

ICSG Insight

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United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development – Rio+20

This twelfth ICSG Insight provides members with a summary of the recently completed UN Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio plus 20 (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil 20-22 June 2012. This Insight forms part of the work of the Study Group falling under the heading of sustainable development.

The UN Conference took place twenty years after the landmark 1992 Earth Summit also held in Rio, hence the name Rio+20. At the Conference participants from governments, the private sector, NGOs and other groups came together to hold discussions focused on two main themes: how to build a green economy to achieve sustainable development and lift people out of poverty; and how to improve international coordination for sustainable development. The meeting was advertised as an opportunity to address challenges such as environmental degradation, economic inequality and global population growth.

The conference produced a 53-page outcome document entitled 'The Future We Want'. Heads of state and ministers from more than 190 nations signed the document. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon stated that the document would guide the world on to a more sustainable path. The full text of the document can be found at <http://www.un.org/en/sustainablefuture/>

This Insight report highlights some of the outcomes as they relate to mining and metals.

Rio Plus 20 and Mining

The outcome document contains some, albeit limited, specific reference to the mining and metals sector and mentions mining in the context of sustainable development. The outcome document has two paragraphs on mining, which state:

Mining

227. We acknowledge that minerals and metals make a major contribution to the world economy and modern societies. We note that mining industries are important to all countries with mineral resources, in particular developing countries. We also note that mining offers the opportunity to catalyze broad-based economic development, reduce poverty and assist countries in meeting internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, when managed effectively and properly.

We acknowledge that countries have the sovereign right to develop their mineral resources according to their national priorities and responsibility regarding the exploitation of resources described in the Rio Principles. We further acknowledge that mining activities should maximize social and economic benefits, as well as effectively address negative environmental and social impacts. In this regard, we recognize that Governments need strong capacities to develop, manage and regulate their mining industries, in the interest of sustainable development.

228. We recognize the importance of strong and effective legal and regulatory frameworks, policies and practices for the mining sector that deliver economic and social benefits and include effective safeguards that reduce social and environmental impacts as well as conserve biodiversity and ecosystems, including during post-mining closure. We call on governments and businesses to promote the continuous improvement of accountability and transparency, as well as the effectiveness of the relevant existing mechanisms to prevent the illicit financial flows from mining activities.

Chemicals and Waste

As well as mining, the topic of chemicals and waste was addressed at the conference and the recommendations made in the outcome document may have future implications for metals. The outcome document called for the strengthening and effective implementation of the Strategic Approach to International Chemicals Management. The work of the Basel Convention and its regional centers was commended. (The Basel Convention has a role in governing the trans-border movement and recycling of lead-acid batteries, among other responsibilities.) The importance of adopting a life cycle approach in the context of resource efficiency and environmentally sound management of waste was underlined. In relation to chemicals, the conference outcome called for recognizing 'the importance of science-based assessments of the risks posed by chemicals to human beings and the environment', and encouraged, inter alia, life cycle assessments in this area.

Outcomes of the Conference

The outcomes of the conference included calls for several actions which may have implications for mining and metals, among them; launching a process to establish sustainable development goals: detailing how the green economy can be used as a tool to achieve sustainable development; strengthening the UN Environment Programme, promoting corporate sustainability reporting measures; taking steps to go beyond gross domestic product to assess the well-being of a country; developing a strategy for sustainable development financing; and adopting a framework for tackling sustainable consumption and production.

One agreed outcome of the conference is a plan to set sustainable development goals. However, participants at the Rio meeting were unable to agree on specific points, so

this work will now be left to an "open working group" of 30 nations to decide upon by September 2013. It is anticipated that by 2015 the goals that are adopted will be added to the Millennium Development Goals.

The outcome document also contained language aimed at raising the profile of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP). It is intended that UNEP will get a more secure budget and an increase in its mandate to initiate scientific research and coordinate global environment strategies.

The conference also established an 'intergovernmental high-level political forum' to coordinate global sustainable development. The forum is to build on the strengths, experiences and resources of the Commission on Sustainable Development and, at some point in the future, replace the Commission. It is left to the General Assembly to define the format and organizational aspects of the high-level forum with the aim of convening the first high-level forum in September 2013.

Another outcome that may have implications for mining in the future was the decision by the summit that "recognized the need for broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product in order to better inform policy decisions." The United Nations Statistical Commission is to launch a program of work in this area building on existing initiatives. Such an initiative may move in the direction of adopting the concept of 'natural capital'. Natural capital is defined as comprising Earth's natural assets (soil, air, water, flora and fauna), and the ecosystem services resulting from them, which make human life possible. Some participants argued that neither these services, nor the stock of natural capital that provides them, are adequately valued compared to social and financial capital. At a side event to the summit, the 'Natural Capital Declaration' was launched.

Conclusions

While the 2012 Conference on Sustainable Development did not focus on mining and metals, specifically, there were a number of decisions taken which may influence the direction of future developments. In particular, the creation of new institutions such as the proposed intergovernmental high-level political forum may serve as a forum for decision-making in the future. Reaffirming the commitment to science-based assessments of the risks posed by chemicals is also of importance to the mining and metals industries. Finally, the move to seek a broader measure of economic progress than that offered by gross domestic product has the potential to move in a direction that could change the calculation of costs underlying mining projects.

Comments or Questions

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