

Rio+20: Realizing a Just, Low-Carbon Economy

For the first time in 20 years, thousands of the world's leaders gather in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The conference, Rio+20, marks the twentieth anniversary of the first Earth Summit in 1992. The past two decades have shown progress in green economy development, but we remain alarmingly far from realizing a just, low-carbon economy.

As the challenge of addressing global warming grows more daunting, workers also live in precarious situations just to make a living. Unjust economic structures have created a chasm between the prosperous few and the suffering many.

Rio+20 must serve as a pivotal point for action that addresses these joint environmental and social crises. Engaging our world leaders and establishing firm, accountable measures can ensure we do not let another 20 years slip by before we take action. But we need more than that; we also need a summit that inspires us all — nation-to-nation, person-to-person — to work together to create real, sustainable solutions. In the words of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon, “We must harness the power of partnership to shift the world onto a more sustainable trajectory of growth and development. Rio should be a concrete step forward in this regard.”¹

In the United States, the labor and environmental partners of the BlueGreen Alliance work tirelessly to create just and beneficial solutions for both the environment and workers. Rio+20 provides the platform to expand this effort to the international level to hopefully make lasting change. The BlueGreen Alliance strongly advocates for commitments that will bring forth social, environmental and economic sustainability; to achieve that multi-faceted goal, we must prioritize the creation of good, green jobs; access to new technologies and training; and measurable, accountable commitments.

Good, Green Jobs

As one of the seven critical issue areas outlined for the conference, good jobs can create stability and opportunity. In planning for the 21st century and beyond, we must look to create jobs that are fair, equitable, and do not exploit the worker nor the environment — ones that would be considered “decent” by the International Trade Union Confederation. The transition to a cleaner economy provides the opportunity to reshape jobs and markets, but it also poses the risk of

further widening gaps between nations and social classes. To create a truly sustainable society, we must work to level the playing field, ensuring that the transition is just for all workers and all nations. The BlueGreen Alliance supports the following measures that promote an all-inclusive approach to sustainability.

- Implement ecosystem-based approaches to adaptation as well as environmentally and socially responsible reforestation efforts to mitigate the effect of human presence.
- Ensure a solid social security system for workers and communities by implementing the ILO Convention 102 and the Social Protection Floor Initiative.
- Rethink the practice of measuring a country's advancement using GDP as the main evaluation factor and replace it with a sustainable development index.
- Promote the health and safety of both workers and the environment through procurement standards and regulation of chemicals in the workplace.
- Foster the rights of workers through collective bargaining, right-to-know policies, and whistleblower protections.

Access to New Technologies and Training

Addressing climate change and its far-reaching effects must be a global effort. By implementing renewable energy and energy efficiency technologies within all nations, we can work together to reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Further, education and job training are essential to both deploying these technologies, as well as fostering further development of new and innovative solutions.

The BlueGreen Alliance urges countries to outline specific policies, such as the ones listed below, which will prioritize efforts to integrate these new technologies throughout the economy, including in the classroom and workplace.

- Scale-up renewable energy use to quickly triple the amount of wind, solar, geothermal, and tidal power that is used throughout the world.
- Promote clean and efficient vehicles that will cut greenhouse gas emissions by 30% by 2020 and by 50% by 2030, and adopt low carbon fuel standards.
- Deploy renewable energy resources to poor and rural communities, allowing access to electricity in areas where it was previously inaccessible or unreliable.
- Create training and education programs — especially for youth — to foster the creation and integration of clean technologies.

Measurable, Accountable Commitments

Both environment and labor agree the most important step in ensuring progress out of Rio+20 is the establishment of measurable and accountable commitments. Whether on the international level or the local level, instituting achievable goals and benchmarks will be the key to advancing towards a more just, sustainable society. The BlueGreen Alliance supports the following actions to help lay the foundation for worldwide commitment to a greener economy.

- Generate billions of dollars in international funding through a Financial Transaction Tax (FTT) to address sustainable development and climate change issues.
- Commit to international treaties such as the Montreal Protocol, which phases down Hydrofluorocarbons and other “super greenhouse gases” that deplete the ozone layer.
- Combat the exploitation of plants and wildlife through the Lacey Act.
- Ensure the health, safety and wellbeing of workers by signing on to international labor standards, such as the ILO Convention 102.

- Implement global greenhouse gas reduction, such as carbon pricing, and adaptation efforts.

The measures laid out here for Rio+20 are crucial steps towards building a more sustainable society, but they do not account for the innumerable actions and initiatives that individuals, groups and communities can take — at any time — to move us closer to that goal. In rethinking the global economic and social structure, we cannot underestimate the power of small-scale efforts to solve large-scale issues. Integrating more renewable energy and energy efficiency into everyday life, standing beside fellow workers to fight for good, green jobs and speaking out against financial exploitation are all ways we can take steps forward. By definition, sustainable development is the ability to “meet the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs,” and failure to act now is a failure to secure a livable future for the generations to come.

1. <http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=41961&Cr=sustainable+development&Cr1>



The BlueGreen Alliance is a national, strategic partnership between labor unions and environmental organizations dedicated to expanding the number and quality of jobs in the green economy.

www.bluegreenalliance.org

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