



Flavio Cotti's press conference on 22 June 1992 after he returned from Brazil. Swiss National Museum / ASL

Switzerland's high hopes at the 1992 Earth Summit

Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti travelled to the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio with high hopes, but he failed to return with much in terms of tangible results.



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“It was the biggest diplomatic event of all time” – these were the solemn words of Federal Councillor Flavio Cotti when he faced the press in Bern on 22 June 1992 alongside FDFA press spokesman Marco Cameroni after spending two whirlwind weeks in Rio. Interior minister Cotti – who had led the Swiss delegation at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) because the foreign minister, René Felber, was absent due to cancer – could barely hide his disappointment at the outcome. Although he did not count himself among the “dreamers” in the run-up to the conference, he told the press that he had hoped for “somewhat more tangible results”.

The UNCED took place from 3 to 14 June 1992 in the Brazilian coastal metropolis of Rio de Janeiro. It was only the second major international environmental conference hosted by the United Nations after the Stockholm Conference of 1972. The Rio Earth Summit was attended by a record 10,000 delegates from almost 180 countries. More than 100 heads of state and government convened to negotiate solutions to global environmental problems.



Short documentary about the 1992 Rio Earth Summit. [YouTube](#)

The preparations for the UNCED kicked off with a resolution by the UN General Assembly in December 1989. The international community subsequently held numerous meetings to prepare for the main conference in 1992. Switzerland was actively involved in this preparatory work from the outset. According to the strategic objectives of Switzerland's fledgling environmental policy at the time, it primarily wanted to see a substantive climate convention with specific emissions reduction targets.

Switzerland's commitment initially became apparent at the Second World Climate Conference in November 1990 in Geneva. Swiss president Arnold Koller gave a memorable speech to the representatives of the international community in attendance, in which he outlined how Switzerland intended to stabilise emissions at 1990 levels by the year 2000 through a CO2 levy.

Owing to domestic political differences, however, this plan was never implemented. Nevertheless, Switzerland continued to support effective action at international level, such as unblocking the negotiations on the Framework Convention on Climate Change ahead of the UNCED. Only thanks to a joint initiative by Federal Councillor Cotti and Brazilian education minister José Goldemberg was it even possible to reach a compromise, draft a convention capable of winning a majority and present it at the Conference in Rio for parties to sign.

On 12 June 1992, Cotti had signed this very Climate Change Framework Convention on behalf of Switzerland. The next day, in his speech at the plenary session, Cotti appeared disappointed with the substantive outcome of the conference, which he deemed “to consist of too many declarations of intent and general commitments that need to be fleshed out and further developed”. Nevertheless, he considered the “Rio summit to be an important breakthrough on the path to sustainable and environmentally-compatible development”.



The 1992 Earth Summit in Rio was a huge success – at least in terms of attendance. [UN Photo/Tom Prendergast](#)

True to Switzerland's foreign policy tradition, Swiss diplomacy got to work immediately after the launch of UNCED in 1989 to bolster the status of International Geneva in the area of the environment. Thanks to generous funding from the Swiss government, the Secretariat coordinating the preparatory work for the UNCED was based in Geneva, and the crucial second and third rounds of negotiations were also held there. A direct consequence of the conference was the founding of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, which coordinated the follow-up work from the UNCED within the UN System. Switzerland ran a major campaign to try and attract the Commission's Secretariat to Geneva, too. Although the majority of UN Member States came out in support of Geneva, UN Secretary General Boutros-Ghali decided on his own to locate the Secretariat in New York.



UN Secretary-General Boutros-Ghali, pictured here with Federal Councillor René Felber in 1992, cultivated good relations with Switzerland. However, he did not manage to locate the Secretariat of the Commission on Sustainable Development in Geneva. Swiss National Museum / ASL

The signing of the Framework Convention on Climate Change in Rio marked the beginning of the *Conferences of the Parties* – known as COPs – that continue to be held today. The 28th COP (COP28) is taking place in Dubai until 12 December. Following the successful conclusion of the Paris Agreement in 2015, an initial global stocktake of the measures to reduce emissions is to be carried out at this year's COP in the United Arab Emirates. This is likely to be a sobering experience. The outcomes of the last two COPs in Glasgow and Sharm El-Sheikh, and the growing polemic around the appointment of the CEO of one of the world's biggest oil and gas firms as chair of the Conference in Dubai, suggest that the “starting shot for sustainable and environmentally-compatible development” that was fired in Rio is steadily losing momentum.

Joint research

This text is the product of a collaboration between the Swiss National Museum (SNM) and the Forschungsstelle Diplomatische Dokumente der Schweiz (Dodis), the Diplomatic Documents of Switzerland research centre. The SNM is researching images relating to Switzerland's foreign policy in the archives of the agency Actualités Suisses Lausanne (ASL), and Dodis puts these photographs in context using the official source material. The files on the year 1992 were published on the internet database Dodis in January 2023. The documents cited in the text are available [online](#).

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