC or on the Rio+20 registry is not to be seen as a reward or a label.** It is in fact the other way round: it means that the commitment-maker adheres to the UNGC principles or wants to join a global effort towards sustainable development. Therefore, the UNGC tried to enforce a strict policy regarding the use of its logo, and the Rio+20 registry will certainly have to do the same. However, it is important that **organisations advertise their participation in these initiatives and promote them**, like the Instituto Superior de Engenharia de Lisboa,<sup>73</sup> which added the Rio+20 logo to the front page of its website, indicating that it supports this initiative.

## 2.10. Transparency, reporting and accessibility

The basic concept of the current Rio+20 registry is to have registered, tangible deliverables with a clear timeline, and to ensure their follow-up by asking the commitment-makers whether they have met their objectives by the indicated dates, or possibly requesting that they send periodic reports on their progress in meeting their deliverables even before their deadline. However, if we want to **ensure a more consistent follow-up and**

71. L. Fall and M. Zahran, United Nations corporate partnerships: The role and functioning of the Global Compact, Joint Inspection Unit, JIU/REP/2010/9, 2010 available at [http://www.unjiu.org/data/reports/2010/JIU.REP.2010.9\\_For%2520Printing\\_17%2520January%25202011.pdf](http://www.unjiu.org/data/reports/2010/JIU.REP.2010.9_For%2520Printing_17%2520January%25202011.pdf) (last visited 9 August 2012).

72. See the example of the Carbon War Room’s mention of “UN-registered commitments” at <http://www.carbonwarroom.com/news/2012/07/09/news-bulletin-carbon-war-room-commits-over-1b-rio20> (last visited 9 August 2012).

73. <http://www.isel.pt/> (last visited 9 August 2012).

## Box 2: A closer look at commitments in specific areas

Eighteen commitments on sustainable transport

By looking at the 18 commitments on sustainable transport directly posted on the Rio+20 registry, we can see that most of them are funded and specific, and aim to publish and share guides, reports, guidelines, new tools, metrics or indicators for sustainable transport, and to provide training and advice for public policy (to integrate cycling, walking and transport facilities in a safe manner – to “share the roads” – and to develop public transportation). We can note one very ambitious and somewhat vague commitment by the International Association of Public Transport to “double the market share of public transport worldwide by 2025”<sup>1</sup> and two commitments by the Carbon War Room on very specific projects for renewable jet fuels and vessel efficiency. We can also mention one commitment by the international intergovernmental organisations to promote fuel efficiency and another by air transport industries to cap net aircraft carbon emissions and to halve carbon emissions from aviation by 2050 compared to 2005. There is also a commitment by the development banks, which we have already mentioned, pledging a huge amount of investment to promote sustainable transportation (\$175 billion), but the other partnerships also have substantial means (amounting to a total of \$150 million).

Overall, these commitments correspond quite well to what we would expect in this category. We could further discuss their “new” and “additional” aspects, but what seems the most surprising is the absence of any apparent coordination between the initiatives. We have already mentioned that **a thematic approach to the registry would help to assess the questions of additionally and novelty, but would also encourage exchanges between the initiatives**, as they all have similar aims on the whole. Finally, it **would avoid duplicating indicators and guides and would provide more easily accessible resources**.

The same can be said about the commitments related to “biodiversity, forests and other ecosystems”, which mention software, tools, technology, and guidelines for identifying, mapping, protecting and monitoring biodiversity, with one of them aimed at harmonising the “current models and datasets of terrestrial, freshwater and marine biodiversity”. It would be useful to have a secretariat or an advisory board for these commitments, in close collaboration with the IPBES, to ensure that

1. <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=204> (last visited 10 August 2012).

efforts are coordinated. Similarly, there are various mentions among the commitments of methodologies and reports on the development of biodiversity and of the value of ecosystem services. It is important that this research is managed and coordinated in order to avoid a multiplication of different methodologies.

### Thirteen commitments on sustainable cities

Of the 13 partnerships in the sustainable cities category, 2 of them are not clearly related to sustainable cities: the Civil Society Partnership Voluntary Commitment, dealing with public participation and actions, and the commitment by Mauritius to reduce carbon emissions by increasing energy efficiency and energy savings in industries<sup>2</sup>. The other commitments are aimed at sharing experiences, establishing systems, tools and observatories, and encouraging legislation that fosters equitable and sustainable urban development, especially for the poorest populations. **It is essential to ensure coherence among these initiatives, especially for the tools and standards.**

Altogether, 7 of the 13 commitments are made by UN-Habitat alone, which is quite surprising, as we would expect UN-Habitat to work on cities as one of its core activities, and these seem more like UN specialised agency programmes than new and voluntary commitments. We can highlight the commitment made by ICLEI to record more energy and climate commitments on the carbon Cities Climate Registry (cCCR)<sup>3</sup>. At Rio+20, 164 local governments from 21 countries had already participated. Finally, it is a pity that more actors dealing with sustainable cities did not list their commitments here, such as the C40 Cities Climate Leadership Group, a network bringing together large cities committed to taking climate-related action, which launched a partnership with the World Bank and the US Climate and Clean Air Initiative to establish a network to assist local governments in reducing methane emissions through solid waste management<sup>4</sup>.

2. See <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=12&menu=153&nr=371&theme=4> (last visited 10 August 2012).

3. See <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=220> (last visited 10 August 2012).

4. For more details, see the C40 website at <http://www.c40.org/c40events/rio-c40-megacity-mayors-taking-action-on-climate-change> (last visited 10 August 2012).

to make information public and transparent, a link to the source should be indicated. At present, after a brief search of the 745 commitments, it appears that **most of them (52%) do not provide a link to a specific website presenting their initiative**.<sup>74</sup> This is also a pity, because if a commitment is clearly advertised on the institution’s website, it creates an incentive to respect it as the company’s customers or the organisation’s members will see it.

74. A specific page, meaning a website page where the commitment is clearly explained and the information updated (not just one line in a press release or a few paragraphs in the annual sustainability report)

Moreover, a small but significant number of commitments were made in native languages.<sup>75</sup> While it is perfectly normal that the pages on the institutions’ websites are in the native language, it would be useful to **provide an English translation of all the commitments posted in the registry** (and possibly to also maintain the version in the native language to ensure accessibility to the

75. See, among other examples, commitments in French: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=435> and <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=401> and in Spanish: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=536> (last visited 9 August 2012).

registry for the people directly concerned by the commitment).

Finally, few of the commitments posted directly on the Rio+20 website mention reporting. The commitments by the UNGC or the HESI are obliged to report, as this is part of the UNGC principles and of the HESI declaration. The rest of the commitments will only have to report on their specific objectives and say whether or not they have been met. Given the large number and the variety of deliverables, it could be useful to **have common reporting standards, such as the UNGC guidelines and the Global Reporting Initiative**. If we want to assess the global achievement of voluntary commitments in a sector, it could also be useful to have **common indicators within this sector that enable a rapid analysis of what has been achieved and what remains to be done**.

### 3. TOWARDS A GLOBAL REGISTRY OF VOLUNTARY COMMITMENTS

#### 3.1. Purpose of a global registry of voluntary commitments

Paragraph 283 of the Rio+20 outcome document mandates the Secretary-General “to compile these commitments and facilitate access to other registries that have compiled commitments, in an internet-based registry. The registry should make information about the commitments fully transparent and accessible to the public, and it should be periodically updated”.<sup>76</sup> Based on this analysis of the commitments, on lessons learnt from Johannesburg and new ideas from the HESI and the Natural Resources Defense Council’s Cloud of Commitments, some conditions should be considered to make these commitments successful in the years to come.

First, **the momentum should not be lost**. A lot of time and thought will be necessary to establish a coherent and efficient global registry, but before reaching its final and “gold” version, commitments already posted should be followed up and should not be forgotten. **The first follow-up process can be very simple and pragmatic**, asking the commitment-makers where they are achieving their deliverables and translating this into clear indicators for readers (with colours indicating the level of achievement: achieved/to be achieved, on time/late/collapsed for example), but it should not be too complicated or stringent and should

ensure a very regular follow-up with the commitment-makers to keep them on board.

Second, over the months and years to come, **global discussions with all the stakeholders, including the commitment-makers**, should be organised to deliberate on what an ideal global registry for commitments would look like. Creating a user-friendly global registry, where anyone could find a commitment made by an institution, examine it, understand what it means, see if it has been achieved or not, and, potentially, comment on this commitment, and which presents periodic assessments of what voluntary commitments for sustainable development have achieved, is a real challenge but could be a crucial legacy of Rio+20. In this respect, the fact that paragraph 283 invites the Secretary-General to establish this registry is a good signal and demonstrates the high-level attention this initiative requires.

Below are some ideas to contribute to this ongoing debate on a global registry and follow-up process for the commitments:

- It should not be seen as “the” holistic registry. Many registries already exist and the one announced at Rio+20 should be **an aggregation, a global index, of all the existing registries related to sustainable development** and should be built on existing initiatives. The success of the Rio+20 commitments comes precisely from the aggregation of successful initiatives and existing registries.
- Commitments **should be strictly selected**, based on clear criteria, including funding, accountable deliverables, a timeline for completion, and “new” and “voluntary” aspects.
- A **solid framework for regularly reviewing commitments** should be established to ensure that promises are kept, although the registry is not a label and would never have the means to verify their achievement on the ground. It would rely on public monitoring and information transparency, and it could also encourage commitment-makers to obtain certification.
- All information posted by the commitment-makers should be **sourced and transparent** and a page on their own website should present the commitments and updated information.
- Its governance could be ensured by **an advisory board**, with representatives of different stakeholders, from the different regions, in order to pool competencies and expertise. It does not have to be a “UN initiative”; it could integrate civil society in a **new governance model**.

76. Supra i.

### 3.2. The “Cloud of Commitments” as a first version of a global registry

Since September 2011, the Natural Resources Defense Council has been working on a global registry for voluntary commitments. Their idea started from the observation that a huge number of voluntary commitments for sustainable development had been made over the last few decades, by all types of stakeholders, and that many new ones would probably emerge at Rio+20. Although many databases already existed to register them, there was no global assessment of what these commitments had achieved. The NRDC international team thought that Rio+20 should be an opportunity to create such a registry in order to aggregate and track commitments. Based on public monitoring and interaction with citizens around the world through new technologies, this registry would help to ensure that promises are kept.

During the Rio+20 preparation process, NRDC and the Boston University Pardee Center presented a mock-up of this registry,<sup>77</sup> then called “EarthPromises”,<sup>78</sup> and organised side-events to present it. The idea was extremely well received and NRDC and the Rio+20 Secretariat worked together closely to discuss the development of such a global registry.

During Rio+20, NRDC launched a website (the “Cloud of Commitments”<sup>79</sup>) and started to aggregate commitments from different platforms. The NRDC team and its partners are currently discussing the evolution of this cloud, and its linkage with the “internet-based registry” mentioned in the Rio+20 outcome document is not very clear yet. To make its Cloud of Commitments more universal, NRDC will have to work with many other stakeholders and continue to aggregate more platforms, to develop accountability mechanisms and to increase user interaction. However, this 1.0 version is already a very interesting step towards what could be a global registry for commitments and, although the cloud is quite recent, it is already possible to highlight some interesting features:

- The interface is more **simple, easily accessible, user-friendly and dynamic** than the current Rio+20 registry. The commitments and categories have been simplified and their number has been reduced (several commitments made

by one organisation being pulled into one commitment on behalf of the commitment-maker). The website **highlights some commitments using various supports, allows multi-criteria searches, ensures a common format for all commitments, whichever platform they come from, and encourages the sharing of commitments through social media.**

- Commitments all come from **existing platforms**, which ensures a selection of the commitments; they cannot be posted directly on the website.
- **A large number of platforms have been aggregated:** Sustainable Energy for All, the Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments and Partnerships Registry, the Global Compact, the Corporate Eco Forum, the Partnership on Sustainable Low Carbon Transport (SLoCaT), Earth Summit Watch and the Access Initiative.
- **The cloud as a pledge-reminder:** The registry was updated in real time during Rio+20. NRDC staff and volunteers, in coordination with other partners, registered new commitments on the Earth Summit Watch platform<sup>80</sup> by attending Rio+20 side-events and following announcements made during the Rio+20 preparation process. These commitments were immediately registered on the cloud database, which should guarantee, if the cloud meets its objective, that they will not be forgotten after Rio+20, that they will be followed up and that regular reports on progress will be requested. **This is a good example of how a future global registry could be used during events and international conferences as a tool to show whether or not promises are actually kept.**
- As the analysis of the 745 Rio+20 commitments shows, an organisation **by specific areas** would help to better contextualise the commitments, to encourage experience sharing and to avoid redundant initiatives. **Thematic advisory boards** could also be established to help determine clear criteria for the “new” and additional aspects of their commitments.
- Although the commitments are voluntary and the reporting format should not become too stringent, it would be useful to have **common indicators on specific areas** to see how well the commitment-maker is doing on different aspects. This would act as a reference framework, prevent “greenwashing” and reinforce the ambition of commitments and commitment-makers, as the reporting would not only concern what has been promised, but would also take

77. <http://www.nrdc.org/international/rio-2012/files/earthpromises.pdf>

78. <http://www.nrdc.org/international/rio-2012/accountability.asp>

79. <http://www.cloudofcommitments.org/>

80. <http://www.summitwatch.org/index.html>

a comprehensive approach. These indicators should be carefully developed to allow flexibility. Commitment-makers could be permitted to not answer some of the indicators, but if they do so, this will be clearly specified.

- The common indicators would also help to **establish global assessments on particular thematic areas**. This could be done by journalists, think tanks, UN agencies or the UN Secretary-General<sup>81</sup> in order to present the achievement of voluntary commitments in a particular field and to highlight the efforts and priorities needed from government legislation. These reports could be **regularly presented during the future forum on sustainable development**. This could also be an important **tool for assessing the progress made in meeting the future Sustainable Development Goals, another major outcome of Rio+20**.
- It is essential to create the conditions for **dynamic exchanges on the platform** so as to keep the commitments alive. This platform should be user-friendly and accessible, including an elaborate research function, different supports, pictures, videos, etc., to highlight commitments and enable interaction. The 50 million people who joined the Future We Want campaign on social media and the 1 million people who voted for the recommendations of the Rio+20 Dialogues have demonstrated the public interest in sustainable development.
- Public participation should be a key element both **for the promotion of the commitments through social media sharing and for the reporting process, by means of “bottom-up accountability”**. Internet users do not lack imagination to denounce, or “name and shame” what they believe to be “greenwashing”, as the Twitter account “UNGCCritics”<sup>82</sup> demonstrates.
- Regular **“in-person” meetings** are also important. They may be organised on a thematic basis and they would enable experience sharing and the promotion of initiatives.
- An **arbitration mechanism** should be developed to resolve potential disputes and to decide on the exclusion of a commitment if it does not meet the registry guidelines.
- A **secretariat** to keep the registry up-to-date and dynamic and to advertise it in order to gather more commitments would also be needed. It would not necessarily require a lot of resources, and it could be funded by a small contribution from commitment-makers or by organisations willing to devote some of their resources to the registry, as NRDC did with the Cloud of Commitments.
- Future forums on sustainable development during international summits should be the opportunity to **build momentum to register commitments**.
- The registry should **become a trusted reference**. International conferences leading to pledges would then **record these on the registry to prove their sincere intention of realising them**.
- **Some means will be necessary to establish such a global registry**. A lot has already been done during the Rio+20 preparation process and the sharing of different resources among the actors involved could help. However, to develop the platform, to keep the registry updated and to finance its secretariat and activities, some additional means will be needed.

## CONCLUSION

Rio+20 has been criticised for the low level of ambition of its outcomes. However, alongside the largely disappointing official negotiations, Rio+20 brought some very interesting new components to reinforce the delivery of sustainable development in the coming years. The voluntary commitments initiative demonstrates the willingness of non-state actors to be part of the global efforts towards sustainable development, and the global registry mentioned in the Rio+20 outcome document to ensure the follow-up of these commitments could be a successful legacy of Rio+20.

As this analysis shows, the 745 commitments do not all have the same level of ambition. Their means, funding, description and deliverables are highly varied, as is their geographical distribution. The criteria established by the Rio+20 secretariat to accept commitments have not always been respected and there is a lack of coordination among commitments and of compatible indicators to easily compare and assess their achievements. However, there is great potential in this initiative, as some particularly successful commitments show.

The development of a new version of an international registry of commitments will require global discussions with all the stakeholders, including the other registries aggregated, and a lot

81. Following the model of the steering group established by the World Bank, the ESMAP and the IEA to produce a Baseline Report for the UN SE4ALL initiative and an associated long-term tracking framework, more information at <http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/actions-commitments/commitments/single/un-se4all-baseline-report-and-design-of-tracking-framework> (last visited 14 August 2012).

82. <https://twitter.com/UNGCCritics/> (last visited 14 August 2012).

of work to build trust and to ensure it becomes a global reference. As previous experience has shown, a database simply compiling commitments and some reporting information is not enough. To seriously and consistently follow up so many diverse commitments, several challenges are raised that need to be discussed and resolved. This study has mentioned some of these and suggested some ideas based on the lessons learnt from other experiences, but the debate must go on. Think tanks, universities, UN agencies, national governments, NGOs, private companies, other registries and all the actors who participated in these voluntary commitments should take over this registry and begin this global debate. In this respect, the new UN website on sustainable development,<sup>83</sup> which features voluntary commitments and presents an improved interface (more accessible and easier to use), is a good first step. However, regarding the establishment of the online platform for voluntary commitments, the UN Rio+20 implementation framework,<sup>84</sup> which mentions several UN agencies (DESA, UN Regional Commissions and FAO), does not specify any timeframe is surprising. These commitments should not be forgotten once again. They need to deliver and to keep their promises. A multi-stakeholder, transparent and global registry reinforcing accountability and allowing for global assessment of the achievements of voluntary commitments in different areas would be a major outcome for Rio+20.

Moreover, such a registry could reinforce the other interesting achievements of Rio+20, which

IDDRI already highlighted in previous publications.<sup>85</sup> First, the Rio+20 thematic Dialogues ensured a link between civil society, experts and official negotiations and established 30 innovative recommendations. These dialogues should certainly be improved, but the concept should be repeated in all the future forums or international conferences on sustainable development. The registry could also contribute to these dialogues both by providing assessments of progress made and remaining gaps in the implementation of sustainable development for each thematic area, and by using the recommendations of the Dialogues to encourage the commitment-makers to implement them. Second, Rio+20 initiated a process to establish Sustainable Development Goals. The registry could be a useful tool to evaluate the achievement of these goals on the voluntary commitments side in a transparent, updated, clear and accountable manner.

Finally, Rio+20 may have been seen as a disappointing conference, but it is not over yet as its legacy brings promising initiatives. All the stakeholders concerned should take over this legacy and contribute to building a global registry to follow up the achievements of voluntary commitments, as well as continuing the dialogues initiated in Rio and becoming part of the elaboration and achievement of Sustainable Development Goals. This would not compensate for the lack of cooperation and trust among Member States and their inability to decide on more ambitious policies, but it could at least contribute, at its level, to further implementing sustainable development and improve its current achievements. ■

83. <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/commitments.html>.

84. Available at: [sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1136REVISED%20Rio%20Implementation%20Framework%20-%2027%20Sept%202012.pdf](http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/1136REVISED%20Rio%20Implementation%20Framework%20-%2027%20Sept%202012.pdf).

85. Including in the article “Rio+20 et après ? available at <http://www.iddri.org/iddri/Lettre-de-l-iddri/Rio+20-et-apres>.

## APPENDIX

### The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative as a paradigm

The Higher Education Sustainability Initiative (HESI) is one of the successful initiatives resulting from Rio+20. It gained high-level support from Elisabeth Thompson, Rio+20 Executive Coordinator, and was mentioned by the Bulgarian President Rossen Plevneliev in his plenary speech. It consists in the signature of a common declaration for sustainable development, a presentation of the institution's plan for sustainability for the period 2012-2015 and an invitation to submit voluntary commitments to the Rio+20 registry. This initiative succeeded in compiling 270 voluntary commitments from 53 countries thanks to joint efforts by some very involved networks and outstanding individuals. It is also the result of a unique cooperation between UN agencies (such as UNESCO, the UN University system, the Academic Impact, the Global Compact, the Principles for Responsible Management Education initiative and the UNEP Environmental Education and Training Unit).

Initiatives by management institutions already existed, including for the Copenhagen Climate Summit,<sup>86</sup> new ones have been developed, such as the "50+20, Management Education for the World"<sup>87</sup> presented during Rio+20, and a considerable number of initiatives exist at the regional or national levels. But the HESI managed to bring together an outstanding number of diverse institutions and organisations in a very short period of time at the global level.

It is interesting to examine this initiative because it represents an example of a successful collection of numerous commitments and also because, to ensure the follow-up of these commitments, it will have to face the same challenges and the same questions as the ones we mentioned for a global registry. We can therefore consider some of these challenges and see how they could be resolved in the context of commitments related to higher education.

#### International summits as catalysts for initiatives

Although some may question the value of huge sustainable development summits such as

Rio+20 and criticise the level of ambition of their outcomes, one of their unquestionable advantages is that they are an opportunity to get more people involved in sustainable development initiatives. For the HESI, Rio+20 acted as a catalyst and created the conditions to get a great many institutions on board at the same time. Some institutions were already making efforts and wanted to show these and to go further, while others had just begun but wanted to be part of this global effort. It is interesting to highlight the role of some of the students, staff or directors involved in sustainable development in convincing the presidents of their institutions to sign the declaration. The summit also enabled several UN agencies that do not usually work together to collaborate and share their expertise.

#### Overview of the commitments

The institutions committed to take action in the five areas mentioned in the Declaration: teaching sustainable development concepts, encouraging research on sustainable development issues, greening their campuses, supporting sustainability efforts in the communities in which they are located and engaging and sharing results through international frameworks.<sup>88</sup> It seems that having a common framework for commitments greatly helped the institutions in their decision to join because they knew what was expected from them, and it also proposed some steps for action. The institutions were then asked to present their sustainability project for the period 2012-2015 and to submit voluntary commitments to be added to the Rio+20 registry. The commitments made generally mention the same types of activities, including: developing public awareness on sustainable development issues (almost all of them mention this), creating a new curriculum (such as new masters degrees or new classes)<sup>89</sup>, new research programmes,<sup>90</sup> campus management

88. More details on the Declaration text and on the commitments made available at <http://rio20.euromed-management.com/wp-content/uploads/2012/03/Higher-Education-Sustainability-Initiative-for-Rio-The-directory-of-Deans-Chancellors-committed.pdf> (last visited 14 August 2012).

89. See commitments by Al Farabi Kazakh National University at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=175>, Faculty of Administration and Business, University of Bucharest, Romania at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=192> or the Stevens Institute of Technology at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=340> (last visited 14 August 2012).

90. See the commitments by the Faculty of Economics, University of Ljubljana at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=199>, the

86. To find out more, see <http://www.cbs.dk/Forskning/Konferencer/PRME2009> (last visited 14 August 2012).

87. <http://50plus20.org/about/what-is-5020> (last visited 14 August 2012).

(waste management, energy efficiency, renewable energy, green roofs, sustainable transportation,<sup>91</sup> tree planting, encouraging organic food) and efforts to engage in and support local communities around the university.<sup>92</sup> The commitments and the deliverables vary greatly: some provide very precise descriptions with clear targets<sup>93</sup> while others only mention “projects germane to the Declaration” and “continuing efforts already underway 2015”.<sup>94</sup> It is interesting to note that several universities, mostly American and European ones, also mention standards and certification such as LEED, STARS or ISO14001.

### Geographical distribution of commitment-makers

The geographical distribution is also rather imbalanced. The majority of the institutions committed are located in Northern countries (83% of them), mostly in Europe and the US. Of the 23 institutions located in the South, most are in Nigeria, Argentina and Brazil. This can be explained by the way the initiative has been spread out (activation of existing networks and communications between

institutions), but the gap could be regulated by further outreach efforts in the under-represented regions.

### “New” and “voluntary” aspects of commitments

Most of the commitments demonstrate new or additional efforts. The majority of the universities already had sustainable development departments or strategies, but through this declaration, they made clear, public commitments for future achievements for the period 2012-2015.

As we explained, evaluating the “voluntary” aspect of commitments may be problematic and requires a good deal of knowledge, resources and time. However, this evaluation is easier for commitments related to a common theme as they refer to a restricted number of regulations. In the context of a registry, we can imagine that experts belonging to a potential advisory board could indicate which commitments go beyond the legislation in place in their respective countries. As an example, we can show that France has an obligation for higher education institutions to produce “green plans” to integrate sustainable development into their curriculum and their research programmes as well as into the management of their campuses. Should we then consider that the commitments made by French institutions to establish a “green plan” are not voluntary and should not be part of the registry? Probably not, because first, many institutions have not established “green plans” to date, and as the implementing decree has not yet been published this obligation has not actually been implemented; the institutions establishing “green plans” could thus still be seen as volunteers to a certain extent. Second, the obligation stipulates the establishment of a “green plan”, and although some guidelines are given, there is not yet a mandatory set of common targets to be met within a given timeline, and what the “green plan” has to achieve is quite flexible. It is therefore still interesting to share on-going initiatives and future achievements. However, if the “green plan” legislation were to become stricter and more specific, it could be useful to consider as voluntary only those commitments going beyond this regulation.

### A future registry to follow up higher education institutions’ commitments?

Now that the HESI has achieved what is an impressive result on the whole, discussions are underway to decide on its follow-up. The key challenge is to keep the signatory parties on board to ensure this global initiative remains active and that parties respect their commitments. The very same challenges we face for the global registry

Nizhny Novgorod State University of Architecture and Civil Engineering at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=342> and the Università Cattolica del Sacro Cuore at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=164> (last visited 14 August 2012).

91. To give only one example for each category: Bridgend College at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=218>, Richland College at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=396>, Università Degli Studi Di Udine at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=285>, Fashion Institute of Technology at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=309>, Université de Tours at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=395>, Catholic University of Portugal, <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=190>, Dickinson College at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=318> (last visited 14 August 2012).

92. See commitments by the Higher Education Sustainability Initiative-University of Enna Kore at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=170>, University of Wisconsin at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=551> and Addis Ababa University at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=113> (last visited 14 August 2012).

93. Such as HAN University of Applied Sciences at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=527> (last visited 14 August 2012).

94. Bunkyo University at <http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=1006&menu=153&nr=430> (last visited 14 August 2012).

are at stake, but it may be easier to solve them because of the limited scope of the initiative and the relative homogeneity of the commitments and commitment-makers (all being higher education institutions).

If we are to follow up the commitments made by the institutions, it will be necessary to confirm they have done what they said they would. As many universities are part of or intend to join the Principles for Responsible Management Education, an initiative by the UN Global Compact, they will have to regularly share information on progress.<sup>95</sup> However, as we have seen, communications and annual reports alone are not sufficient to ensure the solid follow-up, monitoring, and exchange of best practices. **The Decade of Education for Sustainable Development expires in two years; this could be an excellent opportunity to launch a registry for these commitments.** To this end, some ideas can be suggested that are potentially helpful for the global registry as well:

- **A multi-actor initiative, managed by an advisory board and assisted by a secretariat**
  - A future registry aggregating commitments and responsible for their monitoring should be a **multi-actor initiative**, ensuring representation of the actors and pooling resources. UN agencies **should continue to collaborate, each one bringing its own complementary expertise.**
  - It should have an **advisory board**, including representatives of the institutions, evaluation and sustainability experts, UN agencies and any other relevant actors to specify the guidelines of the registry and to ensure its rigour.
  - It could establish clear rules to **strictly select commitments.** After review by the advisory board or an arbitration body, it should be possible **to remove commitments if they fail to keep their promises or to provide regular reports on progress.**
  - Such a platform would need a **permanent secretariat** that would ensure the dynamism of this platform and keep it up to date. It could potentially be built on existing resources or be funded through a modest fee that would be asked of any institution wishing to join the platform.
- **Common indicators to enable achievements to be monitored in a clear and consistent manner**
  - The advisory board could also be in charge of **establishing common indicators.** To ensure that sustainable development is really being

implemented in the curriculum and research activities and also in campus management, the registry should require, as a condition for accepting a commitment, that all these aspects are presented for each initiative and reported on. This would make it possible to avoid institutions only integrating sustainable development in a particular masters course or in an optional class.

- As the commitments are voluntary, the registry should be **flexible enough to avoid discouraging good will, but specific enough to be credible.** The indicators should therefore also **encourage efforts.** Institutions cannot be forced to provide information for all indicators, but if they do not do so, this will be clearly specified. Moreover, we could imagine that institutions may add specific indicators if they feel that their projects require this.
- Such indicators **should remain unchanged** (as much as possible) over the years.<sup>96</sup>
- They should be **totally transparent and the sources should be made public** as well so that information is verifiable. In particular, the institutions should **all develop an up-to-date page on their website specifically presenting the commitment.**
- Such indicators could be based on **existing frameworks and guidelines**, like those of the French “green plan” or the numerous resources provided by the Association for the Advancement of Sustainability in Higher Education.<sup>97</sup> Their elaboration would not necessarily take too much time, but **it would require a good deal of cooperation and willingness to cooperate.**
- These indicators also allow for **annual reports on global progress and remaining gaps** in the implementation of sustainable development in higher education institutions, which could be submitted to the annual forum on sustainable development, for example. **This would enable assessments to be made and could indicate priorities for government action in this field.**
- To encourage **ambitious commitments**, we could also imagine a system of stars or levels, to highlight the commitments that have

96. See the example of the indicators used by the Euromed activity and sustainability report, pp.35-50 at [http://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/80638347?access\\_key=key-t6bcost9fvdco5t2ju](http://www.scribd.com/fullscreen/80638347?access_key=key-t6bcost9fvdco5t2ju) (last visited 14 August 2012).

97. <http://www.aashe.org/resources/resources-campus-sustainability-officers> (last visited 14 August 2012).

95. <http://www.unprme.org/sharing-information-on-progress/index.php> (last visited 14 August 2012).

- made the most progress in the largest number of areas.
- Even if this registry is not intended to provide institutions with certification, it could **highlight the commitments of institutions that have received independent certification**, such as the STARS one for example, or it could potentially form partnerships with independent certification agencies and encourage commitment-makers to obtain certification.
  - ***A dynamic and updated registry***
    - Links **with social media** are important so that commitments can be shared and commented on by the institutional community (students, academics and staff).
    - **Annual or regular “in-person” meetings** are valuable in order to renew commitments to the declaration, to encourage new institutions to join, to highlight progress made and gaps in implementation, and to share best practices.

## Rio+20 Voluntary Commitments: delivering promises on sustainable development?

Céline Ramstein (IDDRI - Sciences Po)

- S. Treyer *et al.* (2012), "Powerful International Science-Policy Interfaces for Sustainable Development", IDDRI, *Policy Briefs* N°06/12.
- "What reasonable ambition for Rio+20?", IDDRI, *Policy Briefs* N°03/12.
- L. Chabason (2011), "Twenty years on from Rio, development is still far from sustainable", IDDRI, *Working Papers* N°12/11.

Publications available online at: [www.iddri.org](http://www.iddri.org)

The Institute for Sustainable Development and International Relations (IDDRI) is a Paris based non-profit policy research institute. Its objective is to develop and share key knowledge and tools for analysing and shedding light on the strategic issues of sustainable development from a global perspective.

Given the rising stakes of the issues posed by climate change and biodiversity loss, IDDRI provides stakeholders with input for their reflection on global governance, and also participates in work on reframing development pathways. A special effort has been made to develop a partnership network with emerging countries to better understand and share various perspectives on sustainable development issues and governance.

For more effective action, IDDRI operates with a network of partners from the private sector, academia, civil society and the public sector, not only in France and Europe but also internationally. As an independent policy research institute, IDDRI mobilises resources and expertise to disseminate the most relevant scientific ideas and research ahead of negotiations and decision-making processes. It applies a crosscutting approach to its work, which focuses on five threads: global governance, climate change, biodiversity, urban fabric, and agriculture.

IDDRI issues a range of own publications. With its *Working Papers* collection, it quickly circulates texts which are the responsibility of their authors; *Policy Briefs* summarize the ideas of scientific debates or issues under discussion in international forums and examine controversies; *Studies* go deeper into a specific topic. IDDRI also develops scientific and editorial partnerships: among others, *A Planet for Life. Sustainable Development in Action* is the result of collaboration with the French Development Agency (AFD) and The Energy and Resources Institute (TERI), and editorial partnership with Armand Colin for the French edition, *Regards sur la Terre*.

To learn more on IDDRI's publications and activities, visit [www.iddri.org](http://www.iddri.org)