Sustainability conference challenge: Make a difference

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More than 100 heads of state and an estimated 50,000 people have converged in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil this week for the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development conference, “Rio+20.” Participants are challenged to “shape new policies to promote global prosperity, reduce poverty and advance social equity and environmental protection.”

The first such conference was held in Rio de Janeiro 20 years ago, followed 10 years later by a conference in Johannesburg, South Africa.

For Ira Robert Feldman, a former Environmental Protection Agency attorney who is president of Greentrack Strategies in Maryland, expectations for the conference are low. World leaders, he said, lack political will to build on the progress of the first Rio conference.

“The world has progressed,” Feldman said, “but with only 20 out of hundreds of paragraphs agreed upon, it’s not likely Rio+20 will be a watershed event.”
For Amanda Nesheiwat, a 2012 graduate of Ramapo College who is the the UN's youth representative for The Foundation for Post Conflict Development, Rio+20 represents "a beginning, not the end." She is blogging from the summit and hoping for a "sustainability revolution."

Both activists served as panelists June 15 at a breakfast seminar sponsored by the Institute for Sustainable Enterprise at Fairleigh Dickinson University in Madison/Florham Park. Some 40 representatives of universities, businesses and non-profits, heard from Feldman, Nesheiwat and the institute's Bill Russell, and worked in groups afterward.

Each was asked by institute co-founder Jeana Wirtzberg for ideas to make "tangible differences in the world" and "personally take action as a result of this session."

Harrison Ramsey, executive vice president of Alpha Solar Energy Distributor in Newark, came to get involved in the green economy and see if he could grow those kind of jobs in his community.

Last year, Ramsey installed solar panels in his 16-unit apartment building in Newark. His said his $200,000 investment will be repaid with energy savings in nine years, and that the project created jobs.

For global corporations at the breakfast, green is good for business.

Linda Brenneman, environmental counsel for chemical giant BASF, said the company's commitment to green solutions is embodied in its North American headquarters in Florham Park. The Park Avenue building, dedicated in April, has attained the highest platinum certification from the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design program, or LEED. A ground-floor innovation center is open to the public.

"On a personal level, it's important to be on top of all of these topics," said Brenneman.