

The Failure of Rio, The Promise of Wales

By Gordon James

Guests arriving at the IWA Inspire Wales Awards at Cardiff's City Hall could have been forgiven for believing that this splendid event was taking place in November rather than in June. A few days after the heavens had opened to dump, in 24 hours, twice the average June rainfall onto villages near Aberystwyth, there was little respite.

Such abnormal and extreme weather is becoming more frequent locally and globally, confirming the predictions of climate scientists. Although scientists are careful not to link specific events to climate change in the absence of hard evidence, the evidence is mounting.

Research, led by Myles Allen of Oxford University, indicates that global warming made the floods that devastated England and Wales in the autumn of 2000 twice as likely to happen [1]. And last November, a United Nations-backed report confirmed the link between climate change and current trends in extreme weather [2].

These extremes could become the norm because of the widespread failure, despite commitments made 20 years ago at the first Earth Summit at Rio, to tackle the causes of climate change.

Our present predicament has been well articulated by the normally conservative International Energy Agency (IEA). Speaking in April, its deputy director, Richard Jones, warned that, "the current trend of increasing emissions is unbroken", and if this continues, "long-term temperature rise is likely to be at least 6C." [3]

Climate scientists have estimated that global warming of 2C above preindustrial levels marks the limit of safety beyond which climate change becomes catastrophic and irreversible. Mr Jones said the world could still hold temperature rise to 2C, but only if nations co-operated urgently on clean technology.

Factor into this scenario population growth, rapidly growing demand for food and water, and the over-exploitation of dwindling resources and we are creating what the U.K. Government's Chief Scientific Adviser, Prof John Beddington, has called "a perfect storm" of global events by 2030 [4].

You would think that world governments would respond by striving to implement solutions, such as developing exciting new low-carbon technologies that boost the green economy, and use the Rio +20 Summit as a launch-pad. Some at Rio tried, but for the powerful nations of the world, unduly influenced by large corporations, short-term economic interests still dominate.

The first Earth Summit raised hopes by producing two important legally binding agreements on climate change and biological biodiversity. Although the outcomes of these agreements

have been disappointing with, for instance, greenhouse gas emissions rising by almost 50% in the intervening years, the situation would have been even worse without them. The Convention on Climate Change has persuaded many governments, including ours in Wales, to take the issue more seriously and to set challenging targets to cut emissions. Rio +20 offers almost nothing.

Its main outcome is to set Sustainable Development Goals by 2015, provided squabbling between poor and rich nations about the meaning of such goals can be overcome. Nations only agreed to 'think about' alternatives to GDP and ways to place a higher value on nature and the services it provides, and failed to reduce the huge subsidies doled out to fossil fuels.

The failure of yet another international summit should not come as a surprise. Shortly before it began, the UN published its latest Global Environmental Outlook, which pointed out that, "the world continues to speed down an unsustainable path despite over 500 internationally agreed goals and objectives....significant progress has been made in just four out of 90 environmental goals"[5].

If we are to successfully meet the immense challenges we now face we are going to have to rely far more on initiatives at local, regional and national government levels. And here in Wales we have a government which is positioning itself to take a lead role by making sustainable development its central organising principle.

On May 18, the IWA took a closer look at this at its conference, 'Putting Wales at the heart of Rio +20'. It got off to a rather embarrassing start when Alun Davies AM popped up in a film enthusiastically promoting sustainable development. This was the AM who has also enthusiastically supported the environmentally damaging, wasteful and very unsustainable new gas-fired power station at Pembroke.

His appearance perhaps revealed more than was intended about the Welsh Government's ambitions. These are outlined in its consultation document on the Sustainable Development Bill. Some initial responses have been critical because, for instance, it speaks of simply wanting to 'encourage sustainable development behaviours' and for focusing on 'thinking and behaviour' rather than 'actions and outcomes'.

The Sustainable Development Act will help to shuffle Wales forward in the right direction but the steps taken are likely to be short, timid and inadequate. The whole consultation process is also likely, once again, to divert environmental organisations away from campaigning onto safer and less productive ground.

If we are not to bequeath to our children a "perfect storm" we are going to have to take far more responsibility as individuals to, in Gandhi's words, "be the change we want to see in the world", to create greater awareness, to lobby and to campaign. We are going far too gently into the night. We should be raging.

June 26th 2012

NOTES

1. 'Climate change doubled likelihood of devastating UK floods of 2000', Guardian, 16th Feb 2011

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/feb/16/climate-change-risk-uk-floods>

2. UN News Centre, 18 November 2011- UN-backed report spotlights links between global warming and extreme weather

<http://www.un.org/apps/news/story.asp?NewsID=40440>

3. 'World headed for irreversible climate change in five years, IEA warns'

<http://www.guardian.co.uk/environment/2011/nov/09/fossil-fuel-infrastructure-climate-change>

4. <http://www.govnet.co.uk/news/govnet/professor-sir-john-beddingtons-speech-at-sduk-09>

5. Global Environmental Outlook press release, 6 June 2012

http://www.unep.org/geo/pdfs/geo5/GEO5-Global_PR_EN.pdf