

Another Earth Summit on Sustainable Development in 2012: Leading or Misleading the World through a Green Economy?

by Uchita de Zoysa

'Sustainable Development' is one of the most defined, interpreted and misinterpreted words on earth. After two decades since the Brundtland Commission Report on 'Our Common Future' published in 1987 famous definition of sustainable development as 'development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs', the world still appears to be unsatisfied. To most of us in the South sustainable development would mean 'achieving an enduring prosperity, wellbeing and happiness for all where sustainable consumption and production opportunities are ensured in an equitable world that at the same time keeps the ecosystem in a healthy balance'. Yet, many Northern Governments, Multinational Corporations and the United Nations Bureaucracy are not satisfied with the plans already made way back in 1992 when the first ever Earth Summit was held in Rio de Janeiro to achieve such world order.

The 1992 Earth Summit adopted Agenda 21, a comprehensive global plan of action for sustainable development. A decade later, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) was adopted highlighting concrete steps for better implementation of Agenda 21. However, the progress has been slow in achieving these internationally agreed goals and sustainable development has now become a greater challenge. Therefore another Earth Summit to deliberate on sustainable development will be convened in the year 2012 in the same city of Rio de Janeiro.

Do We Need Another Summit?

Why do we need another earth summit? According to Mr. Felix Dodds of the Stakeholder Forum in UK, a UN summit is the best way to draw global attention towards sustainable development. If not the subject continues to be conveniently neglected by policy makers and governments and does not get media attention to enable the sustainability agenda. The main strategist behind getting the UN to declare the Rio+20 Summit, Dodds draws an interesting point about keeping the sustainable development agenda alive. He believes this is not the end all be all of accomplishing the challenges ahead but that it will play a critical role in what we can or cannot succeed in doing. The conversation surrounding transforming our economy should focus on seeing a world that is about fairness, equity and where everyone benefits from the planet, not just a few as our current system allows. In the past 20 years since the Earth Summit in Rio Dodds believes we have lost the plot and emphasizes that more people now have less than two decades ago. As the next 20 years unravel, if we do not commit to remedying the current state of the world immediately, the years to follow will see insecurity of water, food, energy and health worldwide. Dodds calls the world to step up in this small window of opportunity that is presented to us to work together and use Rio +20 as the final piece to bring the family back together for a sustainable and secure future.

The First Preparatory Meeting for UNCSD

The first preparatory committee (PrepCom-1) of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) more popularly known as 'Rio+20 Summit' was held in May 2010 in New York at the headquarters of the organization. A rather poorly informed and rather quietly organized event had already attempted to finalise a programme for the proposed 2012 Earth Summit. The organizers appear to be in hurry to conclude the outcome rather early without any sense of responsibility towards national governments and its people and stakeholder groups. The framework of the summit also has been decided with four agenda items; Review of



Address: 253/10, Stanley Thilakaratne Mawatha, Nugegoda, Sri Lanka.

Tel: 2768459 Mobile: 0777372206 Email: uchita@sltnet.lk Email : info@glossolutions.com Web : www.glossolutions.com

Commitments, Emerging Issues, Green Economy in the context of Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development, and Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development.

Why is the UN together with some countries in a mighty hurry to frame another Earth Summit agenda? What troubled the minds of many at the PrepCom-1 was the dominant agenda item called 'The Green Economy'. While the 2012 Earth Summit is to focus on a Green Economy, everybody including the top UN officials managing this process kept asking "what is a green economy?" While many different definitions and explanations were offered by various interest groups, the closest that the official process could arrive at to justify the agenda item was to compromise on wording that read as "Green Economy in the context of Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development".

The Report of the Secretary General of the Rio+20 Summit released during the PrepCom-1 of the UNCSD says, "the green economy approach is an attempt to unite under one banner a broad suite of economic instruments relevant to sustainable development". This is distracting us away from the core strategies of sustainable development as set out in the agenda 21. Everyone is saying we do not still know what a Green Economy means. Why then are we not concentrating on what we know after 20 years of sustainable development discussions and negotiations? All human activities and human societies are not governed by the economy whether it is black or green. German social scientist Wolfgang Sachs in 1992 wrote, "In societies that are not built on the compulsion to amass material wealth, economic activity is not geared to slick zippy output. The economy is closely bound up with life, but it does not stamp its rule and rhythms on the rest of society. Only in the West does the economy dictate the drama and everyone's role in it."

After 18 years since the first Earth Summit in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro, how did we manage to come to a position that we define Sustainable Development under the purview of a Green Economy? Shouldn't it be the other way round? Greening the economy was supposed to be a strategic transition path towards achieving sustainable development. Poverty eradication too was another strategic pathway. Now the UN once again is changing the direction of the global evolution of the entire sustainable development policy focus and turning it upside down.

Greening the Economy vs. Green Economy

But now that a summit is to take place, should the focus change from sustainable development towards a green economy? United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) backed by some Western European countries appear to be the key proponents advocating a green economy and making a sustainable development summit into a green economy summit.

The Green Economy Initiative of UNEP was launched in 2008 as a response to the economic down turn and is designed to assist governments in "greening" their economies by reshaping and refocusing policies, investments and spending towards a range of sectors, such as clean technologies, renewable energies, water services, green transportation, waste management, green buildings and sustainable agriculture and forests. UNEP says today we need vision, urgent action and strong political engagement to direct financial flows and manage markets to deal with the even greater global challenges of our time. These range from climate change; poverty; job creation for the 1.3 billion people under or unemployed and accelerating natural resource scarcity to the need to fuel and to feed six billion, rising to nine billion people by 2050. A new Green Deal, generating businesses in renewable energies; clean tech ventures, sustainable agriculture, conservation and the intelligent management of the planet's ecosystems and nature-based infrastructure is already underway. Accelerating this transition is at



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the core of the Green Economy initiative and the best bet for global, sustainable wealth and employment generation for 1.3 billion poor people.

It is rather interesting to note the comment made by the Co-Chair of UNEP Finance Initiative, Ms, Barbara Krumsiek, who is also the CEO of the Washington D.C. headquartered Calvert Group Ltd just prior to the PrepCom-1 of UNCSD. She says, "As the economy and the financial sector begin to recover, we have both an opportunity and obligation to build sustainability into the way global financial companies do business. The challenges finance and investment face on the road to the Rio+20 Summit are considerable. It is a critical time to work for progress and develop the means to deal with the next crisis - which may very well be a natural resources crisis".

While the Business and Industry sector is planning to thrive on the opportunities at Rio+20 by pushing for a green economy, many other stakeholder groups were more pessimistic. Ms. Leida Rijnhout of the Northern Alliance for Sustainability (ANPED) in Belgium brings to attention the wording of green economy and claims that it is the wrong choice of words to be used. Sustainable Development, which was a term that has taken shape and clear understanding these past 20 years is one in which we should continue to commit to. There is a need to re-assess our economy and reshape it in a way that is sustainable and something closer to a green and fair economy. Rijnhout strengthens this point by pointing to the need for the new economy to be based on equity and real values that fit with the carrying capacity of our planet and social needs. The goal she leaves us with leading up to Rio+20 should not be about greening our greed but about expanding our thinking to adopting sustainable lifestyles respectful and responsible towards global equality.

Representing the Asian Indigenous Women's Network, Vicky Tauli Corpuz from the Philippines also believes that the green economy concept is distorting what we have achieved with the concept of sustainable development. The economic model that has collapsed and we are trying to resuscitate it based on concepts that will inevitably result in our environmental collapse. We are talking about growth, but growth in the current sense is what Indigenous Peoples see as the source of the environmental problems we are facing. The developed nations encourage the developing nations to create products that we deem useless in just a matter of months. As a result those in developing nations, which are the most dependent on natural resources for survival are the ones suffering. If we continue to believe this as the process of growth, Corpus argues, we will just continue to go down in the natural resources that support our planet. She believes we need a radical restructuring of the entire economic system underpinned by the concept of sustainable development, but that also ensures the support of human rights and the respect of mother earth.

Another veteran from the first Rio Summit, Ms. Chee Yoke-Ling of the Third World Network (TWN) in Malaysia clearly explains that the call since Rio 1992 Earth Summit was on greening the economy rather than making an all new green economy. The focus needs to be on working towards a new global economic system, one in which the ideas of a green economy are at the centre. Yoke-ling places emphasis on the need for the global systems to be collaboratively repaired, regulated and combined with a recommitment to the promises made in Rio 18 years ago. She stress how important it is to get governments moving as there is currently a strong political will to not go sustainable. She believes it is not just about Rio but also about all of the similar bodies and agreements of the United Nations that promote and work to achieve sustainability. There has not necessarily been a deficit to devise structures based on sustainable development but that the failure has come in the implementation of their mandates. Rich countries are continuing to run away from their obligations and responsibilities to the



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South. As a result there are more inequalities today that are suspended in outdated agreements, which promote unsustainable practices that developing countries are obliged to follow.

Dr. Palitha Kohona from the Sri Lanka Permanent Mission to the UN in New York agrees that summits are important in getting people to talk about issues but that time should not be wasted trying to define specifically what green economy means. Sustainable Development is a term he believes we should continue to work with as it embodies the idea of the carrying capacity of our planet while preserving enough resources for future generations. Providing a very raw depiction of the priorities that plague the South, Kohona says the struggles that exist for those in the South are of basic survival and immediate necessity. For those in developing countries, securing food and shelter are of primary concern and to bombard them with the pressure to green their economic and social activities is one which cannot be realistically addressed until poverty for them has been eradicated. He emphasizes our need to look at the green economy in this context and not to forget that over one billion go to bed hungry every night. This needs to be remedied before those who live in poverty can begin to focus on clean air and water. The North can think about the issues of conserving energy and water because they have the luxury of having reliable sources and are using them in its excess.

New Green Trade Battle

So are these two different concepts? While greening the economy is a process that drives the worlds unsustainable consumption, production and trading process to be corrected, the object of creating a green economy appears to be focused on creating new market opportunities in the realization of the down turn of the market based economy. Greening the existing industrial production system will not help green the economy. It will not take us towards a carbon neutral society and drive us away from the wasteful lifestyles. A new green world order has to be more authentic than making mountains of the green labeling and green procurement business. Such a new world order will have to make sufficiency based considerations more pertinent. Sufficiency can firstly reduce greed and want for over- consumption through a state of adequacy and contentment. It can also innovate on indigenous knowledge systems to produce without waste, more efficiently, become more self-reliant, and less dependent on external resources.

Are we entering into a new battle between North and South or developed and developing countries? Are we entering into a new phase of a global trading regime that favours the rich and powerful? And are we using the concepts of environmentalism to green wash the black industrial economies? And are we heading towards new conflicts and wars on earth?

Main Issues and Proposals for the Rio+20 Summit

Therefore, I raise the following questions from the organizers of the UNCSD Rio+20 Summit. (a) Do we need more convincing to eradicate poverty as a prerequisite to achieve sustainable development? (b) The so called Marrakech process during the past 8 years has failed to consult nations and formulate a 10YFP. What do we need? Voluntary commitments or binding agreements to regulate unsustainable consumption and production ©) Can we bring to focus the Climate Change challenge into the Rio+20 processes? What is the so called post Kyoto challenge in the “Green Economy”?

I have proposed three key international commitments to draw focus on at the Rio+20 UNCSD in 2012 to enable sustainable development on earth.



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Proposal 01: Poverty Eradication

The first proposal is on poverty eradication. While discussing sustainability for the past four decades, the world has failed in eradicating hunger and poverty on earth. Currently half of the world's humanity are under poverty and are desperately struggling to survive on a daily basis. Poverty is a result of a hypocritical global governance system. This is a system that has promoted unsustainable production regimes and over-consuming societies to grow further; a system that rewards exploitation by a few and obstructs access to resources by the majority; a system where the unconcerned and non-compassionate continue to decide the destinies of humanity. If any hope for sustainability is to be drawn in the development processes in the developing countries where the poor reside, poverty needs to be eradicated. Development that cannot ensure the wellbeing of all citizens does not have the capability to sustain itself. That is where the growth-based economic model has failed. While growth has created increased gaps between the rich and poor, the lack of intent to distribute the wealth has clearly blocked the progress of development in wellbeing and prosperity. Northern governments need to recognize that climate change and the emergence of the new economic powers may well shift the zones of suffering in the world. The emerging consumer classes in the South have already started to enjoy the power over their own resources, technological advancement, market dominance and power in global governance. An emerging world order suggests that the resources for over-consumption in the developed nations are becoming harder to come by the day and the Rio+20 process should take an early note to address all kinds of poverty on earth.

Proposal 02: Sustainable Consumption and Production

The second proposal is on sustainable consumption and production. The World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, or Rio+10, clearly declared that one of the greatest barriers for sustainable development on earth has been the unsustainable consumption and production patterns and that we should be regulating such activities. While the UNEP-led Marrakech Process for a 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production which is expected to commence in the year 2012 has failed for the past eight years to deliver a credible plan, and the Rio+20 fails to recognize such a programme officially in its agenda at the same time. At this stage a weak programme that caters to the political needs of a European-dominated agenda is clearly not what the Rio+20 needs to focus on but to address the Rio+10 call at the Johannesburg WSSD Summit for means to regulate unsustainable production and consumption patterns. The prevailing unsustainable consumption and production system is the largest contributory factor to both climate change and poverty on earth and thus requires greater emphasis and focus at the levels of international regulation. If anthropogenic climate change is to be controlled, then developing a regulatory framework for sustainable consumption and production must be a priority as well. In very simple terms, unsustainable consumption and production needs to be regulated on earth parallel to emission cuts as a solution to both problems of climate change and poverty. This may not be the easiest to achieve, but if the UN Rio+20 Summit plans to follow-up on the Rio and Rio+10 commitments, it will then have to stop playing the hide-and-seek game that the so-called Marrakech Process has been playing to formulate a 10-year framework of programmes. The true value of the other agenda item for Rio+20 as in Sustainable Development Governance would mean that the new institutional mechanisms will be more forthright and fair in its approach towards designing and implementing sustainable development programmes for its member nations.

Proposal 03: Climate Sustainability

The third proposal is on climate sustainability. The continued failure by the UNFCCC-led climate negotiations to derive a global agreement is driving the world towards a climate catastrophe of magnitude that threatens the mere existence of humans on earth. Climate change is no longer a possibility but a larger reality that has already



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commenced its ascending. Prof. Mohan Munasinghe, vice-chair of the Nobel Prize-winning fourth assessment report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, points out that the world can be saved from the dangers posed by climate change by sustainable consumers and producers. "We need to look at finding integrated solutions for multiple global problems rather than trying to solve these problems separately", and he warns that climate change is a threat amplifier for the growing risk of financial-economic crises, persistent poverty and growing inequity, shortages of energy, water and food, and other extreme events. While the Kyoto Protocol is said to be expiring in 2012 and the world is looking for a new binding agreement in 2012, the Rio+20 UNCSD Summit once again fails to include it in its agenda. Sadly, the Climate Change Convention that was signed at the first Earth Summit in 1992 has become out of reach of the sustainable development programme and has become another separate programme in the UN system.

Riding on a Dismantled Train to Sustainability: A Formula for Failure

In my book "It has to be CLIMATE SUSTAINABILITY" I wrote that the UN process that drives the world towards sustainability is like a ride on a dismantled train. The train to sustainable development had been dismantled since the first Earth Summit in 1992 and different compartments were placed on different tracks; climate change, biodiversity conservation, poverty eradication, economic prosperity, etc. Since then many of us continued to demand that this train needs to be assembled together and placed on the correct track, and that we should proceed towards sustainability through a clear path to avoid being stranded. Today, we are dangerously stranded with possibilities of no return. Yet the UN system continues to ignore negotiating these interlinked issues in a holistic approach and continues to divide and rule.

The Rio+20 UNCSD Summit already demonstrates another formula for failure. The hunger for dominance on earth by the different regions and countries, clearly to protect the business and trading interest of the multinational corporations that keeps the rich richer and poor poorer still is the greatest debate inside the UN rooms where negotiations take place. Therefore, another UN summit has brought us once again on to a football field where the ball will be passed from one end to the other till the game results in a stalemate; a no result that will prolong the quest for sustainability on earth and increase the threat of climate change. So, to keep the sustainable development agenda alive, we may have to organize Rio+30, Rio+40 and Rio+50 summits and by time the world will be in much desperation than today.

Optimistic Conclusions

I still would like to see more optimism in a Rio+20 Summit. A representative from a USA based NGO stated at a International Advisory Board meeting of the Stakeholder Forum for Rio+20 that this is the last chance to save the Earth. Well, I had to remind him that the same words were said by Mr. Maurice Strong as the Secretary General of the first Rio Earth Summit in 1992; but this is not the case. I believe that Rio+20 Earth Summit is the best chance rather than the last chance to get the sustainable development process moving proactively on earth because we no longer need to sell the concept. The concept of sustainable development is already sold and appreciated by all including the rich industrialized nations, the poor developing nations, the big and small business and industries and people across the world. But, Rio+20 now will have to target finalizing the agreed pathways and commitments.

In doing this the United Nations will have to draw in the voices, opinions, minds and aspirations of all people on earth. Dr. Rubens Harry Born of Vitae Civilis from Brazil reminds us that often humans use different words to express the same feeling or action. What is most important is not that we agree to the term itself but that there



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is action to fulfill the aims this word is supposed to promote. When we look to 2012 and Rio+20 we need to start implementing a much more formal and bureaucratic process, which is bottom up participatory. Further, the representation of the current nine major groups is not enough to speak of the world's diverse people. At Rio+20 Born argues that the whole world should have access to what takes place. With our advances in information communication technologies there is no reason that anyone should be excluded. It is now possible that those whose voices are most critical, but do not have the funding support to get there, can now be given the connection to be seen and heard in the most critical conversations that will take place this century.

Historically human societies have collapsed when the greedy use of resources exceeds the carrying capacity of the earth. The future threatens us with great insecurities, but humans also have demonstrated resilience and endurance to rise above the challenge when survival is at stake. The Rio+20 Summit needs to be viewed in both such desperation and opportunities. However, planning cannot wait till 2012 and needs to commence now and encompass the needs of all human groups in a way that will create a sustainable and enjoyable future for everyone. For this mindfulness needs to prevail and the Rio+20 Summit will create the required impetus for a more conscious process of living and behaving on earth.

(Uchita de Zoysa is the author of 'It has to be CLIMATE SUSTAINABILITY' and convener of the Climate Sustainability PLATFORM, chairman of Global Sustainability Solutions and Executive Director of the Centre for Environment and Development. He was a Steering Committee Member of the Global NGO Forum at the first Earth Summit in 1992 and is International Advisory Board Member of the Stakeholder Forum for Rio+20. This article was written as a firsthand witness to the 1st PrepCom of the Rio+20 Summit held in New York recently. Please send your comments to uchita@slt.net.lk)



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