

Rio+20: implementation is the key

Across the world, social marginalization, and even exclusion, is on the rise. The disenchantment of young people, women, indigenous peoples, rural and urban poor and other marginalized populations, as well as a middle class now under threat, constitutes an unprecedented challenge for governments and the UN. The ecological crisis – from resource depletion to pollution and climate change – has worsened since 1992. Human Rights provides a cross-cutting dimension for sustainable development: Rio+20 must therefore focus on implementation of sustainable development. There is an urgent need to strengthen institutional arrangements in accordance with the Rio principles.

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Expectations for the Rio+20 outcome document are inextricably linked to the unfulfilled commitments and promises of the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development, and subsequent conventions and action plans. The commitment to make a paradigm shift from unsustainable economic growth models to sustainable development was made at the highest political levels but to date has not taken place.

Today income inequalities between and within States are pervasive. World exports have increased almost five-fold while world per capita income has more than doubled. However, the top 20% of the population enjoys more than 70% of total income and those in the bottom quintile gets only 2% of global income.

That distorted distribution of economic wealth has come about at the high price of a deregulated and destabilized international financial system, and a multilateral trade system that is largely characterized by rules that are not balanced, operating to the disadvantage of developing countries. When financial and economic crises hit, the majority— especially the poor— bear vastly disproportionate impacts.

Developed countries also agreed at Rio 1992 to take the lead in shifting from unsustainable consumption patterns. But these have remained largely unchanged, and instead have spread to developing countries with the wealthy adopting similar lifestyles while poverty eradication continues to be elusive. With income inequalities sharpening in all countries, over-consumption and unsustainable consumption dominates production choices (and hence natural resources use and financial resources allocation) while the poor and marginalized are deprived of a dignified standard of living.

Reaffirming the Rio 1992 principles

Sustainable development principles and frameworks have already been adopted, first at Rio 1992 and subsequently in action plans, programmes and measures agreed at annual sessions of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). They have also been agreed to in all of the relevant treaties and conventions.

Components of the sustainable agenda are also contained in the outcomes of the UN Summits and Conferences since 1992. The elaboration of human rights as a cross cutting dimension for sustainable development too has ample precedent, going back as far as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights

INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The UN is the primary forum in which to agree on an Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD) for the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development and the implementation of the sustainable development agenda. In this context, there is an urgent need to strengthen institutional arrangements on sustainable development at all levels in accordance with the Rio principles, especially that of common but differentiated responsibilities.

To accomplish this integration of the three pillars and achieve sustainable development, the IFSD should at least carry out the following functions:

- Identify specific actions to fulfil the sustainable development agenda;
- Support regional structures and national mechanisms in developing and implementing their national sustainable development strategies;
- Support developing countries to participate meaningfully at the international and regional levels of decision making;
- Provide global guidance on specific actions needed in order to fulfil the sustainable development agenda;
- Monitor progress in implementation, including on the commitments to provide expertise and technology for implementation and recommend actions to correct and address challenges;
- Assess the balanced integration of the three pillars in the international system and establish the needed mechanisms to follow up on commitments and to identify gaps or weaknesses that affect the full implementation of the sustainable development agenda;
- Promote the participation of civil society in the sustainable development agenda.

The IFSD requires the Secretariat to: (a) provide research, analysis and reports and recommendations, to alert governments and the public of emerging trends and problems; (b) provide technical assistance and advice in general; (c) make arrangements for convening meetings, disseminating their reports and following up on the outcomes. It is important that for all of these, it consider the implications for all three pillars, so that each one is equitably developed in concepts, outcomes and actions.

adopted by the UN General Assembly in 1948. Rio+20 must therefore focus on implementation.

Today the implementation gaps of the sustainable development agenda are widely acknowledged. It is therefore crucial for Rio+20 to acknowledge the fundamental causes for the implementation failure. These include:

- Overtaking of the sustainable development agenda by globalization characterized by economic liberalization that has created ecological and social crises, concentrated wealth in a handful of large corporations in both industry and finance and undermined the policy autonomy and space of States. Such globalization has itself created economic crises, exacerbating social tensions, conflicts and political destabilization.
- Weakening of multilateralism that is crucial for sustainable development.
- Disproportionate influence of global economic institutions and their lack of public accountability, including to the UN.
- Lack of implementation means (finance, technology and capacity building that were an integral part of the 1992 sustainable development partnership with developed countries committing to provide them.
- Lack of integration of the three pillars of sustainable development (economic development, social development, and environmental protection), at all levels of policy and governance despite initial efforts in the 1990s.

Thus there is an urgent need to:

First, reaffirm the internationally agreed principles contained in the Rio de Janeiro Declaration on Environment and Development of 1992, in particular the fundamental principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, as the political framework for sustainable development.

Second, renew political commitment to implement the agreed sustainable development agenda, building on accumulated knowledge and experiences over the past 20 years.

Third, undertake a “revitalized global partnership for sustainable development” based on States resuming their responsible role and asserting policy autonomy as a counter to the unfettered market forces that are causing instabilities at all levels.

Fourth, in any private-public sector collaboration, ensure independence of public policy and governance from undue influence by the private sector, especially transnational corporations and large enterprises.

Fifth, recognizing the importance of appropriate technology for sustainable development establish an intergovernmental body that facilitates technology transfer and innovation (and deals with barriers such as intellectual property rights) and builds capacity for technology assessment. The CSD in its first session in already stressed the need for technologies to be assessed for their health, safety, environmental, economic and social impact.

Rebuilding confidence

Confidence building is needed due to the retreat by most developed countries from their international sustainable development commitments, and even rejection by some of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. It is clear from the preparatory process and numerous related discussions that there is still no universally accepted definition or common understanding on the term “green economy.” While parts of the UN system such as ESCAP have assisted Member States in arriving at

some common understanding of green growth, its details and operationalization remain unclear to most governments.

At the level of national and local governments, communities and enterprises and civil society organizations, a wide range of policies, programmes, projects and measures are developed and implemented that all concerned regard as “green” in accordance with their respective interpretations and descriptions.

However, it is also emerging strongly from the preparatory process, especially the regional meetings, including most recently the High Level Symposium on Rio +20 in Beijing and the Delhi Ministerial Dialogue on Green Economy and Inclusive Growth, that there is a growing consensus on reaffirming the Rio principles and sustainable development framework at the international level and allowing national strategies to be formulated that can refine the three pillars in line with the best principles, approaches and practices. ■