

# Switching paradigms: the only way out

The attempts to implement sustainable development have failed due to the fact that the dominant economic paradigm was not modified, as unregulated capitalism is at odds with any model of sustainability. It is up to the State to become sustainability's main promoter, promoting a broad coordination with civil society and the business community (the market) to decidedly foster a viable development model. Dignifying labor and special attention to women economics, must be key elements in any viable paradigm of development.

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The difficulty in achieving the development and human well-being goals lies in the failure of the prevalent economic paradigm, which poses for us the issue of changing capitalism from the inside or from the outside. Our response is from the inside. The weakness of the principles that sustain the neoliberal model has been shown by the recurring economic crises. However, these principles continue to be imposed as the only way forward to development.

In the last two decades, the world economy has been marked by constant crises with a common denominator: speculation in financial markets that leads to investment in speculative, high-risk instruments. At the end of the day, excess capital and lax regulations created bubbles and overheating that turned into crises.

## The gap between discourse and actions

Beginning with the publication of the World Commission on the Environment and Development (the Brundtland Commission) in 1987, the term "sustainable development" became a reference point for the international community. With the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment and the Report by the Commission on International Development Issues (Brandt Commission) as its precedents, the Brundtland Commission defined sustainable development as: "development that can meet [the] needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

The definitive impetus for the concept came with the 1992 Earth Summit, with the adoption of the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and the Agenda 21. In these two documents, signatory countries committed to seeking economic growth based on sustainable development guidelines. Later, the Sustainable Development Commission was established in the UN Economic and Social Council as a body that would follow up the accords.

The concept of sustainability explores the relationship among economic development, environmental quality and social equity. It includes a long-term perspective and an inclusive approach to action, which recognises the need for all people to be involved in the process. According to the Brundtland Commission,

"sustainable development is a dynamic process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent in future as well as present needs."

However, a balance sheet of this paradigm's advances shows a large gap between discourse and actions. A review of the documents that came out of the different UN development summits shows that since the Rio Summit, the discourse in favor of sustainable development has been maintained, accompanied by notions like human development and human security.

This does not mean the notion has been strengthened or that it is a priority on international agendas. Quite to the contrary: the promotion of this paradigm has suffered serious ups and downs due to factors ranging from the differences in perceptions between the North and the South about priorities and financing, or the reduction of goals to "a minimum acceptable to all," to the preeminence of the traditional security agenda since the 9/11 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York in 2001.

At the same time, the developed countries have omitted the notion of "sustainable" to favor their economic expansion and the maintenance of their populations' excessive consumption patterns. Meanwhile, in the developing countries, protecting the environment has not necessarily been a priority, while the logic of first seeking growth and only after that, development, has held sway. Thus, despite the fact that in the framework of the United Nations, states have declared themselves in favor of sustainable development, the political will has not existed to carry forward a comprehensive program that would make it possible to implement it over the entire planet.

At the same time, the breadth, multidimensionality, and scope of the sustainable development paradigm in economic, social, and environmental terms are still far from being understood, either by government decision-makers and the population in general. While the United Nations has insisted on the three pillars of the process and different NGOs are working to promote its multidimensional character, the idea of sustainability has been associated fundamentally with environmental protection. This vision has been given new impetus in recent years by natural disasters, global warming, and the challenges to energy transition. Thus, for example, the issue of a green economy has been positioned as one of the priorities on the sustainable development agenda itself.

These circumstances should be understood in the framework of the international system that took on board neoliberal postulates as the paradigm for development. According to this vision, electoral democracy and free markets would bring with them the longed-for well-being, and for that reason, states should limit their functions and let market forces act. This model displayed its limits very early on with recurring economic crises and the widening social gaps that have brought globalization to a true ethical crisis.

## From Rio to the Millennium Declaration: good intentions, poor results

The precedents of the movement for sustainable development and to put the individual at the center of developmental concerns date back to the 1970s and 1980s with the establishment of the Independent Commission on International Development Issues, the Independent Commission on Disarmament and Security Issues, and the aforementioned Brundtland Commission.

It would be in the first half of the 1990s when development issues would take on particular importance, reflected by the series of summits held and the emergence of the concepts of human development and human security, intimately linked to the idea of sustainable development. The end of the Cold War made it possible to broaden the international agenda and incorporate the so-called "new issues" that covered both the development and security agendas.

Actually, these were phenomena that had been around for decades, but the bi-polar ideological struggle had pushed them into the background. From the perspective of the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), the gap between North and South had deepened because of the paradigm that considered that economic growth would automatically bring about greater benefits for society and that emphasized structural adjustment over the issue of development.<sup>1</sup> Thus, from within the United Nations, a new development agenda was fostered with the aim of dealing with the great inequalities reflected, for example, in the humanitarian crises in Africa and the legacy of the "lost decade" in Latin America. The curious thing is that, despite these criticisms of the

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<sup>1</sup> United Nations Development Program (UNDP), "Origins of the Human Development Approach," <[hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/origins/](http://hdr.undp.org/en/humandev/origins/)>.

neoliberal model, it gained even more strength, and it was in that framework that the attempt was made to implement the sustainable development paradigm.

In 1990, the World Conference on Education for All and the Second UN Conference on Least Developed Countries were held. That same year, together with a group of experts like Mahbub ul Haq and Amartya Sen, the UNDP proposed an alternative concept: the human development approach, defined as *a process of enlarging people's choices and enhancing human capabilities (the range of things people can be and do) and freedoms, enabling them to: live a long and healthy life, have access to knowledge and a decent standard of living, and participate in the life of their community and decisions affecting their lives.*<sup>2</sup>

The notion of sustainable development took on definitive impetus in 1992 with the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro. With the attendance of 108 heads of state, the conference resulted in the adoption of three general documents (the Declaration of Rio, Agenda 21, and the Forest Principles); the establishment of the UN Sustainable Development Commission; and the signing of conventions about climate change, biological diversity, and desertification.

The Declaration of Rio includes 27 principles of action about sustainable development, touching on such substantive topics as prevention policies, common but differentiated responsibilities, and the "polluter pays" principle. Also the inclusion of the principle of the right to development (Principle 3) for the first time meant affirming that right in an international instrument approved by consensus. For its part, the 40 chapters of Agenda 21 provide an ample framework of action to achieve the transition toward sustainable development and to measure progress toward that goal.<sup>3</sup>

It should be pointed out that one of the conference's most important aspects was the decision to foster a broad-based social movement in favor of the model. The summit was conceived to have an impact on international institutions, national and local governments, the private sector, and organized civil society around the world. Thus, the UNCED was the first international conference that allowed total access to a good number of social organizations and contributed to the development of an independent summit.<sup>4</sup>

Continuing with the tendency of situating human beings as the central axis for development, in its 1994 Human Development Report, the UN Develop-

ment Program proposed a new vision of security that challenged the traditional perspective centered on the state and its military component. Human security means *safety from such chronic threats as hunger, disease, and repression, and protection from sudden and hurtful disruptions in the patterns of daily life.*<sup>5</sup> The concept is based on the logic of human development and spans economic, political, food, health, environmental, personal, and community security.

That same year the Conference on Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (SIDS) was held in Bridgetown, Barbados. This was the first conference to translate Agenda 21 into a programme of action for a group of countries. The Barbados Programme of Action (BPOA) and the Declaration of Barbados set forth specific actions and measures to be taken at the national, regional and international levels in support of the sustainable development of SIDS.<sup>6</sup>

Thus, in the early 1990s, we saw emerge within the United Nations a movement for development centered on human well-being and dignity. The international community's interest in these issues was reflected in its holding several international meetings on food (the 1992 International Conference on Nutrition and the 1996 World Food Summit), human rights (the 1993 World Conference on Human Rights), population (International Conference on Population and Development in 1994, and the ICPD+5 in 1999), housing (the 1996 Second UN Conference on Human Settlements, or HABITAT II), and gender equality (the Fourth World Conference on Women in Beijing in 1995, and Beijing+5 in 2000).

Among the outstanding aspects the declarations, and action plans that came out of these conferences share are: a) an insistence on the importance of putting people at the center of the development process; b) the need to foster a comprehensive program to fulfill basic human needs; c) the commitment to reduce inequalities and facilitate sustainable possibilities for living; and d) promoting environmental sustainability, particularly in the population and housing summits.

Thus, for example, the declaration that came out of the Copenhagen Summit on Social Development recognizes that "economic development, social development, and environmental protection are interdependent and mutually reinforcing components of sustainable development, which is the framework

for our efforts to achieve a higher quality of life for all people."<sup>7</sup>

In compliance with the agreement reached at the Rio Summit, in 1997 the Special Session of the UN General Assembly was held in New York (Earth Summit+5).<sup>8</sup> The session was called for to assess progress since the Rio Summit and to set future priorities. Based on reports prepared for the session, Governments acknowledged that the global environment had continued to deteriorate since Rio, renewable resources continued to be used at rates that are clearly unsustainable, the number of people living in poverty had increased and gaps between rich and poor have grown, both within and between countries.

Furthermore, North-South differences dominated in the debates. Pledges made at Rio by donor countries to increase official development assistance (ODA) and make environment-friendly technologies available on concessional terms had not been kept.

Rather, ODA had declined from an average 0.34 per cent of donor country gross national product in 1991 to 0.27 per cent in 1995.<sup>9</sup>

As a result of these divisions, the final document of the meeting (Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21) included a minimum of new commitments to action. Although no new specific financial commitments were made, Governments agreed to a general statement that developed countries should fulfil their commitment made in Rio related to ODA and that "intensified efforts" should be made to reverse the downward trend since 1992.<sup>10</sup>

At the end of the 1990s, the ethical crisis of neoliberal economic globalization became clearer. Deepening social inequalities, both between North and South and within countries, the weakening of the state as a guarantor of the common good, and recurring economic crises became the new Leviathan.

Hand in hand with the crises came the social justice movements who claimed "another world is possible." Their first big public demonstrations took place in Seattle in the framework of the World Trade Organization's Millennium Round in November 1999. From that moment on, all the summits of the world's great economic powers, as well as its international financial institutions, became the target of movement demonstrations. Their presence at international summits, like the one in Bangkok and the G-7 Summit in Okinawa in 2000, put the social justice movement on the map as a new actor on the new, complex international stage.

In 2000, the 189 nations gathered at the Millennium Summit expressed themselves again and again

2 Ibid.

3 Cfr United Nations, *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development: application and implementation Report of the Secretary-General*, (E/CN.17/1997/8), Commission on Sustainable Development, Fifth sesión, (7-25 April 1997).

4 The summit provided full access to a wide range of nongovernmental organizations and encouraged an independent Earth Summit at a nearby venue. Cfr. Robert W. Kates, Thomas M. Parris, and Anthony A. Leiserowitz, "What is sustainable development? Goals, Indicators, Values and Practice", *Environment: Science and Policy for Sustainable Development*, volume 47, number 3, (2005).

5 UNDP, "New dimension of human security," *Human Development Report*, (UNDP, 1994).

6 Both documents listed fifteen priority areas for specific action: climate change and sea level Climate change and sea-level rise; natural and environmental disasters; management of wastes; coastal and marine resources; freshwater resources; land resources; energy resources; tourism resources; biodiversity resources; national institutions and administrative capacity; regional institutions and technical cooperation; transport and communication; science and technology; human resource development and implementation, monitoring and review. Cfr. UNESCO, *Intersectoral Platform for Small Island Developing States, From Barbados to Mauritius*, <portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-URL\_ID=12117&URL\_DO=DO\_TOPIC&URL\_SECTION=201.html>.

7 Copenhagen Declaration on Social Development, adopted at the World Summit for Social Development, (Copenhagen: 1995), <[www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/aconf166-9.htm](http://www.un.org/documents/ga/conf166/aconf166-9.htm)>.

8 UN General Assembly, *Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21*, adopted at the special session of the General Assembly Earth Summit + 5, New York, (September, 19, 1997).

9 UN Department of Public Information, *Earth Summit Review Ends with Few Commitments*, Press Release, (New York: 27 June 1997).

10 Ibid..

on the issues of world inequality, poverty, health, and nutrition. They also touched on central issues like UN reform, the fight against AIDS, education, preserving the environment, international security, and, specifically, the inter-ethnic wars in Africa. The summit's final declaration itself manifested the ethical crisis of the international politics and economy of the new millennium. According to the Declaration of the Millennium, world leaders would spare no effort in liberating humanity from war, extreme poverty, the threat of environmental disaster, and in promoting democracy and the rule of law.

In theory, the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and their 21 targets obey the logic of fostering human development. Actually, the goals were reduced to "minimums acceptable by all." This is the case of poverty reduction based on income, by considering that someone is no longer poor if he/she lives with US\$1 per day, or education, by limiting the goal to covering primary school education.

The seventh MDG is "to ensure environmental sustainability." However, integrating the principles of sustainable development into national policies and plans, as well as reverting the loss of natural resources (Target 7A), were commitments set from the time of the 1992 Earth Summit. At the same time, Target 7B, dealing with biodiversity loss, deforestation, and CO<sub>2</sub> emissions, among other things, established no specific commitment about concrete reduction levels.

### From Johannesburg to Rio+20: torn between War on Terrorism and environmental calamity

In 2001, the first World Social Forum was held in Porto Alegre, Brazil, bringing together the world social justice movement. This was an exercise carried out parallel to the "For a Citizens' Construction of the World" Forum in Paris. In both cases, the aim was to analyze the current situation and propose alternatives to the prevailing forms.<sup>11</sup> Civil society has contributed decisively to promoting sustainable development. Mutual exchange of ideas and knowledge make it possible to join efforts internationally at the same time that these movements foster changes from the local level through working directly working with people.

The September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on Washington and New York meant the return to the terms of *real politik* for the international agenda. The struggle against terrorism became the priority, not

only for the United States, but for all the international agendas, eclipsing the development agenda.

The world became polarized based on the George Bush administration logic of "you're either with me or you're against me." The United States reconfigured its security and defense systems, and, with United Nations support, launched the war against Afghanistan. Thus, the ethical crisis of neoliberal globalization was joined by the momentary crisis of security.<sup>12</sup>

A year later, the International Conference on Financing for Development was held in Monterrey, Mexico. The Monterrey Consensus calls on developed countries to adopt concrete measures to funnel 0.7 percent of their GDP to official development assistance (ODA) for developing countries, and to earmark between 0.15 percent and 0.20 percent of their GDP for least developed nations, objectives that were reaffirmed at the Third United Nations Conference on Least Developed Countries. The document did not establish clear goals about the amount of resources that should be used to foster development through foreign direct investment and other flows of private capital.<sup>13</sup>

The United Nations General Assembly, for its part, recognized that the advances in sustainable development during the 1990s had been disappointing. Poverty and social exclusion increased on a par with environmental degradation. For this reason, in addition to developing its usual balance sheet about the advances of Agenda 21, the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Rio+10) held in Johannesburg was conceived as a "summit centered on applying measures."

However, once again, no concrete agreements about new treaties were arrived at, nor was the Agenda 21 renegotiated. For example, a few targets were established, like reducing by half the number of people without basic sanitary services by 2012, and achieving a significant reduction in the loss of biological diversity by 2010. Meanwhile, topics linked to ODA and technology transfer from North to South continued to generate greater divisions among countries.

That year at the Group of Eight (G-8) Summit in Gleneagles, Scotland, the world's most developed countries committed to increasing ODA funds from US\$80 billion in 2004 to US\$130 billion (at constant 2004 prices) by 2010, the equivalent of 0.36 percent of their combined national domestic product.

While *chiaroscuros* were the constant in the development meetings and the traditional security agenda linked to issues of terrorism and international organized crime were the priority, particularly due

to the deepening of the war in Afghanistan and the disastrous Iraq War, the system's different crises began to converge.

On the one hand, the ecological crisis began to be increasingly evident with the rise in the number of natural disasters and conflicts over resources such as in Darfur, all a product of global warming. In 2007, on the initiative of Great Britain, the UN Security Council debated the issue, which took on noteworthy importance since it was irremediably linked to security issues on all levels. To this must be added the challenges of the energy transition—between the exhaustion of fossil fuel resources and the need to foster alternative fuels in order to cause no further damage to the environment—and the food crisis related not only to access to food, but also to the quality of food, whose prices on a world level have increased considerably since 2005.

Finally, we are witnessing what is considered the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929; the current crisis originated at the very center of capitalism with the mortgage bubble and the collapse of financial institutions as emblematic as Lehman Brothers. It soon expanded to the entire world, as did its social repercussions. However, since it originated directly in the center of the world economy, it opened up an important reflection about the need to redefine the relationship between the state and the market, as well as to regulate the economy. In direct opposition to the economic crises of previous decades, this time the way out of the crisis and the responses to its challenges have once again been found in the state.

It should be pointed out that, in addition to putting at risk the fulfillment of the Millennium Goals because it threw millions of people around the world into poverty and unemployment, the economic crisis had an impact on the already affected ODA figures. The amount earmarked for ODA by the 23 members of the OECD's Development Assistance Committee in 2009 was US\$120 billion, a 2.2 percent nominal drop with regard to 2005. As a result, the deficit for 2010 *vis-à-vis* the Gleneagles target was US\$18 billion. Only five countries (Denmark, Luxemburg, Norway, the Netherlands, and Sweden) have a ratio between ODA and gross national income that is higher than the UN's 0.7 percent assistance target.

### Conclusions

The lack of ethics in the international economy, particularly in financial markets, is also fed by the absence of norms and regulations, which in turn feeds speculation. The neoliberal model favors the search for easy, short-term profits, a situation that is also the root of the different economic crises, the unequal distribution of wealth, and the increase in the number of people living in extreme poverty.

The socio-economic model prevalent in the world today has narrowed its vision of human development, which undoubtedly was richer when it started out at the time of the Brundtland Report and the goals of the Earth Summit. Today, it has shrunk to a minimum that is closer to a moral excuse than a real will to solve the problems.

11 Through the World Social Forum, the social justice movement has managed to define the aim of its activism translating it into "the model of an alternative society, whose bases are the respect for the dignity of every human being; the defense of humanity's common patrimony; fostering democracy, environmental sustainability, the exercise of non-violence, respect for the identity and diversity; placing the economy at the service of human beings; defending the right to culture; solidarity among peoples and individuals; and the creation of social structures that make it possible for the individual to live in conditions of liberty, equality, and fraternity." Charter of Principles of the World Social Forum" in *Foro Social Mundial*, (June 8, 2002). <[www.forosocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id\\_menu=4&cd\\_language=4](http://www.forosocialmundial.org.br/main.php?id_menu=4&cd_language=4)>.

12 Alejandro Chanona, "El sistema internacional: viejos dilemas y nuevos retos. La crisis de septiembre de Estados Unidos y su gran oportunidad," in José Luis Valdés-Ugalde and Diego Valadés, comps., *Globalidad y Conflicto. Estados Unidos y la crisis de septiembre*, (México City: Editorial UNAM, CISAN, IJ, 2002), pp. 65-73.

13 United Nations, *Proyecto de documento final de la Conferencia Internacional sobre Financiación para el Desarrollo*, International Conference on Financing for Development, (Monterrey, Mexico: March 18-22, 2002), <[www.un.org/spanish/conferencias/ffd/ACONF1983.pdf](http://www.un.org/spanish/conferencias/ffd/ACONF1983.pdf)>.

Thus, the advances of the sustainable development agenda have been gradual and limited. They depend directly on the political will of the states, not only for coming to agreements on goals, resources, and schedules, but also for their implementation, evaluation, and follow-up. The developed countries have bet on minimum goals and targets, at the same time that they avoid establishing specific, much more ambitious, inclusive targets and commitments.

Economic growth and monetary stability *per se* are not equivalent to less poverty. As long as the structural problems of inequitable distribution of income and wealth are not solved, it will be very difficult to advance in the fight against hunger and to reduce poverty, lessening the capacity to fulfill the Millennium Development Goals or any other, for that matter. It should also be pointed out that it is imperative to increase ODA; if what is really wanted is to reduce current inequalities; more precise indicators are required for evaluating poverty in the world. The problem is that the entire system of monitoring and indicators is part of the current economic growth paradigm and jibes with its discourse.

The liberal community that today's world is part of, and its vision of the world economy, have generated a narrative with which individuals interpret their surroundings and assign meaning to their particular and social living conditions. This is why it is important to change that narrative, to allow world leaders, heads of state or government, to reformulate their interpretation of reality and therefore the way they design and evaluate public policies.

This is why a change of paradigm must be accompanied by a renewed discursive-conceptual framework, as well as new indicators to measure social well-being. Any measurement of advances in development and social well-being must go beyond the methodology limited to the economic-monetarist vision that reduces complex, multidimensional phenomena like poverty to a narrow

## NIGERIA: KEYS FOR SUSTAINABLE POVERTY REDUCTION

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Nigeria is blessed with many natural resources like bauxites, gold, tin, coal, oil, tin, forest, water land, etc.. It has the largest mangrove forest in Africa, third in the world, covering a total of 1.000 km<sup>2</sup> along the West Atlantic Coast of Africa (for environmental issues in the country, see national report). However, 70% of Nigerians wallow in want. In 2002 the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) ranked Nigeria as the 26th poorest nation in the world, and the situation is still unchanged.

Factors and causes of this situation are multiple, including inappropriate macroeconomic policies, negative economic growth, effects of globalisation, corruption, debt burden, low productivity and low wages in the informal sector, unemployment or deficiencies in the labour market, high population growth rate and poor human resources development. Other involved factors are the rise in the rates of criminality and violence, environmental degradation

due to climate change, retrenchment of workers, the weakening of social safety nets and changes in family structure. Traditional family, in particular, is very important in Nigerian culture, but is currently an institution falling apart due, among other reasons, to migrations from rural villages to cities.

This multiplicity of challenges cannot be confronted with simplistic or reductionist solutions. To address poverty it is important to empower the poor people and to give them an opportunity in managing the environment and natural resources. As explained by the International Fund for Agricultural Development: "Empowerment is defined as the ability of people, in particular the least privileged, to: (a) have access to productive resources that enable them to increase their earnings and obtain the goods and services they need; and (b) participate in the development process and the decisions that affect them. These two aspects are related; one without the other is not empowerment". With this in mind, it is clear that global strategies and policies for sustainable poverty reduction should integrate economic and environmental considerations.

conceptual construct from which minimal indicators are derived. For this reason, the discussion about defining new development goals must continue, so they can go beyond the categories of economic growth. A new set of indicators for poverty and other issues is needed which would mean a profound redefinition of international society, the state, and humanity itself.

The current crisis of the international system as a whole opens up the possibility of rethinking the relationship between state and market, and the neoliberal paradigm that has held sway for several decades. As the Brundtland Report pointed out at the time, "Sustainable development in the final analysis must rest on political will of governments as critical economic, environmental, and social decisions have to be made." ■