



When we think of large summits such as the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20, we picture world leaders sitting around a table, deciding for us on the future of the planet.

But Rio+20 has a social side as well and it is a very dynamic one. In addition to over 100 world leaders, an estimated 70,000 businesses, non-governmental organizations, and social action groups are expected to participate in the Conference.

The involvement of actors, other than government representatives, has been an integral part of the preparations of the Rio+20 Summit.

Henrietta Elizabeth Thompson, the Executive Coordinator of Rio+20, says that one of the lessons learned from upheavals in many parts of the world in recent years, is that politicians have to listen to the people. "The world witnessed an Arab Spring, we saw people Occupy Wall Street and other places. People took to the streets in Europe – at the core of all of these social uprisings has been a demand for people to be able to live in dignity, to have a sustainable quality of life and be able to pass that to their children,"

From the onset, the Rio+20 Conference has been pursuing the legacy of Rio 1992 with the intense participation of civil society in the UN debate, generating what is called the "Spirit of Rio."

For instance in Europe, the European Economic and Social Committee (EESC) adopted a document in September 2011 which set out European civil society's contribution to the EU's position at Rio+20.

In February an EESC conference with over 300 participants challenged "governments to be more ambitious" in addressing "the global challenges."

Since the 1992 Conference, non-governmental actors have been involved in three rounds of 'informal-informal' negotiations on the final document draft, and their representatives will also participate in the round tables of the high level sessions at the conference.

In parallel, the Government of Brazil has organized, with the support of the UN, the Sustainable Development Dialogues, a forum for civil society before the Conference. Their recommendations will be conveyed directly to the heads of state and government ministers present at the Summit.

The UN has been running a similar campaign – [www.thefuturewewant.org](http://www.thefuturewewant.org) (see separate article).

Finally, a [Peoples' Summit of the Rio +20 for Social and Environmental Justice](#) is being organized by non-state actors, including social movements and individuals, who are critical about the state-centered approach but who do see the urgency of the Rio+20 Conference issues and a need for global multi-polar governance. Described as "a peoples' space; autonomous, free from corporations and government influence", it will build on the Porto Alegre World Social Forum and will take place between 15 and 23 June in Rio de Janeiro.