What can we expect from “Rio+20,” the June 2012 United Nations conference to address the challenge of sustainable development? On November 10, 2011, the Harvard Kennedy School Energy and Environment Professional Interest Council organized a panel discussion to assess progress since the first Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro 20 years ago and to explore opportunities to promote the “green” economy and improve institutional governance for sustainable development.

Moderated by Prof. Joseph Aldy, Faculty Chair of the Regulatory Policy Program, the panel included John Matuszak, Division Chief for Sustainable Development and Multilateral Affairs at the U.S. State Department; Jorge Laguna Celis, Second Secretary, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations; and Felix Dodds, Executive Director of Stakeholder Forum.

“We are seeing a results gap,” said Matuszak, referring to the gap between the goals that governments agreed to at various UN conferences and economic and environmental conditions today. “We are also seeing an implementation gap, funding gap, and governance gap,” said Dodds.

Noting that economic development and environmental protection are often perceived as at odds, Celis said that a primary goal of the upcoming conference should be for governments to renew their political commitment to the goals they made 20 years ago. “What we agreed to before is still valid. The challenge now is to translate those principles into action,” according to Celis.

Referencing the negative financial outlook in the EU, Japan, and the U.S., Aldy asked panelists whether it was reasonable to expect governments to make new financial commitments to sustainable development at the Rio+20 conference. Matuszak said that governments would need to use existing financial resources more efficiently and should not expect an influx of new funds. Dodds, on the other hand, called on the investment community to issue “Earth Bonds” to finance sustainable development projects. Aldy pointed to recent policy reforms that eliminate fossil fuel subsidies as a cost-effective way to make progress toward sustainability.

Both Matuszak and Celis emphasized the need to develop better methods to measure sustainability impacts and track progress. Matuszak noted that all governments need to develop the capacity to assess the state of their economies and their environment and to make this information public to improve decision making.

The seminar was part of a series offered by the Regulatory Policy Program (RPP) at the Mossavar-Rahmani Center for Business and Government. For information, go to: http://www.hks.harvard.edu/m-rcbg/rpp/index.html