

Although I was in Rio last week, I was miles away from the actual negotiations, both geographically and metaphorically. But, as it turned out, the side events were at least as important as the actual negotiations.

This is an interesting phenomenon. Some big international negotiations like WTO meetings attract protesters, but the big environmental negotiations form the nucleus of a cluster of events by NGOs, universities, and businesses. The events include academic conferences, trade fairs for clean technologies, press conferences, training programs, and much else. I imagine that these side events were initially a minor accompaniment to the formal governmental activities, but they now loom much larger.

As [E&E News](#) reports, a number of the side events included important new commitments — over six hundred, by one count. A few examples:

- Banks, investors, 57 countries, and companies like Wal-Mart agreed to include “natural capital” (and its depreciation) in their measures of wealth.
- Brazil, Denmark, France and South Africa agreed to adopt UNEP’s initiative to push companies into reporting their environmental footprints.
- Brazil, Denmark, France and South Africa agreed to adopt UNEP’s global reporting initiative to push companies into reporting environmental footprints.
- The World Wildlife Fund said it had obtained pledges from twenty-six countries for an agreement to protect transnational water bodies.

These developments fit well with the theory of network governance. The idea is that international cooperation does not simply involve formal treaties, but instead involves networks of officials at different levels of government, NGOs, and stakeholders.

Even apart from the side events themselves, conferences such as Rio foster the formation of such networks simply from the opportunities for informal interaction among people from around the globe with shared interests.

It does seem to be true that we are seeing the emergence of less-centralized forms of coordination with some resemblance to the decentralized global communication web. Especially since the formal process of international negotiation seems stalled right now, networks like these may be our best hope of progress on global issues.