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**IBON PRIMER ON  
THE UNITED NATIONS  
CONFERENCE ON SUSTAINABLE  
DEVELOPMENT  
(RIO+20)**

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IBON International



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# Introduction

“Sustainable development is development which meets the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”

## 1. What is the UNCSO?

From June 20 to 22, 2012, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil will host what is one of the largest ever United Nations conferences: the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSO). The conference comes twenty years after the United Nations Conference of Environment and Development (UNCED), also held in Rio de Janeiro, and known informally as the Earth or Rio Summit.

The first Earth Summit sought to rethink the issues of environment and development, issues it brought together in order to address global social, economic and environmental crises exemplified by entrenched poverty, massive global inequalities in standards of living, environmental pollution and destruction, and the depletion of the planet’s natural resources.

These issues were first raised at the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm, before capturing the global imagination after the World Commission on Environment and Development (known as the Brundtland Commission after its chair, then Norwegian prime minister Gro Harlem Brundtland) first introduced the concept of sustainable development in its 1987 Brundtland Report. Its definition has since become the widely accepted official definition.

The Earth Summit, then unprecedented in scale and scope, produced commitments and plans of action intended to be implemented at all scales, from international to local. Drawing from a lineage of international conferences and reports, sustainable development lay at the heart of the Earth Summit. Sustainable development, intended to straddle three pillars, social, economic and environmental, expressed the maxim that development must “meet the needs of current generations without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”.

UNCSD, known informally as Rio+20, yet again breaks UN records for conference scale and scope. World leaders, members of governments, the private sector and representatives of civil society, will again meet to look at how the world can seek to address development and the environment, with the specific aim of securing political commitment for sustainable development (expressed through a new, negotiated political document), assessing the progress made since the first Earth Summit, analysing gaps in the implementation of previous sustainable development commitments, and addressing emerging challenges.

There will be two explicit themes that Rio+20 will focus on:

- a “green economy” in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication;
- the institutional framework for sustainable development

Rio+20 comes at a critical juncture for the world. As in the time of the Earth Summit, multiple interacting and causally related crises continue to afflict the planet. As before, the impacts of these crises are disproportionately felt by the world’s poorest. Twenty years after the Earth Summit, the crises have increased in magnitude with more people affected and the effects becoming increasingly severe.

In their own assessment ahead of Rio+20, the UNCSD organisers note that:

- 1.4 billion people, one out of every five on the planet, live on less than USD 1.25 per day
- 1.5 billion do not have access to electricity, 2.5 billion do not have a toilet, and almost 1 billion go hungry every day

- Greenhouse gas emissions are rising, and more than one-third of all known species could be extinct if climate change continues unchecked
- There will be greater poverty and instability, and a more degraded planet if these challenges are not immediately addressed<sup>1</sup>

These points, framed by the UN as a rationale for Rio+20, can be better appreciated when presented in terms of the inequality that also pervades the world, and the extent to which the consumption patterns of the wealthy few and poverty of the many are predicated on a system that relentlessly pursues economic growth for the benefit of a tiny minority. These points are also based on environmental plunder, which further exacerbates the poverty faced by poor and marginalised peoples.

Indeed, from the point of view of many—especially Southern—civil society organisations (CSOs), Rio+20 represents something else. Southern CSOs have come together to hold a People’s Summit, *Cúpula dos Povos*, which will run alongside the official UN summit. The CSOs state that they “want to transform Rio+20 in a moment of opportunity to address the serious problems that humanity is facing and demonstrate the political power of organised people.”<sup>2</sup> At the heart of their concerns is the fear that human rights obligations and equity principles—prominent in the outcomes of the Earth Summit<sup>3</sup>—are under threat of erosion in the official Rio+20 agenda at the hands of the world’s most powerful states and corporate lobbies, and that the “green economy” as a set of policy proposals ignores the “deeper causes of the ecological crisis and because of its emphasis on economic growth, technology and market-based approaches.”<sup>4</sup>

## **2. Why is Rio+20 needed?**

### ***The social and economic crises***

A defining characteristic of the changes that the world has undergone in between the Earth Summit and Rio+20 is that while the wealth of the world as a whole has increased through economic growth, the richest have become richer, but the poorest remain trapped in their poverty. And the widening poverty gap is exacerbated by food shortages, armed conflicts and rising

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## **UN Declaration on The Right to Development, 1986**

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The right to development is an inalienable human right by virtue of which every human person and all peoples are entitled to participate in, contribute to, and enjoy economic, social, cultural and political development, in which all human rights and fundamental freedoms can be fully realized.

The human right to development also implies the full realization of the right of peoples to self-determination, which includes, subject to the relevant provisions of both International Covenants on Human Rights, the exercise of their inalienable right to full sovereignty over all their natural wealth and resources.

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unemployment. Beyond this, while the absolute numbers of poor may have decreased, the structures which stunt the social mobility of the poor remain firmly entrenched – those who are born poor, whether in rich countries or poor countries are likely to remain poor. Moreover, the situation of only a select few benefiting from the planet and its resources has been maintained, exerting increasing pressure on the environment and resources at a global level, and often detracting from the ability of people to access the resources over which they are entitled to sovereignty.

For the bulk of the world's poor, some 70 percent of whom live in rural areas where their livelihoods depend on the natural environment, the very process of wealth being accumulated by the rich at the expense of the environment only serves to exacerbate their poverty. For example, global warming caused largely by emissions generated to maintain unsustainable production and consumption patterns in the Global North has led Lake Chad, in Africa, to shrink by more than 90 percent. As a consequence, the livelihoods of millions, such as fisherfolk, have been devastated, and competition over dwindling water resources has increased.

The situation of entrenched, chronic poverty faced by the majority is maintained in spite of international agreements and declarations such as the UN Declaration on the Right to Development and the far-reaching programme of action endorsed at the Earth Summit which recognised such issues and produced commitments designed specifically to confront many of their causes.

This situation persists despite the world's richest countries engaging in the distribution of resources to poorer countries under the relative misnomer of "aid"—a process whose rhetoric does not match the reality of its overbearing political-economic concerns.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the vast amounts of wealth being produced in the world, the benefits are shared very unequally. Half of the world's population live on less than USD 2.50 a day, nearly 1 billion live in hunger, and close to 2 billion are trapped in “multidimensional poverty”—an international measure of acute poverty reflecting the multiple deprivations across the three dimensions of health, education and living standards as determined by the markers including nutrition, child mortality, years of schooling, access to cooking fuel, sanitation, water and electricity.

The social and economic crises engendered by capitalism, which create huge variances in people's lives within and between countries—and indeed at smaller scales, such as within and between “global cities”, whether in the global North or South—run alongside the system's immense output of wealth. Thus the social and economic crises faced by the poorest are compounded by the bitter truth that their deprivation exists side by side with the means to address inequities through redistribution.

At present:

- Some 40 percent of the world's population live on less than USD 2.00 a day and account for 5 percent of global income, while the richest 20 percent accounting for three-quarters;
- the countries in which the average household consumes the least calories are the same ones where the average household spends most of its income on food, while more than a quarter of children in developing countries are estimated to be underweight;
- 2.5 billion people live without basic sanitation, while one in six people are unable to access the clean water they need to meet basic survival needs<sup>6</sup>

At the heart of such huge global disparities is a system which both creates and perpetuates inequity based on exploiting people, while at the same time pillaging the environment in order to maintain itself. It is capitalism which is responsible for extreme inequalities of wealth characterised by over-consumption driven by an unsustainable mode of production, at the heart of which lies exploitation, of both people and the environment. It is capitalism which prioritises a continual pursuit of growth over and above an egalitarian distribution of the immense wealth already in existence in the world. And

it is the international and domestic finance oligarchy which ensures that at global and national levels the system is maintained in the interests of the relative few who benefit from it and at the expense of the majority of people. At the base of the system is the exploited labour power of workers, and the environment, which sustains it with necessary resources and is polluted by its outputs.

### ***The environmental crisis***

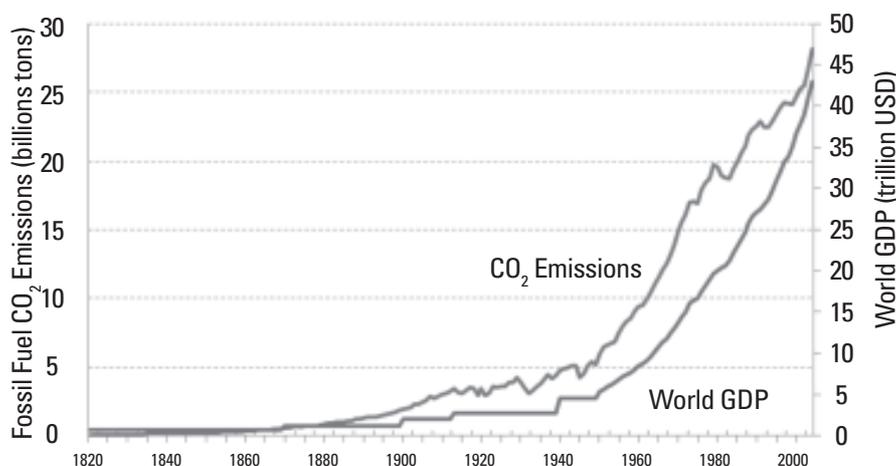
As such, the systemic disparities in wealth at the heart of the world's social and economic crises are directly linked to the environmental crisis facing humanity. The more that wealth has been accumulated, the more the planet's ecosystems and people become adversely affected by climate change, pollution and resource depletion.

Anthropogenic, negative impacts on the environment—the impacts caused by people—lead to environmental stresses that threaten the foundation of the ecosystems that humans and other species depend on for their survival. Climate change, biodiversity loss and pollution are intertwined with the rise of heavy industry and the predominance of multi-national corporations under capitalism.

The imprint of heavy industries on the environment is indelible. Industrial farming's use of pesticides, industrial fishing's depletion of the oceans, the increasing deforestation caused by industrial logging and the pollution and resource depletion of large-scale mining are at the forefront of the environmental crisis. And central to global warming and climate change are the build-up of heat-trapping greenhouse gases (GHGs) in the atmosphere driven by the massive increase in human-induced GHG emissions since the industrial age began 250 years ago.

The tremendous growth in GHG emissions came in step with the equally tremendous economic growth paved by the industrial revolution. Expansion in economic activity demands greater energy and materials use and drives greater emissions. Figure 1 shows how fossil fuel CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and the world gross domestic product (GDP)—the most widely used measure and index of economic production, size, and expansion—have grown exponentially in lock-step with each other over the past two centuries.

**Figure 1. Trend in Fossil Fuel CO<sub>2</sub> Emissions and World GDP (1870-2004)**



**Sources:** Fossil Fuel Carbon Emissions: Carbon Dioxide Analysis Center (CDIAC), Oak Ridge National Laboratory, U.S. Department of Energy

World GDP: Angus Maddison, Statistics on World Population, GDP and Per Capita GDP, 1-2008 AD, 1950-2006

**Note:** No data for World GDP in the years between 1820 and 1870, 1870 and 1900, 1900 and 1913, 1913 and 1940, and 1940 and 1950.

The world economy grew the fastest in the last 50–60 years, driving with it an unprecedented increase in human-induced GHG emissions. Between 1820 and 2006, global GDP experienced a 70-fold expansion, 90% of it occurring after 1950. Similarly, the last half century accounts for 80% of the 580-fold growth in fossil carbon emissions between 1820 and 2006, and 80% of all fossil carbon released into the atmosphere over the same 126-year period.

Projections see global GDP doubling in the next two decades, from USD 60 trillion in 2006 to USD 137 trillion in 2030 (3.5% average annual growth). Over the same period, annual energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions are projected to increase by 30%, from 28Gt to 40Gt in 2030 (1.4% average annual growth). Overall GHG emissions, including non-energy related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and all other gases, would also rise by 30%, from 42Gt CO<sub>2</sub>-eq (billion tons of carbon dioxide equivalent) to 56Gt CO<sub>2</sub> by 2030. This rise puts the world on a path towards GHG concentrations in the atmosphere rising to 1000ppm

CO<sub>2</sub>-eq by 2100, and global average temperatures increasing by as much as 6°C, a figure which could have devastating implications for the world.

The by-products of global warming, resource depletion and pollution have severe impacts on the planet's environment and its people. Indeed, many impacts on the environment have immediate, direct consequences for people who depend on the environment for their livelihoods, alongside indirect impacts on people now and impacts that will also be felt by future generations.

These are just a few elements of the world's environment—and the ability of people to survive through their dependence on it—under threat by human activities driven by over-consumption and unsustainable modes of production:

- The loss of global biodiversity—the variety of life on earth—is a major threat to planetary ecosystems, which if degraded represent a severe threat to all life. Impacted by habitat loss through deforestation and practices such as overfishing, it is believed to occur at 1,000 times the “natural” rate, with some scientists believing the world is in the grip of the “sixth great extinction” under which humans are killing plant and animal species faster than they can evolve.<sup>7</sup>
- Climate change is increasing the regularity of extreme weather events such as flooding and droughts through the impact it has on the water cycle. Such events can trigger natural disasters through direct impacts like flooding, or trigger famine through crop failures. Climate change can also have a severe impact on management of already scarce water resources, with a disproportionately adverse impact on the rural poor in the South, who are dependent on agriculture for survival.
- Deforestation, the loss of trees which help regulate global climate, rainfall and water flow, has resulted in some four-fifths of the forest that covered almost half of the Earth's land surface eight thousand years ago being irreplaceably degraded or destroyed. Greenpeace estimates that “every two seconds, an area of forest the size of a football pitch is lost due to logging or destructive practices”, a practice which at the same time produces 1/5 of GHGs.<sup>8</sup>

### 3. What does Rio+20 hope to achieve?

Through its twin pillars of the “green economy” and the “institutional framework for sustainable development,” Rio+20 seeks to “define pathways to a safer, more equitable, cleaner, greener and more prosperous world for all” and “move away from business-as-usual and to act to end poverty, address environmental destruction and build a bridge to the future”. The outcomes of Rio+20 will, effectively, set the development agenda for many years to come.

Occupying a central position in the official discourse at Rio+20, in spite of its limited conceptual evolution, is the “green economy”. The friendly-sounding yet ill-defined term was first coined by the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) in 2009 when it called for a conference to mark 20 years from the 1992 Earth Summit. Soon after, in 2011, the UNEP published “Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication”, commonly known as the “Green Economy Report” (GER). The depiction of a green economy portrayed by the report was of an economy that:

- produces low greenhouse gas emissions
- uses resources more efficiently continues to generate growth
- observes social equity and inclusiveness

The supposed results of the green economy are “improved human well-being and social equity while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcity.”

The institutional framework for sustainable development is the means through which the three pillars of sustainable development, economic, social and environmental, can be integrated into an operating framework to deliver change at global, national and regional levels. This is a framework that UNCSO will seek to strengthen.

Beneath these two major themes, Rio+20 will also focus on seven key thematic areas: decent jobs, energy, sustainable cities, food security and sustainable agriculture, water, oceans and disaster readiness.

The UNCSD anticipates that “Governments are expected to adopt clear and focused practical measures for implementing sustainable development, based on the many examples of success we have seen over the last 20 years.”

Among its anticipated outcomes are:

- the strengthening of UNEP or creation of a new international organisation for the environment
- the setting of “sustainable development goals”
- the creation of a global commitments registry for sustainable development
- the creation of a high level council to coordinate sustainable development issues in the UN

However, Rio+20 must also be understood in context. Like its predecessor, any outcomes expressed in a document of political commitment will be a result of compromise based on negotiations among countries of the world with unequal economic and political power, while their implementation will depend on actions taken after the summit rather than words expressed at it. It also comes at a time when the dominant powers of the world face a deep, systemic, economic crisis. The result of this crisis has been an attempt by governments to resuscitate economies for a renewed period of accumulation. Seen through this lens, the Rio+20 agenda thus far, while containing positives, has been beset by constant attempts by wealthy economies to remove its most progressive elements, highlighting the danger that the Rio+20 agenda may be used as little more than a pretext for a “business as usual” approach to poverty and environmentalism, with the continuing drive for profit and accumulation remaining in the driving seat of policy decisions.

Thus far, it seems that Rio+20 is unlikely to analyse, critique and address the drivers of unsustainable development and under-development that must be tackled if true sustainable development is to be achieved.

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## Endnotes

- 1 UNCSO, “The Future We Want”
- 2 *Cúpula dos Povos* website
- 3 Principle 1 of the Rio Declaration notes the centrality of human rights to sustainability
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Tarnoff and Lawson p.2
- 6 UNDP, UN Water, Food Service Warehouse
- 7 *Nature Journal* Natural Environment Research Council UK
- 8 Greenpeace International



## CHAPTER 1

# Sustainable Development and the Earth Summit

### 1. A brief history of sustainable development

As a term that lies at the heart of the environment and development nexus, sustainable development is most commonly associated with the Brundtland Report. It is a buzzword that has entered the popular consciousness and is often incorrectly associated solely with environmental protection in the context of inter-generational equity. While a concern for environmental protection lies at the heart of sustainable development, it is but one of three pillars alongside social and economic development—institutionalised through the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation—that are equally central to the concept.

The global turn towards environmental concerns was propelled by an increasing turn to environmentalism in society. The potential ramifications of pollution and the presumed limits of the earth's carrying capacity—the maximum population the planet can sustain—were expressed in influential works in the 1960s such as Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* and Garret Hardin's *Tragedy of the Commons*. Events like oil spills, incidences of radioactive fallout and toxic poisoning were witnessed by the world and re-affirmed the dangers of humankind's disrespect and unsustainable pillaging of the environment.

However, at the same time, the poorest states, many just recently and begrudgingly relinquished by their colonial masters, sought to push for a restructuring of the world economic system into a “New International

Economic Order” in the hope of redressing global inequality and the endemic poverty among their populations. While this demand took precedence over any mutual focus on environment and development, the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment, held in Stockholm in 1972, linked environment with development at a global level. The Stockholm Declaration was the first global document to tackle natural resources and the environment, prompting a raft of new legislation around the world and the birth of UNEP. Crucially, it also expressed environmental problems as inextricably linked to development and the world’s social and economic inequalities, while also expressing a concern for intergenerational equity, which was to be reiterated under the Brundtland Commission.

Man has the fundamental right to freedom, equality and adequate conditions of life, in an environment of a quality that permits a life of dignity and well-being, and he bears a solemn responsibility to protect and improve the environment for present and future generations. <sup>1</sup>

In 1983, as public awareness of global warming, depletion of the ozone layer, and rainforest and biodiversity loss accelerated through the decade and on into the 1980s, the World Commission on Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) was established. It was in the Brundtland Report that sustainable development found its working definition:

The concept of sustainable development provides a framework for the integration of environment policies and development strategies—the term ‘development’ being used here in its broadest sense. The word is often taken to refer to the processes of economic and social change in the Third World. But the integration of environment and development is required in all countries, rich and poor. The pursuit of sustainable development requires changes in the domestic and international policies of every nation.

Sustainable development seeks to meet the needs and aspirations of the present without compromising the ability to meet those of the future. Far from requiring the cessation of economic growth, it recognises that the problems of poverty and underdevelopment cannot be solved unless we have a new era of growth in which developing countries play a large role and reap large benefits.<sup>2</sup>

In bringing the term sustainable development to prominence, the 1986 report, while highlighting the need for improved legal frameworks for sustainable

development and the need for increased foreign aid, pushed economic growth as a solution for the world set against the use of technology to resolve environmental issues. Absent from the economic growth heralded by the report was the means to resolve the structural imbalances central to sustainable development issues or a reorienting of Northern lifestyles that drove unsustainable production and consumption. And conspicuous by their absence from any commitment to promote sustainability in the report were multi-national corporations, despite their centrality to the world political-economic system and the inequitable patterns of development it produced, entrapping the poorest countries in chronic poverty while promoting a “conspicuous consumption” sustainable only through environmental destruction.

The report, in a “tradition” continued to this day, also sought to highlight the role of poverty in the South’s “unsustainable development,” as though parallel in responsibility to the role that the continual pursuit of profit has played. At the same time, it ignored the link between poverty and the systemic pursuit of profit over meeting people’s needs:

Environmental stress has often been seen as the result of the growing demand on scarce resources and the pollution generated by the rising living standards of the relatively affluent. But poverty itself pollutes the environment, creating environmental stress in a different way. Those who are poor and hungry will often destroy their immediate environment in order to survive: They will cut down forests; their livestock will overgraze grasslands; they will overuse marginal land; and in growing numbers they will crowd into congested cities. The cumulative effect of these changes is so far-reaching as to make poverty itself a major global scourge.<sup>3</sup>

The impacts of environmental degradation are often felt most keenly by those in the poorest parts of the world, where ecological destruction further exacerbates the plight of the many poor who depend on rural livelihoods for their income. For example, in Africa, responsible for some 4 percent of GHG emissions, global warming has already substantially altered regional climatic and ecological systems. As a consequence, many African countries face droughts, flooding and water shortages, with as many as 460 million people at risk of living in water stress—when a lack of water is a major constraint on human activity - by 2025.<sup>4</sup>

Yet the poor are continually apportioned the blame for environmental destruction and its consequence of their further impoverishment—the relationship between poverty and environmental destruction has been and is viewed through a deterministic lens. The work of the influential 18<sup>th</sup> century demographer Thomas Malthus, the views expressed by European colonial powers, the Brundtland Report, and IMF and UN reports and conferences, have all reiterated and reinforced the view of poverty as the determinant of environmental destruction in a “two-way interactive process.”<sup>5</sup> As the 1990 UN Human Development Report affirmed soon after the Brundtland Report: “Poverty is one of the greatest threats to the environment.”<sup>6</sup>

But it is the richest countries’ accumulation of wealth that has driven the current environmental crisis, as well as perpetuated poverty in the South. Yet, many Northern states continually oppose demands from the South that they take a role for preventing and mitigating environmental destruction proportionate to their historical responsibility for causing it. They also continually resist calls to provide greater assistance for poorer countries in addressing environmental issues.

Such a state of affairs heightens the need for an approach to sustainable development (and environmental crises) that couches it within global political economy, that pays heed to the environment alongside development, and that looks at poverty, inequality and environmental crises within the framework of structured, unequal relations between and within countries.

One early academic appraisal of the Brundtland notion of sustainable development adopted a critique that rings true to this day:

“Sustainable development, if it is to be an alternative to unsustainable development, should imply a break with the linear model of growth and accumulation that ultimately serves to undermine the planet’s life support systems. Development is too closely associated in our minds with what has happened in western capitalist societies in the past, and a handful of peripheral capitalist societies today.” \*

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\* Redclift p.4

## 2. The origins of the 1992 Earth Summit

In bringing the environment and development nexus to the global stage, culminating in the Earth Summit, the increasing proliferation of global conferences and reports reflected increasing global demand for coordinated action and concern about the ramifications of a lack of action.

The United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm represented the arrival of environmental concerns in international politics, and, moreover, its articulation within the discourse of development. The Stockholm Declaration, which the Earth Summit sought to build upon, stated that economic and social development run alongside and are intertwined with damage to the environment, and that consequently all three issues must be tackled in a comprehensive approach. To do this, the declaration stated the necessity of “a cooperative spirit” wherein all countries, regardless of size, are “on an equal footing.”<sup>7</sup>

Included in the 26 principles of the Stockholm Declaration was the notion that inequitable development was a root cause of environmental problems:

In the developing countries most of the environmental problems are caused by under-development ... developing countries must direct their efforts to development, bearing in mind their priorities and the need to safeguard and improve the environment ... industrialized countries should make efforts to reduce the gap themselves and the developing countries. In the industrialized countries, environmental problems are generally related to industrialization and technological development.<sup>8</sup>

This link was expressed further at a 1974 meeting in Mexico jointly organised by the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) and UNEP. The meeting further emphasised links between environment and development, but this conclusion met with opposition from the US, which attempted to pressure UNEP to place less emphasis on the promotion of development within the joint nexus.<sup>9</sup>

The 1980s inauguration of the World Commission on Environment and Development started the UN process that led to the Earth Summit. Soon after the Brundtland Report, UN General Assembly Resolution 44/228, adopted in 1989, initiated the Earth Summit by calling for the convening of a heads of state meeting in Rio.

The resolution was progressive in its outlook, identifying the root causes that lay at the heart of multi-dimensional crises necessitating a new paradigm in approaching environment and development. It recognised unsustainable production and consumption patterns, especially in the North, as diagnostic to the environmental crisis faced by the world, although it failed to recognise the centrality of private sector actors to this situation. Key to the outlook of the resolution was that Southern states had played an active role in its drafting, while the efforts of Southern NGOs in particular “contributed significantly to transform the UNCED agenda to more closely address the environment-development nexus and the North-South dimensions.”<sup>10</sup>

Included in the resolution were the following statements:

- [the] continuing deterioration of the state of the environment and the serious degradation of the global life-support systems ... if allowed to continue, could disrupt the global ecological balance, jeopardize the life-sustaining qualities of the Earth and lead to an ecological catastrophe ... decisive, urgent and global action is vital to protecting the ecological balance of the Earth
- Measures to be undertaken at the international level for the protection and enhancement of the environment must take fully into account the current imbalances in global patterns of production and consumption
- Affirming that the responsibility for containing, reducing and eliminating global environmental damage must be borne by the countries causing such damage, must be in relation to the damage caused and must be in accordance with their respective capabilities and responsibilities
- Poverty and environmental degradation are closely interrelated and that environmental protection in developing countries must, in this context, be viewed as an integral part of the development process and cannot be considered in isolation from it

### **3. What did the Earth Summit achieve?**

Before the summit, the head of UNCED—Maurice Strong, a former Brundtland Commission member—expressed the need for rethinking prevailing economic orthodoxies alongside re-crafting (Northern) consumption patterns and the unsustainable lifestyles that drove them.

However, despite the success of the summit's progressive agenda as embodied by its preceding UN resolution, there remained discrepancies in what states of the North and South hoped to take from the summit. This was evident in four drawn-out preparatory meetings for the summit. For the North, the summit's outcome was a short document, emphasising the individual and collective responsibility of all in environmental protection. As the Canadian delegation outlined, it wanted a document every child in the world could understand and place above their bed.<sup>11</sup> For the South, in the shape of the Group of 77 and China, it was a text linking the Right to Development to environmental concerns, while emphasising that the responsibility for tackling environmental and developmental crises must be seen through the lens of a common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR) between states of the North and South. And, as the G77 spokesman clarified, for many children in the world's poorest countries, there existed no bed over which any document could be hung.

Southern states were left feeling that the powerful states of the North were judges ruling on environmental destruction in the South, over which they had detached themselves from any responsibility. Meanwhile, NGOs pointed to the glaring absence of multi-nationals from the agenda, alongside the World Bank and the IMF, all of which had prominent roles in directly and indirectly driving global social and economic inequalities, and environmental destruction in the South.<sup>12</sup> As a result, negotiations to formulate the summit outcome document—the Rio Declaration—became protracted as agreement proved difficult to reach, especially on issues such as the Right to Development, unsustainable Northern consumption patterns, population control, and CBDR between North and South.

An uneven distribution of power prevailed in the negotiations. However, the often smaller and less-resourced Southern delegations—stretched to the point where delegations could not be present in some meetings where decisions were made—were buttressed by the support of CSOs.<sup>13</sup> The resultant text taken to and adopted at Rio was the product of a consensus

process laden with compromises on all sides, which, despite objections put on record such as US objections on the Right to Development and CBDR, represented a major step forward in the sustainable development agenda.

The Rio Declaration paid heed to key progressive elements such as reiterating the Right to Development, “the essential task of eradicating poverty as an indispensable requirement for sustainable development,” the necessity of eliminating unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and CBDR between wealthy and poor states. The document was also accompanied by an implementation plan of immense scope, in the shape of Agenda 21. The summit also led to other institutions and principles still in force today: the Statement of Forest Principles, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (UNCBD).

However, the private sector was conspicuous by its absence from the official agenda of the Earth Summit, lacking even a commitment to a code of conduct. Instead, the implicit assumption was that businesses would self-regulate. Indeed, it has been suggested the reasons for such a startling lacuna in the Earth Summit commitments are linked to the controversial influence of big business on the summit, via the Business Council for Sustainable Development (BCSD)—a grouping of 48 chief executives of multinationals.<sup>14</sup> BCSD was the only independent sector group funding the summit. Some of its member companies had both questionable environmental records and a legacy of funding anti-environmental lobby groups, while the public relations company consulting for BCSD had helped Exxon and Union Carbide in public relations work in the face of respective disasters in Valdez and Bhopal.<sup>15</sup>

### ***The Rio Declaration***

The Declaration, a set of 27 principles, encompassed the political agreements and commitments of the Earth Summit, taking in a broad range of issues relevant to sustainable development as agreed in negotiations. Among these are:

- the centrality of humans to the concerns of sustainable development (Principle 1),

- the primacy of poverty eradication and meeting the needs of the majority of people (Principle 5),
  - the importance of the environment for current and future generations and its status alongside development, including emphasis on the Right to Development (Principles 3 and 4),
  - the special consideration given to developing countries (Principle 6),
  - the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities between poor and wealthy countries (Principle 7),
  - eliminating unsustainable patterns of production and consumption (Principle 8), and
  - emphasising the participation of women (Principle 20).
- Also included are the two economic principles of polluter pays (Principle 16) and the precautionary approach (Principle 15). It also requested that signatory states bring in adequate legislative instruments to address environmental issues. <sup>16</sup>

### ***Agenda 21***

Agenda 21 is the 40-chapter framework through which future action at global, national and local levels was mandated on each of the principal dimensions of sustainability—economic development, environmental protection and social justice. As an operational framework, it remains the most comprehensive undertaking by the UN system to promote sustainable development, targeting all areas where human activity impacts on the environment. It however depends on national government implementation due to its not being legally enforceable.

Agenda 21 is made up of four sections: social and economic dimensions; conservation and management of resources for development; strengthening the role of major groups; and means of implementation. The major groups are defined as women, children and youth, indigenous peoples, non-governmental organisations, local authorities, workers and trade unions, business and industry, the scientific and technical community, and farmers.

Consistent with the Rio principles, Agenda 21 is likewise progressive in outlook, emphasising the need for poverty eradication, the need to give greater resource access to poorer people, and the greater responsibility of richer countries for cleaning the environment, while emphasising the need for the adoption of national strategies and a global partnership in order to bring about change.

### ***United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)***

The UNFCCC sought to deal specifically with the challenge of climate change. Its aim was to both prevent further global temperature increases and deal with the consequences of any increases. It stated that:

The ultimate objective of this Convention and any related legal instruments that the Conference of the Parties may adopt is to achieve, in accordance with the relevant provisions of the Convention, stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system. Such a level should be achieved within a time-frame sufficient to allow ecosystems to adapt naturally to climate change, to ensure that food production is not threatened and to enable economic development to proceed in a sustainable manner.<sup>17</sup>

A major outcome of the UNFCCC, which mandated yearly meetings of the Conference of Parties (COP)—composed of the Convention’s signatories, now numbered at 195—is the Kyoto Protocol. Adopted at the third COP meeting, the Protocol went beyond the UNFCCC’s by-then inadequate targets and legally bound developed countries to emissions reduction targets. The first commitment period of the Protocol began in 2008 and is due to end in 2012, with a second commitment period agreed at COP 17 in Durban to begin in 2013. It is yet to be determined whether the period will last for five or eight years.

### ***United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (UN CBD)***

The UN CBD was the first document to pay heed to the value of biodiversity to human social and economic development, and the impact of human activity on biodiversity. Recognising the high rate of species extinction and the centrality of biodiversity to the functioning of all ecosystems, the CBD seeks to: conserve biodiversity; ensure the sustainable use of its components; and ensure “the fair and equitable sharing of the benefits arising out of the

utilization of genetic resources, including by appropriate access to genetic resources and by appropriate transfer of relevant technologies, taking into account all rights over those resources and to technologies, and by appropriate funding.”<sup>18</sup>

### ***Statement of Forest Principles***

The “Non-Legally Binding Authoritative Statement of Principles for a Global Consensus on the Management, Conservation and Sustainable Development of All Types of Forests,” known as the Statement of Forest Principles, seeks to ensure sustainable forestry—preventing deforestation while simultaneously allowing for the sovereign use of forests for development and other purposes. It also addresses the issue of costs of forest conservation being shared internationally.

It states that:

States have, in accordance with the Charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law, the sovereign right to exploit their own resources pursuant to their own environmental policies and have the responsibility to ensure that activities within their jurisdiction or control do not cause damage to the environment of other States or of areas beyond the limits of national jurisdiction.

The agreed full incremental cost of achieving benefits associated with forest conservation and sustainable development requires increased international cooperation and should be equitably shared by the international community.<sup>19</sup>

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## **Endnotes**

- 1 Ibid.
- 2 Brundtland Report, Chapter 1, paragraph 48
- 3 Brundtland Report, Chapter 1, paragraph 8
- 4 IPCC Technical Paper, p.79
- 5 Gray and Mosely, pp. 9 - 10
- 6 United Nations Human Development Report 1990, p.7
- 7 UNEP
- 8 Ibid.

- 9 Raghavan, 1992, in TWN p.14
- 10 Ling p.3
- 11 Ling p.3
- 12 Ling p.8
- 13 Ling pp. 10 - 12
- 14 Chatterjee and Finger, cited in Doyle, p. 784, Thomas p.19, and TWN cited in Thomas p.19
- 15 Thomas p.19, and TWN cited in Thomas p.19
- 16 UN DESA p.5
- 17 UNFCCC Article 2
- 18 UN CBD Article 1
- 19 Statement of Forest Principles, Principle 1

## CHAPTER 2

# Agenda 21 revisited

### 1. What is Agenda 21?

Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being. However, integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can—in a global partnership for sustainable development.<sup>1</sup>

Agenda 21 is the comprehensive and ambitious implementation plan drafted to match the equally ambitious Rio Principles. It is so named because it “aims at preparing the world for the challenges of the next [21<sup>st</sup>] century.” In so doing, Agenda 21 defined actions at global, national and regional levels, through UN organisations, governments and major groups in all areas where human activities impact on the environment. Although 178 governments agreed to its planned implementation, the actual implementation depends on governments themselves producing national strategies, policies and plans. It is thus a normative basis for action rather than a legally binding commitment, with international organisations called on to contribute to the effort, and CSO and public participation strongly encouraged.

Agenda 21 represented a progressive leap forward in attempts to pursue sustainable development through global implementation of changes,

especially when seen in the contemporary context, a period when the Washington Consensus reigned supreme at the end of the Cold War.

The Agenda's 40 chapters cover four different areas of focus: social and economic dimensions; conservation and management of resources for development; strengthening the role of major groups; and means of implementation. For each sub-topic, the Agenda exhaustively outlines the basis for action, a series of objectives, activities, and means of implementation, including elements such as financing and cost evaluation, scientific and technological means, and human resource development and capacity building.

## **2. What are Agenda 21's successes and failures?**

That Agenda 21 as a whole has failed is in part evident through the prevailing crises in the world, affecting the three areas targeted for action by the Agenda: a large section of the global population remains trapped in abject poverty; GHG emissions continue, along with increasing climate change and decreasing biodiversity; and unsustainable patterns of production and consumption remain.

However, due to its magnitude, a wholesale appraisal of Agenda 21 and its impacts at every sectoral and geographic level is difficult and has only been carried out piecemeal thus far. As observed by the UN Department for Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) in its 2012 assessment, the most thorough assessment of Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles to date:

Information on progress and gaps in the implementation of sustainable development commitments and decisions exist, but is often scattered. On some of the topics, global assessments have been undertaken by the international community (IPCC reports; Global Energy Assessment; IAASTD for agriculture). Academic institutions and think tanks often produce reports on specific sectors or topics (e.g. oceans, renewable energy, climate change).

However, if Rio+20 is to build on the Earth Summit's progressive outputs to engender real sustainable development and thus avert social, economic and environmental crises, then it is crucial to not only understand what has failed in Agenda 21, but also why it has failed.

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**Box 1. List of Agenda 21 chapter headings**

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Ch 01: Preamble

**Section 1: Social and Economic Dimensions**

Ch 02: Accelerating sustainable development in developing countries

Ch 03: Combating poverty

Ch 04: Changing consumption patterns

Ch 05: Demographic dynamics and sustainability

Ch 06: Protecting and promoting human health conditions

Ch 07: Promoting sustainable human settlement development

Ch 08: Integrating environment and development in decision-making

**Section 2: Conservation and Management of Resources for Development**

Ch 09: Protection of the atmosphere

Ch 10: Integrated planning and management of land resources

Ch 11: Combating deforestation

Ch 12: Combating desertification and drought

Ch 13: Sustainable mountain development

Ch 14: Promoting sustainable agriculture and rural development

Ch 15: Conservation of biological diversity

Ch 16: Environmentally sound management of biotechnology

Ch 17: Protection of the oceans and their living resources

Ch 18: Protection of freshwater resources

Ch 19: Management of toxic chemicals

Ch 20: Management of hazardous wastes

Ch 21: Solid wastes and sewage

Ch 22: Management of radioactive wastes

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**Box 1. List of Agenda 21 chapter headings (continued)**

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**Section 3: Strengthening the Role of Major Groups**

- Ch 23: Preamble
- Ch 24: Global action for women towards sustainable and equitable development
- Ch 25: Children and youth in sustainable development
- Ch 26: The role of indigenous people and their communities
- Ch 27: Strengthening the role of non-governmental organizations
- Ch 28: Local authorities' initiatives in support of Agenda 21
- Ch 29: Strengthening the role of workers and their trade unions
- Ch 30: Strengthening the role of business and industry
- Ch 31: Scientific and technological community
- Ch 32: Strengthening the role of farmers

**Section 4: Means of Implementation**

- Ch 33: Financial resources and mechanisms
  - Ch 34: Transfer of environmentally sound technology
  - Ch 35: Science for sustainable development
  - Ch 36: Promoting education, public awareness and training
  - Ch 37: Capacity-building in developing countries
  - Ch 38: International institutional arrangements
  - Ch 39: International legal instruments and mechanisms
  - Ch 40: Information for decision-making
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The failures can be grouped broadly under two discrete areas: (a) technical issues that have stymied Agenda 21 implementation, specifically the lack of any legal obligation to ratify it, and (b) dominant political-economic structures that run against the grain of Agenda 21 objectives.

A key gap in Agenda 21's output is that it was not "allowed"<sup>2</sup> to examine the global economic system, the central element for any analysis of how to bring about sustainable development, to explain why unsustainable patterns of production and consumption exist, and how they lead to crises. It is a major sin of omission, since UNCED itself expressed that a radical change in economic thinking was needed.

Thus, while many of Agenda 21's calls for reform place under question the dominant economic system's intrinsic elements or by-products, these are not critiqued holistically. It is outside Agenda 21's remit to propose wholesale system change. Rather, it identifies elements in the system which are unsustainable, and suggests ways to alter them without overhauling the underlying structures which produce and reproduce unsustainability. Indicative of how Agenda 21 is undermined by wider systemic issues is the way in which, right after the Earth Summit, the Uruguay round of the General Agreement of Tariffs and Trade was leading to the liberalisation of Southern economies, unfair terms of trade, and the maintenance of quotas for rich countries.

### ***The UN DESA assessment***

The UN DESA assessment, conducted by experts and which outlines the “successes” and “challenges” of Agenda 21, has this to say:

... while there are some gaps in coverage, the issues that humanity is struggling with now are more or less similar to those covered by the chapters of Agenda 21. However, while Agenda 21 has acquired considerable coverage amongst nation states, its implementation remains far from universal or effective. Progress has been patchy, and despite some elements of good practice most Agenda 21 outcomes have still not been realised.<sup>3</sup>

Specifically, the UN DESA assessment found that in most chapters of Agenda 21 progress has been “limited”. Three chapters—chapter 4 on changing consumption patterns, chapter 7 on promoting sustainable human settlement development and chapter 9 on protection of the atmosphere—were listed as having made no progress or regressed. Meanwhile, five chapters rated as having achieved good progress or better: chapters 27 and 18 on involvement of NGOs and local authorities, chapter 35 on science for sustainable development, chapter 38 on international institutional arrangements, and chapter 39 on international legal instruments and mechanisms.<sup>4</sup>

As UN DESA notes, some of the challenges it lists may be deemed “failures” of Agenda 21. Some challenges also serve indirectly as explanations of these failures.

### **Agenda 21 successes according to UN DESA**

The Agenda 21 successes listed by UN DESA include the following:

- Agenda 21 brought sustainable development into the heart of the development discourse;
- it placed sustainable development and its associated issues at a higher institutional level;
- it increased participation and boosted the role of NGOs;
- it linked global goals to local action;
- it built a progressive and strong narrative for action.

The following excerpts from the UN DESA assessment provide additional detail:

- *Agenda 21 (and the Earth Summit more generally) brought the concept of sustainable development into common parlance ... [and helped] put the concept of sustainable human development at the heart of development, as opposed to more technology-oriented 'solutions' in the so-called 'development decades' of the 1960s and 1970s.*
- *Arguably, Agenda 21's biggest success has come through driving ambition on what sustainable outcomes are achievable on a sector by sector basis. [It has greatly advanced] our understanding of biodiversity, of the contribution that agriculture makes to development or of the role of indigenous peoples in society...*
- *Agenda 21 tried to address the issue of integration of environment and development through the creation of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) ... The placing of CSD as a functioning commission of the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) did have some early successes with the issues of persistent organic pollutants (eventually resulting in the Stockholm Convention on POPs), prior informed consent (resulting in the Rotterdam Convention on PICs), oceans (the United Nations Open-*

*ended Informal Consultative Process on Oceans and the Law of the Sea) and forests (UN Forum on Forests). It would initiate the conversations and then set them off to be negotiated more formally in other processes.*

- *Agenda 21 has engendered a much stronger notion of participation in decision-making. This affirmation of the important role of non-governmental actors has percolated all levels of government, international law and international governance. ... Agenda 21 helped bring the gender dimension in all development work and beyond, including gender-differentiated official statistics.*
- *Agenda 21 was the first UN document to identify roles and responsibilities for stakeholders. The nine chapters on “Major Groups” have had a large impact on the engagement in implementation and monitoring of Agenda 21 ... specifically, the status and importance of NGOs ...has increased tremendously over the last decades. NGOs play roles as moral stakeholders, watchdogs, mediators, implementers, advocates, and experts ... However, how much of this “improved participation” is simply rhetoric is debateable.*
- *Local Agenda 21 has been one of the most extensive follow-up programmes to UNCED and is widely cited as a success in linking global goals to local action. In 2002, over 6,000 local authorities around the world—the Major Group addressed in Chapter 28—were found to have adopted some kind of policy or undertaken activities for sustainable development... However since then no extensive survey has been conducted, and interest seems to have subsided, as sustainable development had to face competition from sectors that promised access to tangible resources, such as climate change.*
- *Agenda 21 represented a progressive vision for action that set standards of ambition and success incomparably higher than the plans of old. It also built a strong narrative for action, which in itself was progressive.<sup>5</sup>*

### ***Agenda 21 challenges and failures according to UN DESA***

Among the recognised challenges are the following:

- the Agenda excluded key sectors such as energy and mining, which weakened the all-encompassing nature of the document;
- continued unsustainable global production and consumption patterns prevail in the world, alongside an absolute increase of about 50 percent in resource use, combined with continuing inequitable resource use;
- humanity's ecological footprint is increasing, up by about a third in 20 years; GHGs and other atmospheric pollutants remain a growing problem;
- the basic needs of a large section of the population are not being met;
- there was a failure to examine the economic system, the role of corporations, and the role and impacts of trade and globalisation and of international economic governance in steering the global whole system;
- there has been a lack of reform in the IMF and World Bank towards addressing sustainable development practices and a failure to address institutional structures.

The following excerpts from the UN DESA assessment provide additional detail:

- *In retrospect, the format for Agenda 21 based on sectors may have contributed to defeating the concept of integration that is at the heart of sustainable development, which seeks to promote cross-sectoral solutions. Segmentation in sectoral issues has paved the road for turf wars and silo-isation ... Often stretching the boundaries of a discussion to explore interlinkages with other sectors is viewed as either competition for attention and resources, or worse as a direct threat. Hence, related topics are frequently treated in various fora with no links established between connected*

*issues, generating policy incoherence and confusion. This has also led to strategic gaming, with interlinked issues being seen or “sold” as trade-offs (e.g. trade versus intellectual property rights in food and biodiversity).*

- *Some sectors were not included in Agenda 21. This broke the all encompassing nature of the document. For example, energy and mining are key sectors that were not included as individual chapters*
- *Some areas of Agenda 21 have remained largely unsuccessful and could even be deemed outright failures. For example, globally, consumption and production patterns remain unsustainable. Although resource use has significantly reduced per unit of global economic output over the last 25 years (by around 30 per cent), globally we are using around 50 per cent more natural resources over the same time period. Furthermore, this resources consumption is distributed inequitably. North American per capita consumption is around 90 kg of resources per day, around 45 kg per day for Europeans and around 10 kg per day for people in Africa.*
- *Despite a number of initiatives and increasing levels of awareness and discussion surrounding sustainable consumption and production (SCP), the world has seen extremely little if any progress, in regard to reaching the objectives outlined in Chapter 4. The Ecological Footprint of the global population has increased by over a third since the production of Agenda 21.*
- *Since UNCED the world has seen a steady growth in consumption, and consumption not only remains very high in the developed world, but is witnessing dramatic increases in the consumer population of large emerging countries such as Brazil, India and China. Yet, the basic needs of an even larger section of humanity are not being met. Whilst production systems have become more efficient, the patterns of consumption appear to have become more unsustainable, supported and exacerbated by the globalisation of production, with very little in terms of national policies and strategies to encourage changes in unsustainable consumption patterns.*

- *While some progress has been made around ... protection of the atmosphere ... on the front of ozone depletion, greenhouse gas emissions and other atmospheric pollutants remain a huge and growing problem.*
- *In retrospect, Agenda 21 reflected a somewhat static view of the world, largely due to the fact that the agenda was cut into 40 sector chapters. Agenda 21 did not address the interconnectedness of the various goals, because it was not “allowed” to examine the economic system itself. Nor did it explore the fundamental drivers of sectoral and intercountry outcomes, which include: the role of corporations, and multi-national corporations (MNCs) in particular; the role and impacts of trade and globalisation; the role of international economic governance in helping steer the whole system; the importance given to future generations in everyday policy-making.*
- *There had been an attempt by the UN Centre for Transnational Corporations to table a 41<sup>st</sup> Agenda 21 chapter on “Transnational Corporations and Sustainable Development”. This was rejected and within two years the Centre had been closed down with its function shifted to United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) ... overall, results on this front have been meagre.*
- *Trade had played only a small role in Rio. This issue was subsequently put to the WTO by the CSD as challenge to the new body to integrate sustainable development into trade decisions. The WTO’s founding agreement recognizes sustainable development as a central principle, but in practice numerous challenges remain to adequately address contentious issues involving trade and development—as illustrated by the stalled Doha “Development” round of negotiations under WTO, more than 10 years after it started.*
- *The main global economic institutions—the IMF and World Bank—have not meaningfully reformed their practises to embrace sustainable development. Although certain policies can be shown to support sustainability, the overall activities of both institutions*

*and the regional development banks have supported the present unsustainable economic model.*

- *Agenda 21 also failed to adequately address the institutional structures. It underestimated the inertia and resistance of institutional structures at all levels. These issues included siloisation, bias against developed country representation in rule-making, focus of politicians on “economic development first” and a disconnect between different levels of government.<sup>6</sup>*

### ***The Inter-Parliamentary Union’s survey***

In 1997, five years after the Earth Summit, the Inter-Parliamentary Union (IPU)—an international organization of which the national parliaments of 157 countries are members and nine regional parliamentary assemblies are associate members—carried out a survey on Agenda 21’s implementation among its members.

The IPU found out:

- that Agenda 21 had only a marginal impact on parliaments somewhat determined by prevailing national situations;
- that there had been a general lack of political will towards implementing Agenda 21, which was often relegated to environment departments; and
- that there was a distinct difference between the intentions of implementing the Agenda and the means, whether technical or financial, to carry out intentions.

The following excerpts from the IPU 1997 survey provide additional detail:

- *The Earth Summit has had only a marginal effect on the action taken by parliaments: generally speaking, the latter leave it up to governments to take the initiative and do not use all available means to influence national policies.*
- *Parliaments’ action in the environmental field is seldom prompted by the Rio recommendations, but rather by the worsening of*

*specific ecological problems which differ from country to country, depending on the geographic context and the level of economic development.*

- *Present economic trends do not favour the global application of the principles of sustainable development.*
- *There is ... a chasm between what is said and what is done—lack of political will; in developing countries there is, moreover, a gap between intentions and means—lack of information as well as technical and financial resources.*
- *With very few exceptions, parliaments—in the North as well as the South—have not examined the Rio Declaration which, as it is not subject to ratification, has not been submitted for approval to parliaments by their respective governments. In fact, however, the principles outlined in this Declaration are supposed to provide the basis for implementing the other Rio Agreements, particularly the different chapters of the Agenda 21 Programme.*
- *The other factors which determine whether or not the work of UNCED is taken into consideration in parliaments include the level of influence of the special commission, the urgency of other questions which are considered to be priority issues (economic development, poverty, unemployment, budgetary problems, etc.), and, generally speaking, the political will of MPs whose parliamentary work does not bring them into direct contact with environmental questions.*
- *The work of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development is virtually ignored in parliaments and its recommendations are rarely referred to. MPs neither attend its meetings nor participate in drawing up the country reports which are submitted to the Commission each year.<sup>7</sup>*

Indicative of the variance in political attitudes to Agenda 21 and political will in implementing its objectives is that found in the US, which is a key actor needed to actively participate if meaningful progress towards sustainable development is to be achieved at a global level.

While President Barack Obama is considered an advocate of the Agenda's reforms, the Republican Party—which was in power when Agenda 21 was accepted at the Earth Summit—this year issued a damning resolution (see **Box 2**) “exposing” the Agenda which it described as “destructive and insidious,” and as “a comprehensive plan of extreme environmentalism, social engineering, and global political control ... [to] be accomplished by socialist/communist redistribution of wealth.” At a state level, several states have also either passed or attempted to pass legislation against Agenda 21.

### **3. What are the roots of Agenda 21's failures?**

Underscoring these critiques of Agenda 21 are the political-economic structures which produce and reproduce the crises. While these structures remain in place, they impede any meaningful reform due to the system's predominant profit orientation that stratifies society into haves and have nots, while reducing the planet's ecosystems to a source of materials and a dumping ground for waste. The system, capitalism, perpetuates over-consumption driven by an unsustainable mode of production, at the heart of which lies exploitation, of both people and the environment.

Under the current stage of capitalism, the machinery, raw materials, and labour power necessary to run industry and commerce is owned by a small minority. Entire industries are dominated by a few giant firms. The advanced capitalist countries are effectively ruled by a finance oligarchy wherein governments and business work together. These powerful states of the North dominate the poor and underdeveloped countries of the South. These social inequalities operate both among and within countries.

Under this system, the economy is divided into numerous autonomous business enterprises or corporations. Within each enterprise, internal production and labour is organised under the direction of the owners. What, how much, and in what manner various enterprises produce are therefore the private business of individuals or small groups of individuals who are motivated by the single-minded pursuit of profit.

The decisions made by these corporations are often in conflict with the interest of society as a whole. Under this system, goods and services are produced not to fulfil basic human necessities and improve human welfare

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## **Box 2. Resolution Exposing United Nations Agenda 21, issued by the Republican Party National Committee**

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WHEREAS, the United Nations Agenda 21 is a comprehensive plan of extreme environmentalism, social engineering, and global political control that was initiated at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992; and,

WHEREAS, the United Nations Agenda 21 is being covertly pushed into local communities throughout the United States of America through the International Council of Local Environmental Initiatives (ICLEI) through local “sustainable development” policies such as Smart Growth, Wildlands Project, Resilient Cities, Regional Visioning Projects, and other “Green” or “Alternative” projects; and,

WHEREAS, this United Nations Agenda 21 plan of radical so-called “sustainable development” views the American way of life of private property ownership, single family homes, private car ownership and individual travel choices, and privately owned farms; all as destructive to the environment; and,

WHEREAS, according to the United Nations Agenda 21 policy, social justice is described as the right and opportunity of all people to benefit equally from the resources afforded us by society and the environment which would be accomplished by socialist/communist redistribution of wealth; and,

WHEREAS, according to the United Nations Agenda 21 policy National sovereignty is deemed a social injustice; now therefore be

RESOLVED, the Republican National Committee recognizes the destructive and insidious nature of United Nations Agenda 21 and hereby exposes to the public and public policy makers the dangerous intent of the plan; and therefore be it further

RESOLVED, that the U.S. government and no state or local government is legally bound by the United Nations Agenda 21 treaty in that it has never been endorsed by the (U.S.) Senate, and therefore be it further

RESOLVED, that the federal and state and local governments across the country be well informed of the underlying harmful implications of implementation of United Nations Agenda 21 destructive strategies for “sustainable development” and we hereby endorse rejection of its radical policies and rejection of any grant monies attached to it, and therefore be it further

RESOLVED, that upon the approval of this resolution the Republican National Committee shall deliver a copy of this resolution to each of the Republican members of Congress, all Republican candidates for Congress, all Republican candidates for President who qualify for RNC sanctioned debates, and to each Republican state and territorial party office and recommend for adoption into the Republican Party Platform at the 2012 Convention.

As Approved by the Republican National Committee, January 13, 2012

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but to generate profit for businesses. As a consequence, everything becomes commoditised. In the words of Bolivian President Evo Morales: “In the hands of capitalism everything becomes a commodity: the water, the soil, the human genome, the ancestral cultures, justice, ethics, death . . . and life itself. Everything, absolutely everything, can be bought and sold under capitalism. And even ‘climate change’ itself has become a business.” People’s needs

and desires are satisfied only to the extent that they can afford to pay for these commodities.

In pursuing profit, competition among business owners compels them to accumulate capital. Those who accumulate the most capital, control more means of production, depress already poor workers' wages more, cut down on production costs and expand the scale of production in order to "win". To do otherwise is to risk failure and bankruptcy in competition, which explains the pre-occupation of business leaders with growth, expansion, and globalization.

But the by-product of this is the need for more raw materials, more energy and more labour, among other production inputs. And, to continue to make profits, increasing production must be matched by increasing consumption, which, in turn, requires more environmental resources for assimilating waste. Capital accumulation therefore entails continuously increasing demands on nature for material provisions and ecological services to sustain and regenerate the conditions for production and consumption.

The continual mass dumping of GHGs in the atmosphere—either directly by firms in the energy, manufacturing, transportation, industrial agriculture or mining industries, or indirectly through the goods they have sold at a profit never fully shared with the workers whose labour creates that profit—is at the centre of the climatic changes that are wreaking havoc on the poorest parts of the world and threaten the lives of future generations.

Under this same system, workers' wages are continually depressed, or workers are jettisoned when firms relocate in order to find cheaper labour, while consumption, production and profit are maintained by the promotion of lifestyles which depend on continual exploitation of people and the environment. This same system is therefore also at the heart of the world's entrenched social and economic inequality.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Preamble to Agenda 21
- 2 UN DESA p.7
- 3 Ibid. p.8

- 4 Ibid. p.5
- 5 Ibid. p.5-6
- 6 Ibid. p.6-8
- 7 Inter-Parliamentary Union

## CHAPTER 3

# How does Rio+20 seek to promote sustainable development?

- In seeking to promote sustainable development as the central concept framing a global effort to “reduce poverty while promoting decent jobs, clean energy and a more sustainable and fair use of resources”<sup>1</sup>, Rio+20 has declared a focus on two themes:
- the green economy in the context of sustainable development poverty eradication
- the institutional framework for sustainable development

### 1. Why the focus on green economy?

As described by UNCSO, the rationale for the green economy is that at its heart is the integration central to sustainable development. In this regard, UNCSO believes it follows the spirit of the Earth Summit:

Sustainable development emphasizes a holistic, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision-making at all levels. It emphasizes not just strong economic performance but intragenerational and intergenerational equity. It rests on integration and a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental goals and objectives in both public and private decision-making.

The concept of green economy focuses primarily on the intersection between environment and economy. This recalls the 1992 Rio Conference: the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development.<sup>2</sup>

UNCSD also articulates that the green economy is a strategic turn to be carried out at national level, in accordance with country needs and contexts, and political processes. It notes that greater and more coordinated support from Northern to Southern countries is essential for green economies to become a reality:

An outcome of Rio+20 could and should be the “elaboration and implementation of country-specific green economy strategies or the mainstreaming of the green economy into existing development strategies. This would provide the means for Member States to select, design and implement a suite of green economy policy measures according to their own needs, priorities, development context and political processes. For developing countries, enhanced and more coordinated support from the international community in terms of capacity building, technology transfer, funding and technical support will also be critical.”<sup>3</sup>

While emphasizing that risks through trade—such as protectionism, conditionality and subsidies—that transition to a green economy could bring into “renewed focus,” it argues that trade opportunities may be opened up for developing countries dependent on their supply capacities. UNCSD says that “the green economy offers an opportunity to improve both global trade governance and the domestic trade environment to ensure that trade contributes positively to a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.”<sup>4</sup>

However, from the point of view of member states involved in discussions in the run-up to Rio+20, a common understanding of what the green economy is, the details of it, and how it will be brought into operation, remain unclear.<sup>5</sup>

Developing countries in particular have repeated concerns that the well-understood sustainable development framework may be replaced by an ill-defined conceptual paradigm that could engender protectionism and a new raft of conditionalities for development assistance. At the same time, regional preparatory meetings, including those of the Major Groups, reflect a consensus on the need to reaffirm the Rio Principles and the sustainable development framework—and that the best place for the green economy

may be through its assimilation into the sustainable development framework in the context of national and regional realities.<sup>6</sup>

The EU, however, has appeared keen to elaborate on the green economy, by framing it more precisely with targets and goals. This stance has been opposed by the G77 as well as the US, which does not want to be committed to obligations, and which lags behind Europe and China in its ability to maximise on the opportunities for green technology that may emerge from the green economy agenda.

## 2. Why the focus on governance for sustainable development?

The reform of global governance, as it relates to bringing in sustainable development, is the second key theme of the Rio+20 conference. UNCSA cites that under the 2002 Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), there was recognition of the need to strengthen the Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD).

With sustainable development situated as an overarching goal for institutions at the national, regional and international levels, the UNCSA states:

...the JPOI highlighted the need to enhance the integration of sustainable development in the activities of all relevant United Nations agencies, programmes and funds, and the international financial institutions, within their mandates. The IFSD discussion thus also encompasses the role of institutions comprising the economic and social pillars, e.g. considering how to step up efforts to bridge the gap between the international financial institutions (IFIs) and the multilateral development banks (MDBs), and the rest of the UN system.<sup>7</sup>

UNCSA states that targeted institutional levels within the IFSD include:

- **The UN General Assembly:** the apex of the UN system, wherein the outcomes of summits and conferences are translated into legal documents. The General Assembly will play a key role in implementing the outcomes of Rio+20

- **The Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC):** “a principal body for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on issues of economic and social development, as well as for implementation of the international development goals agreed at the major United Nations summits and conferences, including the Millennium Development Goals”
- **The Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD):** established in 1992 as a high-level commission, the CSD is responsible for monitoring implementation of Agenda 21, including commitments related to the provision of financial resources and transfer of technology. Representatives of other UN bodies and inter-governmental organisations, such as regional banks, are encouraged to “assist and advise the commission in the performance of its functions” and “participate actively in its deliberations”<sup>8</sup>

Also central to Rio+20’s approach to the IFSD is “international environmental governance”. The presumed need for a more cohesive and streamlined form of international environmental governance stems from the increasing number of multilateral environmental agreements and the fragmentation of environmental institutions. Thus, strengthening international environmental governance through, for example, boosting “the science-policy interface with the full and meaningful participation of developing countries” is seen as key to strengthening the environmental pillar of sustainable development.<sup>9</sup>

The Nairobi-Helsinki Outcome adopted by Consultative Group of Ministers or High-level Representatives on International Environmental Governance identified the following options for broader reform:

- enhancing UNEP;
- establishing a new umbrella organization for sustainable development;
- creating a specialised agency such as a World Environment Organization;
- introducing possible reforms to ECOSOC and the CSD; and

- enhanced institutional reforms and streamlining of present structures.<sup>10</sup>

However, as with proposals for the green economy, while member states all agree on the need for reform, they have expressed divergent ideas on the best way to progress with the new institutional framework for sustainable development.

For example, the EU and many African countries led by Kenya want to upgrade the UNEP from the status of a UN programme to a specialised agency of the UN. This group believes the UNEP to be too weak, and would like to see it with a degree of autonomy and functional capability comparable to other specialised agencies such as the World Health Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization, or the International Labour Organization.

UN DESA, joined by some states, has proposed the creation of a Council of Sustainable Development to operate under the General Assembly—in the same manner as the Human Rights Council—with a view to better integrating the three pillars of sustainable development. However, some countries including Mexico have warned that this may require altering the UN Charter and potentially make ECOSOC irrelevant. These countries have advocated strengthening ECOSOC as an alternative.

Another group of mainly wealthy states, including the US, Japan and Russia, oppose both the creation of a new specialised agency or a Council of Sustainable Development due to the potential costs entailed.

### **3. What are the seven critical issues at Rio+20?**

In addition to these over-arching themes, there are seven “priority areas” highlighted by UNCSD: jobs, energy, cities, food, water, oceans, and disasters.

#### ***Jobs***

Economic recession has taken a toll on both the quantity and quality of jobs. For the 190 million unemployed, and for over 500 million job seekers over the next 10 years, labour markets are vital not only for the production and

generation of wealth, but equally for its distribution. Economic action and social policies to create gainful employment are critical for social cohesion and stability. It's also crucial that work is geared to the needs of the natural environment. "Green jobs" are positions in agriculture, industry, services and administration that contribute to preserving or restoring the quality of the environment.

### ***Energy***

Energy is central to nearly every major challenge and opportunity the world faces today. Be it for jobs, security, climate change, food production or increasing incomes, access to energy for all is essential. Sustainable energy is needed for strengthening economies, protecting ecosystems and achieving equity. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon is leading a Sustainable Energy for All initiative to ensure universal access to modern energy services, improve efficiency, and increase use of renewable sources.

### ***Cities***

Cities are hubs for ideas, commerce, culture, science, productivity, social development and much more. At their best, cities have enabled people to advance socially and economically. However, many challenges exist to maintaining cities in a way that continues to create jobs and prosperity while not straining land and resources. Common city challenges include congestion, lack of funds to provide basic services, a shortage of adequate housing, and declining infrastructure. The challenges cities face can be overcome in ways that allow them to continue to thrive and grow, while improving resource use and reducing pollution and poverty.

### ***Food***

It is time to rethink how people grow, share and consume food. If done right, agriculture, forestry and fisheries can provide nutritious food for all and generate decent incomes, while supporting people-centred rural development and protecting the environment. But right now, soils, freshwater, oceans, forests and biodiversity are being rapidly degraded. Climate change is putting even more pressure on resources. A profound change of the global food and agriculture system is needed to nourish today's 925 million hungry and the additional 2 billion people

expected by 2050. The food and agriculture sector offers key solutions for development, and is central for hunger and poverty eradication.

### ***Water***

Clean, accessible water for all is an essential part of the world we want to live in. There is sufficient fresh water on the planet to achieve this dream. But due to bad economics or poor infrastructure, every year millions of people, most of them children, die from diseases associated with inadequate water supply, sanitation and hygiene. Water scarcity, poor water quality, and inadequate sanitation negatively impact food security, livelihood choices and educational opportunities for poor families across the world. Drought afflicts some of the world's poorest countries, worsening hunger and malnutrition. By 2050, at least one in four people is likely to live in a country affected by chronic or recurring shortages of fresh water.

### ***Oceans***

The world's oceans—their temperature, chemistry, currents, and marine life—drive global systems that make the Earth habitable for humankind. Rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines, most of human food, and even the oxygen in the air, are all ultimately provided and regulated by the sea. Throughout history, oceans and seas have been vital conduits for trade and transportation. Careful management of this essential global resource is a key feature of a sustainable future.

### ***Disasters***

Disasters caused by earthquakes, floods, droughts, hurricanes, tsunamis and more can have devastating impacts on people, environments and economies. But resilience—the ability of people and places to withstand or minimise these impacts and recover quickly—remains possible. Sustainable strategies help us recover from disasters, while unsustainable strategies make us more vulnerable. These choices relate to how we grow our food, where and how we build our homes, how our financial system works, what we teach in schools and more. With a quickening pace of natural disasters taking a greater toll on lives and property, and a higher degree of concentration of human settlements, planning ahead and staying alert must be informed by a broad range of sustainable choices.

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## Endnotes

- 1 UNCSO website
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and United Nations Conference on Trade and Development
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Third World Network
- 6 Third World Network
- 7 UNCSO website
- 8 UNCSO website
- 9 Ibid.
- 10 Ibid.

## CHAPTER 4

# The relevance of Rio+20

- The world now has 7 billion people; by 2050, there will be 9 billion.
- 1.4 billion people, or one out of every five on the planet, lives on less than \$1.25 per day.
- 1.5 billion people do not have access to electricity, 2.5 billion do not have a toilet, and almost 1 billion go hungry every day.
- Greenhouse gas emissions are rising, and more than one-third of all known species could be extinct if climate change continues unchecked.
- There will be greater poverty and instability, and a more degraded planet, if these challenges are not immediately addressed<sup>1</sup>

At the heart of Rio+20, as it was with the Earth Summit, is placing sustainable development at the centre of the global growth agenda. Sha Zukang, Secretary General of the Rio+20 Conference sums up the centrality of sustainable development to Rio+20: “Sustainable development is not an option. It is the only path that allows all of humanity to share a decent life on this, one planet. Rio+20 gives our generation the opportunity to choose this path.”<sup>2</sup>

## 1. What is the relevance of Rio+20?

The relevance and need for Rio+20, and, moreover, for the centrality of a model of sustainable development predicated on a change to the prevailing modes of thinking and operating that produce unsustainable production and consumption and resultant cross-sectoral crises, is encapsulated in the lack of change that has taken place in the 20 years between the Earth Summit and now. While sustainable development has undoubtedly taken on a far greater prominence in both political dialogue and the popular consciousness since the Earth Summit, the focus areas of its three pillars—social, economic and environmental—remain beset by crises of increasing scale and depth.

A pertinent question that encapsulates the need for Rio+20 and that should be answered at Rio is that if the Earth Summit sought to conjoin and address development and the environment, how and why have such crises persisted? Rio+20 needs to provide a deep analysis and critique of the drivers of unsustainable development and under-development that have prevented the introduction of a new model of sustainable development. Without understanding why the progressive agenda for change outlined at the Earth Summit was not implemented, the likelihood of an all-too-costly repeat of such a failure remains high.

Reasons for the persistence of crises range from the technical through to the political-economic.

The Earth Summit's commitments were not legally enforceable: countries which agreed to commitments had no obligation to meet the commitments they had made. As such, there was a big divide between what was said and what was done. For the elites in many Northern states, which feel nothing of the severe, life-threatening impacts of the economic, social and environmental crises faced by the South, other priorities, whether domestic or international, have taken precedence, and commitments to provide greater help to poorer countries in meeting their commitments have often fallen by the wayside.

And, underlying these and other factors remain the structural issues which ensure that the interests of the gatekeepers of any change remain focused on maintaining the profit-oriented system that lies at the heart of social, economic and environmental crises that passes them by and maintains their unsustainable production and consumption patterns, while the poorest bear

the brunt of its human and environmental costs. In this respect, a fundamental element in incorporating sustainable development into global economic thinking is to reject the over-arching imperative of limitless growth, and instead re-orient towards redistribution so that the basic needs of the poor majority can be met through the excess wealth of the rich minority.

## **2. Why do recent global events make sustainability more urgent?**

In terms of the interlocking crises, global events testify to the increasing prescience of meeting the targets of a true sustainable development.

The Arab Spring exemplified growing frustration at inequality and poverty in the South. These sentiments are also echoed in the North by global “occupy” movements frustrated at the austerity endured by the masses while banking giants were bailed out by states.

An IMF working paper found that the period 1983 – 2008 was exemplified by a large increase in the income share for the rich, with a large increase in leverage for everyone else. It warned of disastrous social consequences if workers do not regain bargaining power lost amidst increasing inequality.<sup>3</sup>

Devastating famine in the Horn of Africa in 2011 was preceded by the region’s worst drought in 60 years, thought to be caused by warming of the Indian Ocean due to climate change<sup>4</sup> and to have been accentuated by conflict and high prices of commodities. China experienced its worst drought in 100 years, while in the Philippines, Thailand, the US and Australia extreme floods led to loss of life and livelihoods.

Indeed, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change predicts that increasing storms, droughts and heat waves will have severe impacts on some of the poorest areas in the world, alongside island nations and major cities such as Mumbai, Miami, Shanghai, Bangkok, Guangzhou, Ho Chi Minh City, Yangon and Kolkata.<sup>5</sup>

Recent research has argued that biodiversity loss—itsself worsened by climate change—may represent as severe a threat to ecosystems and the future of mankind as climate change.<sup>6</sup> And, in the 20 years since the Earth

Summit, a raft of research that suggests climate change may be even more severe than previously expected, whether due to improved modelling,<sup>7</sup> increasing releases of methane gas from arctic sea ice,<sup>8</sup> with a multiplier effect on global warming, or other reasons.

Central to these increasingly severe crises is the prevailing global political-economic climate.

Transfer of finance and technology from North to South—whether to boost Southern states’ environmental protection attempts or, under the auspices of an aid system tied to rights-based approaches to development wherein ownership of aids is in the hands of those receiving it—is an important element in achieving sustainable development aims. Yet, many Northern states, in recession or recovering slowly from the financial crisis which began in 2008, have pared down aid budgets and are reluctant to disburse funding overseas without seeing immediate results. In the context of preventing an environmental crisis, the impacts of which are not deleterious to Northern countries and for which the results of combating are not immediately quantifiable, such a mandate becomes difficult to fulfil.

In terms of abating social and economic crises, the current approach—characterised by an inequitable aid architecture, aid serving the short- and medium-term foreign policy interests of donors and an immense aid industry, and an absence of rights-based approaches which prioritise the needs of the poorest—has seen aid become near-inconsequential in reducing poverty.

Seen in this context of a lack of progress and increasingly perilous crises since 1992, the relevance of Rio+20’s aim to “define pathways to a safer, more equitable, cleaner, greener and more prosperous world for all”<sup>9</sup> is evident. It is, however, the means through which this will be achieved that remain contentious.

For people’s groups organising a “People’s Summit” to run parallel to the official, state-led Rio+20 summit, the relevance of and need for Rio+20 is centred on the same issues highlighted by the official summit. However, these mainly Southern CSOs frame the need for Rio+20 around their desire for a return to the progressive principles of the Earth Summit. In this respect, the relevance of Rio+20 is that it comes against a backdrop of failed implementation of Agenda 21 and the continuing ascendancy of a growth-obsessed and profit-led social system. Rio+20 thus represents the

opportunity for CSOs to push an agenda for systemic change in order to promote a true sustainable development.

CSOs, in accordance with their status as a product of the rights won by people that enable them to associate and represent themselves autonomously of their governments, have levied demands in the name of the various constituencies they represent. The People's Summit group of CSOs has expressed the fear that progressive elements from the Earth Summit—such as the polluter pays principle, the precautionary approach, and common but differentiated responsibility—are at risk. The group demands that these elements be included and reaffirmed at Rio+20. In terms of the overarching, systemic change it sees as relevant to reversing the trend of the past 20 years and ensuring progress from Rio+20, it states:

Although economic tools are essential to implement the decisions aiming for sustainability, social justice and peace, a private economy rationale should not prevail over the fulfillment of human needs and the respect of planetary boundaries. Therefore a strong institutional framework and regulation is needed. Weakly regulated markets have already proven to be a threat not only to people and nature, but to economies and nation states themselves. Markets must work for people, people should not work for markets.<sup>10</sup>

In a similar vein, the Working Group on Green Economy, of the World Social Forum—a CSO-initiated grouping—noted in February 2012: “The postulates promoted under the Green Economy are wrong. The current environmental and climate crisis is not a simple market failure. The solution is not to put a price on nature. Nature is not a form of capital. It is wrong to say that we only value that which has a price, an owner, and brings profits.”

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## Endnotes

- 1 UNCSO “The Future We Want”
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 International Monetary Fund
- 4 US Geological Survey
- 5 *The Guardian*
- 6 University of Copenhagen
- 7 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

- 8 *The Independent*
- 9 UNCSO “The Future We Want”
- 10 *Cúpula dos Povos* website

## CHAPTER 5

# The 'Green Economy' agenda

### 1. What is a 'green economy' and how did the idea arise?

The concept of a green economy has gradually emerged and caught the attention of global policy bodies in recent years.

The notion of a green economy focuses on the interface of the economy with the environment. Very broadly, a *green* economy is an economy that is environmentally-friendly or sustainable. Defining it more precisely is a challenge because the concept is still evolving through several streams of discourse and practice.

One obvious influence is that of sustainable development, expressed through UN processes from the 1972 Stockholm Conference and the 1987 Brundtland Report to the 1992 Rio summit and its outcome documents.

Another stream of discourse and practice gradually ran in parallel with UN processes: that of pursuing green business. The 1989 UK government report *Blueprint for a Green Economy*<sup>1</sup>—the first book to make prominent use of the term “green economy”—distilled much of how environmental economics saw environmental problems: as a failure of markets to attach value to environmental resources and reward conservation behavior. The book argued the need for markets where resources are priced to reflect their value to society. This basic formula forms the core of market-oriented approaches to environmental problems to this day.

The launch of The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity (TEEB) study in 2007 marked a milestone in the mainstreaming of the language

of money and markets in environmental policy. TEEB was a major study commissioned by the Group of 8 plus 5, hosted by the UNEP and funded by the European Commission, Germany, the UK, Netherlands, Norway, Sweden and Japan. Led by Deutschebank senior banker Pavan Sukhdev, TEEB sought to measure the economic value of ecosystems and biodiversity and their loss in hard-nosed money terms.

The multiple crises of the economy, food and energy in 2008-09 and the worsening climate crisis provided the backdrop for the emergence of green economic strategies designed to overcome these challenges. In June 2009, ministers of OECD (Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development) countries signed the “Declaration on Green Growth” and asked the OECD to develop a green growth strategy. In May 2011, the OECD published this strategy in the document *Towards Green Growth*, which focuses on “fostering the necessary conditions for innovation, investment and competition that can give rise to new sources of economic growth – consistent with resilient ecosystems.”<sup>2</sup>

Meanwhile, in late 2008 the UNEP launched its own Green Economy Initiative (GEI) to refocus the global economy towards investments in clean technologies and natural infrastructure such as forests and soils and thus create green business and job opportunities. As part of the GEI, UNEP released in February 2011 the report *Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication, or Green Economy Report (GER)*. The GER contains the most comprehensive green economy strategy on offer and dominates discussions of the green economy.

## **2. What is the green economy according to the UNEP?**

If we go by the UNEP Green Economy Report, a green economy is one that:

- Produces low greenhouse gas emissions
- Uses resources more efficiently
- Continue to generate growth, income and jobs, and
- Observes social equity and inclusiveness.

In the GER's words, it is one that "results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities."<sup>3</sup>

How can the world achieve a transition to a green economy? The steps seen as most crucial are:

- a. to measure the monetary value of the environment and its resources* (which are often called "ecosystem services"), so that they can be treated as a form of capital, called "natural capital," on the same plane as physical-technical, human, and financial capital, and which can also be depleted and lost, or built-up and made productive;
- b. to prove the viability and profitability of enhancing this natural capital* and related small-footprint technologies as a "new engine of growth" so that it can replace "business as usual" while also satisfying social goals; and
- c. to create the enabling conditions*—such as policies and market mechanisms—for such "public and private investments to incorporate broader environmental and social criteria."<sup>4</sup>

The Green Economy Report (GER) contrasts its green model with "brown economies" ,in which the engine of growth is physical-technological and financial capital (also called "built capital"), and wealth comes at the cost of over-reliance on fossil fuels, resource depletion and other environmental losses. A green economy, by refocusing on natural capital, "can generate as much growth and employment as a brown economy, and outperforms the latter in the medium and long run, while yielding significantly more environmental and social benefits."<sup>5</sup>

Importantly, the GER does not fault brown economies for riding on economic and social inequities to create wealth, such as by exploiting labour and by taking advantage of unequal trade and finance. The green-versus-brown distinction boils down to a choice of investment and technology: those that enhance natural capital as against those that deplete it. The roles of finance capital, markets, and labour appear to be merely adjusted or retained, whether in brown or green economies.

For example, GER recognises the need for huge financial resources to jump-start and sustain the global green transition, but has to rely mainly on the same private channels such as banks and investment funds, whose misworkings prominently caused the crash of 2008. Public finance, including aid, is relegated to “being a catalyst, early stage investment provider, co-sharer of risk and guarantee of public infrastructure and services,” while microfinance is relegated to community and village levels.<sup>6</sup>

Meanwhile, the role of labour basically remains the same, with re-skilling for green jobs as the main concern; truly innovative redesigns of labour-management relations appropriate for a socially equitable green economy, or even just reducing immense income gaps, are left unnoticed.

The GER also shows an over-reliance on market mechanisms that are supposed to push the greening process but may do more harm than good. An example is tradable permit schemes, including “cap-and-trade systems,” and “payment for ecosystem services (PES) schemes,” which turn pollution control and other environmental services into marketable goods.

Shifting from brown to green is therefore not so much a fundamental paradigm shift as an emphasis shift. At the same time, the green economy is more strongly presented as a corrective to prevent the recurrence of crises such as those of recent years while ensuring long-term growth.

The UNEP-GER implicitly blames the 2008-09 crises on wrongly deployed capital in the past 20 years, stating that “at a fundamental level they [the multiple crises] all share a common feature: the gross misallocation of capital [into] ... property, fossil fuels and structured financial assets with embedded derivatives” while little was invested in “renewable energy, energy efficiency, public transportation, sustainable agriculture, ecosystem and biodiversity protection, and land and water conservation.”<sup>7</sup>

### **3. What are the key sectors and policy measures for greening in the GER?**

According to the GER, the green economy is to be achieved by “greening” eleven key economic sectors.

Four sectors—agriculture, fisheries, forests and the water sector—are identified by the GER as “derived from natural capital.” As the frontliners in the greening process, these sectors will need “more sustainable and equitable management” and also more investments that rebuild or maintain the ecosystem services on which they are based.

Seven sectors that could be characterised as “built capital”—energy, manufacturing, waste, construction, transportation, tourism and cities—are traditionally considered “brown.” In these sectors, the GER calls mainly for adopting technologies and processes which are low-carbon and more energy- and resource-efficient.

The GER suggests a range of policy measures that serve as enabling conditions to encourage the green transition, especially in the eleven sectors:

First, the GER calls for *prioritised investment and spending* to stimulate the greening of sectors. Public expenditure and investment incentives are needed to trigger the transition, but “the bulk of green economy investment will ultimately have to come from the private sector.”

Based on its projections (see **Box 3**), the GER calculates the investment needed for the transition to be from a low end of \$1.2 trillion to a high end of over \$3.4 trillion annually, from 2011 to 2050. This amounts to around 2% of global GDP.<sup>8</sup>

Second, the GER sees *taxes and market-based instruments* (e.g., taxes on polluters, and tradable permit schemes and payments for providing ecosystem services) as “powerful tools to promote green investment and innovation.”

Third, the GER wants *reform on subsidies* and other “poorly managed government spending” in environmentally harmful activities, such as fossil fuels, because they “can encourage inefficiency, waste and overuse” and “can also reduce the profitability of green investments.”

Fourth, the GER calls for a *framework of laws, regulations and enforcement* at the national level to reduce business risks and to increase confidence among green investors and markets.

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### Box 3. Green economy projections based on T21 modelling

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The GER's main analyses are based on an economic model that largely drew on the Threshold 21 (T21) modelling framework created by the Millennium Institute. The T21 is described as a large and complex mathematical model, which includes "200 stock variables and several thousand feedback loops" organized into 80 modules.

Using the T21-World model, the UNEP team first established baseline scenarios ("business-as-usual" or BAU) that replicated the world's economic history over the period 1970-2009, then projected two BAU scenarios for the period 2010-2050 that basically showed increasingly worse environmental, economic and social indicators.

Next, two "green investment scenarios" were simulated for the same 2010-2050 period. The first (G1 scenario) assumed that 1% of global Gross Domestic Product (GDP) was to be invested equally across all sectors in the green transition. The other (G2 scenario), which the UNEP preferred as "more relevant and coherent," assumed a bigger investment of 2% of world GDP and prioritized climate change, water scarcity and food security. The mostly positive indicators of economic growth, employment, poverty reduction, nutrition, water access, and biocapacity from year to year until 2050 are finally presented as clear proof that the green investment scenario—especially G2—is desirable and viable.

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**Source:** UNEP, Green Economy Report.

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Fifth, the GER sees investment in *capacity-building and training*, both for governments and national workforces, as essential to the green transition.

Finally, the GER is pushing for strengthened *international governance*, based on multilateral agreements and related processes, to promote a green economy.

## 4. What is wrong with the green economy agenda?

By focusing on "getting the economy right," proponents of the green economy agenda get development wrong. It does not deliver enough on poverty eradication, may likely worsen inequity within and between countries, and does not veer us away from the path to irreversible ecological catastrophe.

### ***The green economy promises growth but not much poverty eradication***

The green economy is supposed to give the highest priority to sustainable development and poverty eradication, but it does not address the root causes of underdevelopment and poverty, especially in the South.

Creating green jobs, ensuring access to basic services, and setting up safety nets for poor people whose present jobs, livelihoods and consumption might be adversely affected by the green transition are discussed disparately. They are almost treated as an afterthought, instead of being hard-wired into the framework of the greening process.

The G2 scenario shows that allotting 2% of global GDP annually on green investments will grow the global economy nearly three times its current size and more than double income per capita by 2050. But it also projects that 8.4% of the global population or about 750 million people will remain living on less than \$2 per day.

Green growth is supposed to create green jobs, but mostly in levels that only replace jobs lost in the transition.

### ***The green economy favors big business***

The green economy assumes that big business holds the solutions because it controls the bulk of capital.

Consider agriculture. The GER recognises both “conventional agriculture systems and traditional smallholder agriculture” as two farming paradigms. On the surface, it seems to emphasise the drawbacks of both systems, and urges all modes of agriculture to adopt green practices that boost productivity and efficiency. The catch is that the GER wants the world’s farmers to “scale up adoption of green agriculture by partnering with leading agribusinesses,” and for the world’s top 40 agribusinesses to play this leading role, since their investment decisions can determine how global agriculture could “encourage green and sustainable farming practices.”<sup>9</sup>

This represents, at worst, a license for big business to extend and deepen further their control of the economy and perpetuate unsustainable practices. The same bias for big business leadership can be seen in GER’s other sectoral strategies, from energy to manufacturing to transport.

### ***The green economy extends the lifespan of the brown economy***

While any global economic shift from brown to green will entail a transition period in which both will have to coexist, one would expect a serious sustainable development strategy to consistently push for policies that can

drastically reduce all destructive brown technologies within the next 40 years. Yet the GER seems to favour areas such as nuclear power and mining where brown business interests are well-entrenched.

GER's green scenarios (both G1 and G2) bear down hard on fossil fuel use. On the other hand, they also show an increasing use of nuclear power from 2011 through to 2050—thereby implicitly endorsing nuclear power.<sup>10</sup> The GER is disappointingly quiet on phasing out nuclear plants or finding clean solutions to the problem of nuclear waste disposal.

The GER is similarly soft on mining. It is concerned about metal ore depletion, intense access and supply competition, and growing extraction costs, but merely calls for higher resource efficiency, including recycling technologies, without proposing greener modes of ore extraction or a clear ban on destructive large-scale mining. More drastic policy interventions than the GER dares contemplate are clearly needed to green the mining industry.

### ***The green economy is unlikely to avert the climate crisis' tipping point***

In terms of curbing emissions to safe levels, the GER's showcase scenario (G2) does not do the job. In the G2 scenario, annual energy-related CO<sub>2</sub> emissions by 2050 will have fallen by over a third against 2011 levels, but only by 4-7% relative to 1990 emissions. This is wide off the mark in terms of achieving the conservative target of stabilizing atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> at 450 ppm, which is still risky and considered by many as outdated, not to mention attaining the safer 350-ppm levels (see Box 4).

The UNEP's green economy is thus neither a credible strategy for averting disastrous climate change nor a viable pathway to sustainable development.

### ***The Green Economy favors the privatization and commodification of nature***

The GER also bats strongly for carbon markets in general, which are questionable since they don't truly reduce global GHG emissions. Forest carbon markets are increasingly associated with land grabs, as have been happening in Africa.<sup>11</sup> Worse, carbon markets can behave so much like financial derivatives and futures trading, which greatly figured in the 2008 crash.

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#### **Box 4. Why the UNEP's Green Economy fails on curbing emissions**

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Analysis in the IPCC's fourth assessment report (2007)—which is increasingly seen as out of date—says that to hold global warming to 2-2.4 degrees, GHG concentrations must reach no higher than 400 ppm.

To achieve this, GHG emissions have to fall by 50-80% of 2000 levels in 2050, or about 43-83% of 1990 levels, using the IEA CO<sub>2</sub> figures for 1990. This target is something like 10 times greater than the emissions reduction that GER's G2 scenario can achieve.

More recent science calls for 350 ppm as a safer boundary for atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> stabilization, and even more rapid and stringent cuts to reach this target. Baer, Athanasiou and Kartha (2009), building on Hansen et al (2008), argue that to stabilize atmospheric CO<sub>2</sub> at 350 ppm by around 2100 (we are currently at 391 ppm), the feasible pathway is for emissions to peak in 2011 and decline at an annual rate of 10% to reach zero emissions by 2050.

In contrast, in the GER's G2 scenario, the world would still emit 20Gt in 2050. Baer et al. recognize a lot of uncertainty, and the possible need for emission cuts that are even more stringent than the 350 model asks for. But the GER just seems oblivious of this, and does not even show pretense to caution by, say, having even slightly higher targets.

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**Source:** Paul Baer, Tom Athanasiou and Sivan Kartha, "A 350 ppm Emergency Pathway," November 2009

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The GER paints the REDD approach (reduced emissions from deforestation and forest degradation) in glowing lights, and even wants it included in a multi-layered payment for ecosystem services (PES) scheme, despite its potentially serious impacts on indigenous peoples, rural communities and biodiversity.

As summarised by Chris Lang in a REDD-Monitor website piece, the main criticisms of REDD (and REDD+) are that impositions by national parks and protected areas may lead to large-scale evictions and loss of rights for indigenous peoples and local communities; forest management programs may be abused by commercial logging firms; and forested or reforestation-targeted land may be converted to industrial tree plantations with serious implications for biodiversity and local communities.<sup>12</sup>

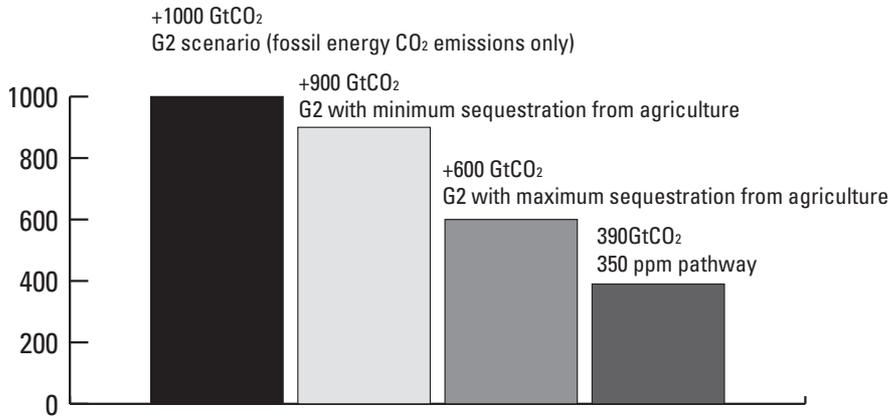
#### ***The green economy may be used to further constrain policy space in developing countries and widen the North-South divide***

The GER recognises the challenge of reconciling “the competing economic development aspirations of rich and poor countries” in the face of worsening environmental problems.<sup>13</sup> Yet it doesn't touch on some of the most intense sources of these conflicts in recent decades, such as debt, trade, and investment inequities. A green economy is offered but North-South inequalities are not addressed.

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**Figure 2. G2 scenario exceeds 350ppm carbon budget (2011-2050)**

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Further, many in the South worry that the green economy becomes a ruse to restrain development and perpetuate poverty in developing countries. They see warning signs instead in the proposed green economy roadmap where targets and goals are applied equally to all countries, constraining policy space as well as violating the principle of common but differentiated responsibility and respective capacity. Or worse, these could be used to justify “green protectionism” (e.g. imposing tariffs on goods from the South produced using brown technologies) or new policies and conditionalities for international cooperation and development assistance that will favor the exports and investments of donor country TNCs which specialise in green products and services.

### ***The green economy holds on to the old paradigm***

The GER frames its greening strategies in terms of capital, prices, cost-benefit analysis, profits and markets. Its core idea is to treat ecosystems as “natural capital” and as sources of marketable “ecosystem services,” and to define their role as a “new engine of growth” in the whole scheme of capitalist business and markets.

It is flawed in a fundamental way because it makes capital—not the environment, not people’s rights and needs—still king. Perversely, the environment is deemed valuable only as a form of capital, as a balance sheet entry. It is essentially the continued colonization of ecology by the (market)

economy. “Getting the economy right” essentially means seeking an early and solid buy-in from big business, mainstream economists, and developed countries.

As George Monbiot cautions about markets: “As soon as something is measurable it becomes negotiable. Subject the natural world to cost-benefit analysis and accountants and statisticians will decide which parts of it we can do without. All that now needs to be done to demonstrate that an ecosystem can be junked is to show that the money to be made from trashing it exceeds the money to be made from preserving it.”<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, allocating natural resources based on capacity to pay promotes resource grabs and lock out access by the poor, while big businesses and rich economies are shown escape routes away from radical changes in production and resource use.

The green economy agenda does not place limits on the pursuit of profit and accumulation of capital. In fact, it banks on the profit motive to spur the development of green technologies and methods. But the logic of this economic system is ever increasing expansion of production and consumption for profit based on the exploitation of labour and natural resources. As long as the system is anchored on continuous growth, this will inexorably lead to further resource depletion, environmental degradation, social inequality and crisis.

### ***The green economy sidelines social sustainability***

By holding economic growth as the principal goal of development, albeit trying to decouple this from environmental degradation, the green economy approach fails to put forward a comprehensive agenda for enhancing the well-being of all. Indeed, the current social crisis manifest in rising social unrest testifies to the importance and urgency of addressing the question of social sustainability—how to ensure inter- and intra-generational equity and justice, redress social exclusion and discrimination, provide social security, and guarantee citizens’ participation in public affairs.

Instead, the social agenda in the green economy is largely relegated to trickle-down poverty alleviation, sidelining issues of redistribution.

The need for transforming social structures, institutions and power relations that underpin various forms of deprivation, vulnerability and exclusion is largely ignored or downplayed. Indeed the precondition for social sustainability is the access of individuals and social groups, including minorities, to societies' resources. In the current context of extreme concentration of wealth in the world, this requires fundamental redistributive reforms within and between countries. Moreover, appropriate technical, social and institutional means are required to ensure access to resources. These include appropriate legal frameworks, education, social and institutional mechanisms to ensure physical access to and productive use of these resources according to the needs and goals of individuals and society determined in a democratic process. All this is absent in the green economy.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Pearce at al.
- 2 OECD
- 3 UNEP, p. 14.
- 4 Ibid.
- 5 Ibid., pp. 623-624.
- 6 Ibid., p. 584.
- 7 Ibid., p. 14.
- 8 Ibid., p. 586.
- 9 Ibid., p. 52.
- 10 Ibid., p. 532-534.
- 11 The Gaia Foundation, Carbon Trade Watch, and Timberwatch. See also: World Rainforest Movement. 2011. "Forest carbon project in Parana, Brazil: Reduction of deforestation and persecution of local communities." Accessed 21 September 2011 at <http://www.wrm.org.uy/bulletin/169/viewpoint.html>; and: Climate and Capitalism. 2011. "Carbon Trading in Europe: An expensive and Harmful Failure". Accessed 21 September 2011 at <http://climateandcapitalism.com/?p=4112>
- 12 Lang
- 13 UNEP, p.14.
- 14 Monbiot





## CHAPTER 6

# **Sustainable development governance and sustainable development goals**

### **1. What is the role of global governance in sustainable development?**

Achieving sustainable development entails a global transition—away from prevailing inequitable and ecologically destabilizing patterns of development, to modes of development based on shared prosperity and environmental protection.

Global governance plays a crucial role in this shift. Global governance refers to the complex of institutions, mechanisms, norms, and policies that shape global processes, mediate relations between actors, and provide a framework for cooperation in addressing global challenges. Currently, it includes the United Nations system, the Group of 20, the World Trade Organization, international financial institutions, and hundreds of international treaties and soft law instruments on trade, the environment, and development.

In the context of a transition to sustainable development, global governance needs to enable a transformation of economic and social processes and structures to achieve development and environmental sustainability; to integrate areas of policy making to achieve co-benefits; and to address consequences (e.g., of environmental and economic changes to the poor) of their interactions. It will need to effectively regulate the behaviour of states and non-state actors, mobilise resources, implement and enforce

commitments, and give countries the space and capacities to successfully chart their own pathways to change.

Global governance for sustainable development will by no means be neutral. The process of sustainable development will have winners and losers: old technologies, practices, and forms of social organization—and actors invested in their persistence—have to give way to new ones. Global governance will need to steer this process in favor of the marginalised and voiceless: the poor and future generations. Governance for sustainable development requires a democratic, pro-poor, inclusive, and rights-based stance.

The principles and norms embodied in the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, and the Rio Conventions outlined the general contours of governance for sustainable development (**see Table 1**).

The world today is not lacking in laws, norms and institutions for advancing economic, social and environmental goals (**see Table 2**). A set of specialised global institutions in the economic and social-development domains were established around the UN system in the immediate post-war era. This includes the IMF, the World Bank, the General Agreement on Tariffs and Trade (later the World Trade Organization), and various specialised UN agencies such as the International Labour Organization, the Food and Agriculture Organization and the World Health Organization, as well as UN funds and programs such as the UN Development Programme and the UN Children's Fund.

The 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment kicked off the development of global environmental governance with the establishment of the UNEP in 1975 and the negotiation of a large number of international environmental agreements in the decades that followed. In 1992, the Earth Summit attempted at a convergence of development and environmental governance through the program of action contained in Agenda 21. The Commission on Sustainable Development was also created to monitor and review progress towards sustainable development.

**Table 1. Key ideas and norms from Rio and how they relate to sustainable development governance**

<b>Idea/principle/norm</b>	<b>Implication for global sustainable development governance</b>
International action and cooperation	The international and trans-boundary nature of economic, social and environmental problems especially in the context of a globalized economy requires international responses. International cooperation and governance play a crucial role in shaping international economic processes, managing environmental problems, and providing enabling conditions for the success of national sustainable development efforts.
Common but differentiated responsibility	Degree of action must correspond to a country's contribution to causing unsustainable development and capacity to act on it.
Polluter pays principle	Government and business actors responsible for causing environmental damage must bear the costs of repair or avoidance.
Policy integration and coherence	Economic, social and environmental factors are interconnected. The design and implementation of policy interventions and legal frameworks requires the integration of economic, social and environmental concerns and goals. Coherence of approached and policies across all sectors is necessary to ensure that efforts in one sector support rather than undermine efforts in others.
Enhanced participation and access to information and justice	Sustainable development requires the empowerment of a broad range of actors to participate in all levels of decision-making, including women, youth, indigenous people, non-government organizations, workers and trade unions, farmers, the scientific community, local businesses and local authorities. Authorities should foster public awareness and education, and people should have access to information relevant to their environment and development. People must also have access to means of redress and remedy. In short, governance must be based on democracy, inclusiveness, transparency, accountability, justice, and active citizenship.
Precautionary principle	Institutions of governance should allow for the use of caution when confronted with the threat of harm, despite the absence of scientific certainty on the likelihood or magnitude of the threat. Moreover, in the lack of scientific certainty than an action or policy is harmful, the burden of proof that it is not harmful falls on actors taking the action

***What is wrong with current global governance for sustainable development and what are the main options for reform?***

Despite this impressive body of laws and institutions, the world finds itself far off track in realizing the vision of sustainable development. This failure reflects partly the shortcomings in global sustainable development governance, at which there have been efforts for reform starting at least from the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg. The perceived inadequacies of global sustainable development governance

**Table 2. Institutions and laws in global governance, according to main mandate**

	<b><i>Economic</i></b> <b><i>Goal: Economic growth and stability</i></b>	<b><i>Social</i></b> <b><i>Goal: Social welfare and equity</i></b>	<b><i>Environmental</i></b> <b><i>Goal: Environmental protection</i></b>
<b><i>Institution</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Group of Eight/Group of Twenty</li> <li>• World Trade Organization</li> <li>• International Monetary Fund</li> <li>• World Bank Group</li> <li>• UN Conference on Trade and Development</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International Labour Organization</li> <li>• Food and Agriculture Organization</li> <li>• World Health Organization</li> <li>• UN Education, Scientific and Cultural Organization</li> <li>• UN Children's Fund</li> <li>• UN Women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UN Environment Programme</li> <li>• Global Environment Facility</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• UN Economic and Social Council</li> </ul>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Commission on Sustainable Development</li> </ul>		
<b><i>Law (soft and hard)</i></b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Uruguay Round agreements</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Millennium Development Goals</li> <li>• Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples</li> <li>• Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rio Conventions</li> <li>• Kyoto Protocol</li> <li>• Other international environmental agreements</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights</li> </ul>		
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Agenda 21</li> <li>• Rio Declaration on Environment and Development</li> </ul>		

often center on institutional weaknesses and gaps, particularly the lack of integration, fragmentation, incoherence, weak implementation, and the weakness of the environmental pillar:

- Current sustainable development institutions are too weak and fragmented;

- Fragmentation—of treaties, financing, and overall authority for environmental and sustainable development governance—has resulted in a lack of policy coherence;
- The three pillars of sustainable development—environmental, economic, and social—lack integration in the UN system and in global, regional, and national policies;
- Enforcement capability is lacking in many cases, as are financial resources to aid implementation and/or build capacity for sustainable development, leading to a “policy-implementation disconnect”;
- Integration of sustainable development into decision-making is lacking at all levels, especially in the wider macro-economic policy domains of finance and trade;
- When considered in the context of international or global governance institutions as a whole, including the UN system and International Financial Institutions (IFIs), the environmental pillar is weak in authority, priority and profile, and capacity relative to the economic pillar.<sup>1</sup>

The main options for reform being considered attempt to address these weaknesses (see **Box 5**). These options can be grouped into three main actions: strengthening the integration and coordination of the economic, social and environmental pillars; enhancing the environmental arm of global governance; and institutional streamlining.

## **2. Do these proposals address the fundamental failings of sustainable development governance?**

These options have their merits. However, they overlook the deeper systemic issues essential to sustainable development governance.

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**Box 5. Institutional options for IFSD reform**

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**Enhancing UNEP.** Universal membership in the UNEP Governing Council (from current 58 members). No change to mandate and minimal financial implications. Some analysts conclude that broad and active participation in the Governing Council and the Global Ministerial Environmental Forum of observer countries amounts to de facto universal membership.

**Establishing a new umbrella organization for sustainable development.** New institution exercising executive functions, possibly founded on existing intergovernmental and secretariat entities. It would enhance integration of sustainable development in the work of institutions covering economic, social and environmental pillars. Established by General Assembly resolution or legal instrument.

**Establishing a specialized agency such as a world environment organization.** Specialized agency based on the model of United Nations agencies such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and FAO, which are hybrid normative and operational entities. It would be the global authority on the environment, providing policy guidance to other United Nations entities working on the environment and multilateral environmental agreements.

**Reforming the Economic and Social Council and the Commission on Sustainable Development.** In relation to the Economic and Social Council, possibilities that have been raised include strengthening the coordination role of the Council in relation to sustainable development, for example, by establishing a “sustainable development segment” to engage more closely with the reports of the various functional commissions and entities such as UNEP. Another possibility involves merging the Economic and Social Council with the Commission on Sustainable Development into a council on sustainable development. Mention has also been made of upgrading the Commission to a sustainable development council, which could be achieved through a General Assembly resolution.

**Enhancing institutional reforms and streamlining existing structures.** A consortium arrangement for environmental sustainability, headed by a high-level governing body. An instrument or set of instruments would structure relationship with existing institutions.

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**Source:** United Nations General Assembly 2010.

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***They do not address divergent approaches to development***

Despite the strong consensus for reform, there is little evidence of a shared vision of sustainable development.<sup>2</sup> The lack of institutional coherence is to a large extent rooted in differences in perspectives and approaches to achieve sustainable development. For many governments, the pursuit of economic growth at all cost through market-enhancing policies remains the overriding approach to development and goal of governance.

Global economic institutions also promote economic policies that undermine the achievement of social and environmental goals pursued in other pillars of governance. For instance, economic liberalisation policies—enforced through adjustment lending by the Bretton Woods institutions and binding trade rules in the WT—have curtailed the space and capacity of developing country governments to provide social services, to pursue endogenous

economic development, and protect their domestic economies from unfair competition and external sources of instability.

***They do not address unequal relations of power in institutions of governance***

Power relations underpin governance: what interests prevail determines what kinds of policies and rules are enforced; which actors are positioned to shape, influence, and ultimately benefit from them; and whose rights are respected and whose are constrained. Global governance is characterised by power asymmetries between the global North and South, and also between elites and the poor and marginalised within them. Governments of developed countries use their influence over global economic institutions and forums to advance the interests of transnational corporations and international finance.

These asymmetric structures have led to asymmetric outcomes. Neoliberal economic policies promoted by global economic institutions in the last three decades have increased the freedoms and entitlements of multinational corporations, international finance, and technology proprietors, while eroding social rights, environmental protections, and policy space for developing countries. These asymmetries also explain why rules in areas that are of interest to developing countries and the poor are weak or do not exist, such as formal rules in sovereign debt renegotiation, rules for corporate behavior, or a global social floor for workers.

Moreover, global governance structures remain state-centric. Although there is a general trend of non-state actors being given formal recognition in multi-stakeholder processes at global, regional, and country levels, there is also a counter-trend of narrowing policy space for CSOs in many areas. CSOs need to be recognised as independent development actors in their own right in the whole range of economic, social and environmental dimensions. As such they should be accorded equal treatment and role in the governance architecture.

### **3. What are sustainable development goals?**

One of the key outcomes of the Rio+20 summit will be the definition of and agreement towards sustainable development goals (SDGs), similar and supportive of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Indeed, this is already being considered by some as a possible successor framework to the MDGs. The UN Secretary-General for instance has backed this approach, saying in his opening remarks to the General Assembly in 2011, “Let us develop a new generation of sustainable development goals to pick up where the MDGs leave off.” Such an approach, say proponents, could allow the MDGs’ focus on poverty reduction to be matched by complementary targets on the environment.

Discussions on the possibility of formulating goals for SDGs started even before Rio+20. SDGs were first proposed by the government of Colombia during the UN General Assembly in September 2011. The government of Guatemala endorsed the proposal and convened an informal consultation on SDGs in November 2011. Currently, the governments of Peru and the United Arab Emirates also support Colombia’s SDG proposal. **Box 6** summarises their updated proposal.

Some quarters are concerned that replacing MDGs with SDGs may imply that resources will be drawn away from meeting many of the unmet targets of the MDGs. There is also little clarity yet as to what the SDGs would cover and how they will be determined. The question of universal applicability, differentiated responsibility and policy space remains a wide open question. Then there is the question of implementation framework, accountability mechanisms, and the roles of various stakeholders in the determination of these goals and in their implementation.

Addressing these questions and concerns therefore have immense relevance to the post-2015 development agenda not only for the UN system but for members states and all development actors including civil society.

### **4. What can we learn from the MDGs?**

The temptation to adopt the MDG approach to the challenge of sustainable development is easy to appreciate. MDGs have proven useful in sparking

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## Box 6. Updated SDG Proposal of the Government of Colombia

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**Overarching goal:** Poverty eradication

**Principles:** Agenda 21 principles in general  
Common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR)  
Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)

### Initial, preliminary and indicative list of SDGs:

- ▶ Food security: production, access and nutrition

*Potential issues areas*

- Reduction in food waste and food losses.
- Achieve zero net land degradation (Increase in productive land)
- Increased global food production (Close yield gaps in agriculture and achieve MSY in fisheries)
- Improved provision of daily nutritional requirements for all

*MDG Linkage: Halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger*

- ▶ Integrated water management for sustainable growth

*Potential issue areas*

- Increased access to water supply and sanitation
- Improved quality of water resources and ecosystems
- Increased water efficiency
- Reduced health risks from water-related diseases

*MDG Linkage: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation*

- ▶ Energy for sustainable development

*Potential issue areas:*

- Ensured access to basic energy services for all
- Improved energy efficiency
- Increase in the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix (differentiated approaches)

- ▶ • Sustainable and resilient cities

*Potential issue areas:*

- Improvements in quality of life (water, energy, housing, transport, air quality)
- Improved resource productivity in cities and urban systems
- Improved integrated planning for cities

*MDG Linkage: By 2020, achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers*

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**Box 2. Updated SDG Proposal of the Government of Colombia (continued)**


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▶ Healthy and productive oceans

*Potential issue areas:*

- Global fish stocks sustainably and effectively managed
- Reductions in marine pollution from land based sources
- Marine and coastal ecosystems sustainably managed and protected

▶ Enhanced capacity of natural systems to support human welfare

*Potential issue areas:*

- Reduced rate of destruction of critical and provisioning ecosystems
- Reduced rate of species/ genus loss (note links to food security)
- Local sustainable livelihoods supported

▶ Improved efficiency and sustainability in resource use (Sustainable consumption and production patterns)

*Potential issue areas:*

- Sustainable public procurement
- Promotion of life cycle approaches (including sound chemical management)
- Promotion of cleaner production approaches

▶ Enhanced Employment and Livelihood Security

*Potential issue areas:*

- Social protection floors tailored to national needs and capacities promoted
- Supportive economic, social and environmental policies for employment generation
- Promotion of entrepreneurship and sustainable enterprise development
- Enabling environment for full participation of women and youth in labour markets

*MDG Linkage: Halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day*

*MDG Linkage: Achieve decent employment for women, men, and young people*

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public awareness on poverty and other key development concerns, and generating consensus around the goal of addressing them. Against the plethora of social, economic and environmental problems confronting the world's peoples, it is rational to identify priorities and focus efforts accordingly.

But even before rushing into a process of adopting new SDGs, the question governments and the UN should first answer is why, despite the popular awareness, high-level commitment, and celebrity enthusiasm generated around the MDGs, the world is still far behind in achieving them?

The reason of course is that the MDGs are embedded within the broader context of the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy (trade and investment liberalization, privatization, deregulation), which has actually worsened many human development indicators in most regions. Unbridled market liberalization has weakened many governments' capacity to ensure the progressive realization of human rights, and has undermined even the most modest development goals that are the MDGs.

As Charles Gore, former Least Developed Countries specialist at the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) acknowledged:

The MDGs have...been embedded within a particular approach to national policy which assumes that global integration, through the Washington Consensus policy package, together with good governance and more social spending, will lead to substantial poverty reduction and improved human development. But these policies have not been able to generate sufficient productive employment opportunities and livelihoods in poor countries, and they have been unable to build up those countries' productive base and thus allow them to become less dependent on aid.

Indeed the strength of the MDG approach—the simplicity and broad appeal of the target—also make for their main weakness as they obfuscate the hard structural and dialectical processes at the core of poverty and underdevelopment. As Charles Gore puts it, the ascendancy of the MDG approach as the lynchpin of the current international development consensus involves the ditching of the notion of development as a comprehensive process that entails evolution and structural transformation, in favor of development conceived as a collection of quantifiable performance standards.<sup>3</sup>

In other words, the MDG approach reduces the process of development to meeting specific, absolute, and measurable aspects of poverty or underdevelopment—such as hunger, or infant mortality—without tackling the roots of poverty and underdevelopment that give rise to hunger and preventable deaths.

For instance, conditional cash transfers in some Latin American countries are hailed for helping reduce rates of inequality and improving enrolment rates among children, even without redistributive reforms. The distribution of mosquito bed nets has made some improvements to reducing child

mortality in Africa even as real improvements in the delivery of health services wait in the backburner.

These achievements are certainly noteworthy. But short of structural transformation and departing from conservative macroeconomic policy frameworks, it is hard to think how these quick wins might be sustained over the long-term.

Indeed, the eruption of economic, climate, and food crises in recent years suggests that without comprehensively addressing the power imbalances and wrong-headed policy choices at the root of poverty and underdevelopment, quick successes with meeting particular MDGs or SDGs are bound to be eroded no sooner than they are won.

## **5. Can SDGs serve as a tool for sustainable development?**

SDGs can only contribute to sustainable development if they address the structural causes of poverty and unsustainable development. This means calling for the end to the current unsustainable neoliberal model of production and consumption that allows unbridled environmental destruction and violation of human rights for the accumulation of the benefits of economic development in the hands of a few, while the environmental and social costs are borne by the larger part of the population whose needs, even the most basic ones, are not met.

Developing a post-2015 framework and a set of SDGs must be guided by a **rights-based agenda**, the **principle of universality, equity and common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR)** and **respective capacity**, and **democratic ownership**.

The overarching objectives of SDGs must be on **poverty eradication and social equity** as well as shifting to **sustainable and equitable production and consumption**. These objectives must be considered as integral and mutually reinforcing. SDGs need to be comprehensive enough to cover the three dimensions of sustainable development—social, and economic and environmental—to be effective.

A **rights-based agenda** would ensure that the political, social, and economic rights of people, including the right to food and proper nutrition, clean and safe drinking water, healthy environment, the rights of indigenous peoples, labour rights, the right to information, right to participation, right to self-determination, right to development, and others are integrated in the formulation of the SDGs.

The principle of **universality** means that SDGs should be applicable to all countries, not just developing countries as with the MDGs. However, the principle of universality must be coupled with the principles of **equity** and **common but differentiated responsibility and respective capacity**.

This means that while overarching goals and objectives may be universal, the targets and indicators will differ between developed and developing countries according to national priorities, and in line with the principle of CBDR.

The large portion of populations living in abject poverty in the South makes poverty eradication the primary goal of sustainable development in such nations. Likewise, recognizing that raising the standard of living of their populations can have negative environmental consequences, developing countries must also consider ecological limits. Developed nations on the other hand have the responsibility of addressing poverty and unsustainable consumption and production not only inside their borders but also in other countries.

Developed countries must also assist developing countries in shifting to sustainable paths of development through appropriate and adequate financial and technology transfers and capacity building.

The principle of **democratic ownership** is also important in framing the SDGs. These principles require participation not only from national and subnational governments but also from civil society, especially those from marginalised groups in all stages: from the identification of priority areas, to defining the set of goals, as well as in the implementation and evaluation of the goals. Countries, especially developing countries, must be able to achieve SDGs tailored to their specific circumstances and their defined priorities.

SDGs should be implemented with a **clear plan of implementation**—with a clear set of commitments, timelines and indicators for progress. SDGs should be measurable and time-bound, not only for management purposes but also for transparency and accountability. However, a comprehensive and integrated set of SDGs calls for the formulation of a set of indicators which go beyond the measurement of GDP to encompass the well-being of people and the environment.

Finally, the SDGs should be **integrated into the post 2015 development framework** and elaborated through a **nationally-driven process** characterised by **democratic participation and transparency**. The exclusive process of the identification of the MDGs which limited the decision making to government bodies with advice from experts should not be repeated. Instead, a multi-stakeholder process should be adopted. The participation of civil society, especially grassroots and the most-marginalised sectors should be present in all phases of decision making; from the identification of priority areas, to identifying the set of goals and indicators, as well as in the implementation and evaluation of the SDGs.

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## Endnotes

- 1 Bernstein and Brunnée
- 2 Ibid.
- 4 Gore

## CHAPTER 7

# **The People's Agenda at Rio+20**

The solutions on offer in the official Rio+20 process—the Green Economy and reforms of institutions for sustainable development—fall short of addressing the fundamental failings of the economic system and of the structures of global governance.

The Green Economy strategy risks veering away from the positive directions of sustainable development taken by Rio and further explored by social movements especially those based in the South. Neither does it express a fundamentally new paradigm that reflects the aspirations of the world's peoples, especially among the poor and marginalised in developing countries, for an economic system that serves their needs.

Similarly, proposals for reforming institutions of sustainable development do not address the divergences in vision and inequalities in power at the heart of the structures of global governance that make them mainly instruments of powerful economic actors and weaken efforts to achieve sustainable development.

We must not allow Rio+20 to legitimise the corporate Green Economy agenda.

We should expose and oppose attempts by powerful states, particularly the US, to whittle down human rights obligations and equity principles in the Rio+20 outcome document in order to avoid concrete commitments to meaningful reforms in social, economic and environmental policies, while on the other hand, they are pushing for corporate-led investments and initiatives to fill in the gap left by government inaction.

We should not allow states to backtrack on the Rio principles and internationally agreed human rights norms and standards. We must assert that the Rio principles be upheld, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibility, the polluter pay principle, the precautionary approach, and the principle on access to information, public participation and justice. We should also assert that sustainable development must be based on the observance and fulfillment of human rights norms and standards, including the rights to food, health and water, the right to education, the rights of women and children, the right to self-determination, the right to development, and the right of people to participate in decision-making.

## **1. On poverty eradication**

Poverty is the result of the unequal distribution of power, assets and opportunities within and between countries. Thus poverty eradication is about the empowerment of the poor to break down structures that act as barriers to opportunity and claim their rights. They must take ownership and control of their natural resources and productive assets and use them to gear their economies to fulfill their needs and development aspirations. They must also take control of institutions of governance in order for their voices to be represented in policy-making. Institutions of global governance must be radically reformed or replaced so that poor countries are equitably represented. Unequal agreements on trade and investment must be renegotiated or abrogated.

## **2. Food sovereignty**

All people have the right to safe, nutritious, adequate, and affordable food. Countries and communities also have the right to access and control the means of food production, the right to determine their food and agricultural policies, and the right to develop and maintain systems of food production and distribution that are ecologically sustainable, socially just and culturally appropriate. Agrarian reform must be carried out in order to secure farmers' and rural people's democratic access to land, water resources and seeds, as well as to finance and infrastructure. Food production and trade policies must prioritise domestic food self-sufficiency and the livelihoods of small

farmers, fishers, women and indigenous people. Public institutions must also help develop and encourage the adoption of sustainable methods of agriculture which rely on local ecosystems and locally-based knowledge as well as appropriate technologies.

### **3. Water**

Water is not a commodity but a common heritage basic to human survival. All people have the right to sufficient, safe, accessible and affordable water and sanitation services. Countries and communities are also entitled to develop and maintain water resources, management systems, and facilities to satisfy human and development needs and safeguard their sustainability. Once privatised, water ceases to be a right and becomes a commodity available only to moneyed corporations that use it unsustainably. The management of water resources must thus be in public and community control. Water use must be primarily for fulfilling basic human needs and sustainable food production. The rights to water and sanitation further require an explicit focus on the most disadvantaged and marginalised, as well as an emphasis on participation, empowerment, accountability and transparency.

### **4. Protection of biodiversity**

Biodiversity is essential to the proper functioning of ecosystems and is thus crucial to the right of people to health, food, and a safe and clean environment. The livelihoods of small farmers, fishers, indigenous people and women also directly depend on biodiversity and their access to genetic resources. They have developed local resource management systems and conserve most of the world's biodiversity. The rapid loss of biodiversity is due mainly to the growing control of corporations over genetic resources as well as over land, water and forests for industrial agriculture, logging and mining. Thus biodiversity protection must also be premised on protecting people's access to land, water and seeds. Biodiversity is also an integral part of the heritage of indigenous people and thus their right to self-determination must be recognised, including their right to develop their own social and economic systems and retain control of their ancestral lands, traditional knowledge and genetic resources.

## **5. Climate change**

Climate change threatens to worsen many environmental problems and undermine a wide range of human rights both of present and future generations. It also threatens to push people into poverty and underdevelopment and lock millions deeper into it. The world has to transition away from the fossil fuel-based, profit-driven economy and abandon unsustainable patterns of manufacture, energy, agriculture and transportation that are behind ever-rising greenhouse gas emissions. The Global North has to take the lead in this effort by making rapid and drastic emissions cuts and assist poorer countries pay for the costs of their own transition through finance and technology transfer.

Rio+20 should learn from the failure of the prevailing system of development, a system where economic and natural resources are used to accumulate wealth for the few who control them rather than serve the common good of society. It is a system based on the unrestricted exploitation of the poor, women and the environment for corporate profits. And it is a system where a few powerful countries write the rules of global trade, finance and environmental action in the interest of their corporations and banks, harming the environment and people's lives and livelihoods in the South. We know it to be a failed system and we need to break from it and replace it.

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