



Multilateral Environmental Agreements

The main method available under international law for countries to work together on global environmental issues is the multilateral environmental agreement (MEA). MEAs are agreements between states which may take the form of "soft-law", setting out non-legally binding principles which parties will respect when considering actions which affect a particular environmental issue, or "hard-law" which specify legally-binding actions to be taken to work toward an environmental objective.

New Zealand's key obligations under the agreements

The 1992 Earth Summit

Several important MEAs were entered into at the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED, or the "Earth Summit"), which was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil. The Earth Summit produced five key documents on sustainable development issues.): two "hard law" – the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the Framework Convention on Climate Change which New Zealand has signed and ratified (see below); and three "soft law" – the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and the Forest Principles which were adopted by consensus at Rio.

Rio Declaration on Environment and Development

The Rio Declaration on Environment and Development describes states' obligations for promoting the principle of sustainable development. This principle involves managing resources in a way that provides for our needs in using those resources, as well as providing for their protection – both for their inherent value, and to preserve mankind's future interests in them. The obligation to "conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem" is framed in a way that recognises that states have differing abilities and methods to draw on when dealing with environmental problems.

The Declaration identifies 27 guiding principles on sustainable development, including:

- **intergenerational equity** – that there should be equity between the rights and needs of the current generation and of generations to come
- **precautionary approach** – that lack of full scientific certainty of the causes and effects of environmental damage should not be a reason for delaying action to prevent such damage
- **polluter pays** – that polluters should bear the cost of pollution, and that the costs of environmental damage should be reflected in cost/benefit analyses of actions affecting the environment
- **responsibilities** – that the world community has a common responsibility for protecting the global environment. However, countries that pollute more should do more for environmental protection than countries that pollute less.

Agenda 21

Agenda 21 is a plan for use by governments, local authorities and individuals to implement the principle of sustainable development contained in the Rio Declaration. This 40-chapter document has significant status as a consensus document adopted by about 180 countries.

New Zealand's legislation is largely in accord with the themes of Agenda 21 (for example the Resource Management Act 1991 and Local Government Act 2002). Action needs to be directed towards implementing this legislation in the best possible way.

The 2002 [World Summit on Sustainable Development](#) agreed on the [Johannesburg Plan of Implementation](#).

Rio+20

The [United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development](#), known as Rio+20, was held in Rio de Janeiro from 20-22 June 2012. It was one of the most important meetings on the international calendar in 2012 and attracted a high level of participation.

New Zealand sought an action-orientated outcome at Rio+20 and took a leadership role in two key areas: the oceans focussed 'blue economy' and fossil fuel subsidy reform FFSR).