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Dialog on Rio + 10

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Action on all levels

SUSTAINABILITY IS EVERYONE'S CONCERN. AND it's everyone's business to make sure it happens across diverse conditions at all levels, from local to global.

A sustainable world is a desired common future we dream and try to build together. To let things be could mean we all go bust. We have come to a defining moment in human history, as the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio describes our time.

But the summit also talked of common and differentiated responsibility. Meaning, that while everyone has a role to play we each do our share in different ways corresponding to our differing accountability for what happened and continues to happen. Rich and poor alike have each their own share of responsibility and must play their part accordingly.



There's a role for civil society which is said to be high in commitment but low in authority. There's another role for local authorities and states which are said to be high in authority but are generally lacking in political will and commitment. Each side has to deliver its part of the bargain. And roles must synergize to produce a positive outcome.

The different but complementary roles of major groups are outlined in Section 3 of the Agenda 21. Though by no means complete, these major groups include women, children and youth, indigenous peoples and their local communities, NGOs, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, science and technology community, and farmers. They can be found in different civil societies.

Scenarios of sustainability

The UNEP's *Global Environmental Outlook (GEO3)* describes four scenarios corresponding to three alternative visions of sustainable development: [1] conventional development/market forces (CD/MF) ; [2] policy reform (PR); [3] a fortress world (FW) and, [4] Great Transitions (GT). These are based respectively on the driving force provided by the market (CD/MF) , the state , possibly also in combination with the market (PR and FW) and civil society (GT).

The market oriented (CD/MF) reforms is viewed as focused almost exclusively on the process of sustainable development—freeing of the global and national markets. The state-oriented (PR) actions are focused on the proper definition of outcomes from where will emerge the understanding of policy actions. State actions may also lead to the possibility of authoritarian control over resources in order to avoid catastrophic environmental and social breakdown (FW). In any case, PR and FW are outcome-focused.

The civil society transition (GT) concerns the autonomous actions of civil actors that lead to a fundamental change in values and lifestyles characterized by low levels of material consumption and high levels of social equity. This scenario puts emphasis on values and behavior and refers to outcomes and processes mainly on these terms.

As the future is inherently unpredictable, scenarios are not to be treated as predictions of the future. They are but a range of possibilities that can lead to one or other alternative future. The usefulness of scenarios, according to GEO3, derives from one of the causes of unpredictability and uncertainty—the possibility of human agency to change the course



of future events. To the extent that these are positive and desirable, they can lead people who consider them to act so that the desired future is more likely to be reached. To the extent that they are negative and unpleasant, they can lead people to act in order to avoid the unpleasant consequences.

Referring to these scenarios, the UNEP dialog paper on Rio+10, entitled *Envisioning Sustainable Development*, favors the so-called civil society perspective on sustainable development.

Revisiting sustainability

The UNEP paper calls for reopening the sustainability debate and argues for a change of approach. And that is, that instead of trying to assess the practice of sustainable development on the basis of a prior theoretical definition, it proposes to deduce the definition of sustainable development from what people actually do.

The paper attributes this inverse approach to civil society. It is contrasted to the conventional approaches of the state, described as outcome-focused because fixated on goals and targets, and that of the market which is process-focused because oriented basically on how to grow the economy.

This so-called alternative third approach is focused on the initial impetus, the driving force, or the “will” behind the action. It talks about the starting point of sustainable development, that is, the motivation, incentives, background, and commitment of those who champion sustainable development in practice and define it through their practices.

At bottom, sustainable development is about envisioning the future. As nothing is so sure about what’s going to come out from the action of so many people, to say nothing about the intervention of natural factors, we can only envision what’s going to happen and account for our action. As the notion of reflexivity says it, paraphrasing George Soros, what the future will be is influenced by what we believe the future will be and what we do to make that future happen. Which makes that future, whatever it is, extremely uncertain, considering that there are six billion of us on this planet believing, valuing, thinking, doing different things.

Sustainability can only be defined retrospectively, or negatively, if you will. Meaning, that you and I don’t really know what’s sustainable until we find that it’s not sustainable. Something may seem to be sustaining



but may conk out sooner or later and then we say it's not sustainable. Socialism was found to be unsustainable in Eastern Europe and Russia but seems to be holding out in China and Cuba but we don't know for how long till it actually comes to an end. Capitalism appears to be more resilient. Likewise, conventional economics persists while alternatives to it can't seem to take hold. In other words, talk of certainty about the future as this relates to sustainability is as good as saying, as Keynes did, that in the end we are all dead anyway.

In this sense, sustainability discourse would make more sense to deal with what's proving to be unsustainable and what's enduring and why. Our action can then be adjusted accordingly from the perspective of a commonly desired set of values (e.g. Rio Declaration, Earth Charter, or some sustainability code of conduct). The future is anybody's guess and can just be outlined in any number of scenarios, whether desirable or not.

Sustainability is also about showing more than telling. From Rio till now much of the preoccupation has been in telling what sustainability should be than in actually doing it. The most compelling demand of the moment is to find out exactly what's happening, what people are doing and why, to explain why things happen the way they do, to continue making our action consistent with shared sustainability values. Of course, we should refer now and then to our desired future as a guide to what we hold important and also to check the consistency of our actions against our values.



So what's happening?

What are people and their institutions doing for sustainability? Have there been any major shifts from pre-Rio conditions?

Post-summit reviews—Rio+5, Cairo+5, Copenhagen+5, Istanbul+5, and so on—have been trying to come up with a balanced picture despite worsening situations everywhere. The so-called outcome documents—usually framed around [1] assessment of progress made; [2] obstacles and constraints encountered; and [3] further initiatives and action—would seem at best a compromise of contrasting evaluations. World leaders in politics, business and industry, and social movements and other institutions of civil society are hard put to come up with consensus positive judgment on where Agenda 21 is at right now. Everybody seems to be struggling to be optimistic.

Take your assessment from a UNEP proposal, for example. Around the 1992 Earth Summit, the UNEP suggested that if we were to succeed in stabilizing the global climate system each individual then living could only be entitled to a CO₂ emission level of 1,500 kilograms. That time an American was doing over 20,000 kilograms while a poor guy from Zaire only 180 kilograms. But more, the UNEP 1,500 kg/person norm had two assumptions: [1] no more deforestation, meaning, the then existing carbon sink stands as is; and [2] zero growth of then around 5.3 billion world inhabitants.

As well, take this example as a metaphor of carrying capacity and global inequalities. Then one would immediately realize the tough job ahead of Rio. And yet Agenda 21 which was intended to address these problems was itself already a global compromise of sorts as much as it was considered a positive global deal. The 'global deal', so to speak, meant cutting down on emissions (read consumption) and transfers or sharing (ODA, debt relief, technology, and so on) from the rich north-side and taking care of biodiversity and carbon sink restoration from the poor south-side. A central part of this agenda was reduction of poverty worldwide.

From this example overall conclusion about progress ten years down the road from Rio should be obvious. The two assumptions did not materialize, to begin with. The carbon sink continues to sink and biodiversity loss goes on despite efforts to arrest, if not reverse, the trend. World population hit 6 billion by October 1999. The world economy has now rolled into recession even as very little progress, if anything at all, has been made in closing the rich-poor divide. The US, for example, remains a nation accounting for only 4 percent of the world's people but consuming 44 percent of the world's resources. And more. After 2001 up to 1.3 billion people still live on \$1 dollar a day.

Why are things not working as intended and planned? An easy explanation is most intentions produce consequences not intentioned. And that most plans are often proven wrong anyway. Beyond this, there are any number of contradictory explanations.

Curiously enough, the US has suggested one explanation. In the resumed second meeting of the preparatory committee (PrepCom) of the upcoming 2002 UN Conference on Financing for Development (FfD) the US official statement suggested to discard so-called boring outcome documents and instead to just come up with a one-pager or two-pager political declaration of allegiance to capitalism. Patterned after the post-September 11 line of "you are either with us or against us" by President Bush, this proposed new capitalist manifesto claims that countries



suffering from the many ills and deprivations in this world (social instability, lawlessness, poverty, corruption and so on) have only themselves to blame for failing to bring themselves up a bit closer to the level of prosperity and stability of countries like the USA. The reason: they did not take the capitalist road or did not embrace capitalism religiously enough.

Here's one more, spun differently but pretty much along the US line. In a recent conference on poverty and growth organized by the ADB, an AusAID official asserted that poverty reduction is about growing the economy. If you don't grow, you stay poor for you got nothing to buy your security (food, housing, education, and whatnot) or your own freedom of movement. He suggested that all of ODA, money which continues to decline and has little prospects of additionality anyway, must be entirely spent on growing the economy. Forget all the crap, so the counsel goes, meaning that all the other concerns being piggybacked as aid conditionalities, such as environment, gender, participation and the like, since they all entail costs and divert scarce money away from the main thing.

These two suggestions make capitalist sense. But how are these to be reconciled with Agenda 21 and the lack of significant progress made after ten years?

The UNEP dialog paper contrasts sharply with these suggestions. It claims that progress in sustainable development has been enabled or hampered by three major trends. One, most social and environmental indicators of sustainable development have worsened despite significant economic growth. Two, the reason why this is happening is not because of the lack of policy attention, but the unwillingness or inability to convert policy rhetoric into concrete outcomes. Three, in sharp contrast to these depressing trends, there is an abundance of will and concrete results in the civil society domain.

Other views resonate the UNEP paper's position. As Robert Wade would bravely put it, our present troubles come down to the beaten, old-fashioned question of inequality. Whatever the champions and partisans of economic growth say, there can be no denying that inequalities between countries, within nations and societies, between men and women, between generations are far from getting redressed despite policies and pronouncements to the contrary.

The mantra of adjustment and opening and linking of local economies to the globalization process have not brought about the promised benefits. Poor and developing countries continue to be saddled by



growing debt burden with little hope of any significant relief. The terms of trade continue to deteriorate at the expense of the weaker economies. Meanwhile, ODA. has been declining as only a few OECD DAC countries have lived up to the promised level (0.7 percent of GNP) of commitment.

The rich and non-poor in every country, whether rich or poor, have yet to give up on their high levels of consumption. It seems their lifestyles are non-negotiable. The Kyoto Protocol, already by itself too weak to effect any reversal in climate destabilization, is indication enough of how far the rich of this world are prepared to give.

Considering these contrasting views, it's back to the old debate on sustainability come Johannesburg 2002. But this time it's different because the debate would have the benefit of hindsight. Ten years of experience from Rio is enough to tell where and how things have gone wrong and why.

Hope springs eternal, so they say. Indeed, it comes from everywhere, from strange quarters even. It comes from all levels, but especially from local action here, there and everywhere.

Hopefully, come September 2002 in Johannesburg, leaders of nations and international institutions will have the courage to say in all honesty that things are not working. But more than that, they will have to commit with passion, clarity and a strong sense of urgency to deliver the promised sustainability this time around.



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