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Editorial: Global Governance and Sustainable Development

Sustainable development is both a holistic and a dynamic concept. It is holistic in that it embraces the economic, social and ecological dimensions of development; it is dynamic in that it focuses on equity, and on future as well as present perspectives. 'Sustainable development is... a process of change in which the exploitation of resources, the direction of investments, the orientation of technological development, and institutional change are made consistent with future as well as present needs' (WCED 1987, p. 8). The concept gained major policy status at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and found prominent expression in the establishment of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), the major institutional outcome of the Rio conference. It informed the 'Rio Declaration' and 'Agenda 21', the global action programme, and all the major environmental conventions and multilateral agreements in the Rio process.

In their United Nations Millennium Declaration (of 8 September 2000), the heads of State and Government reaffirmed their support of the principles of sustainable development, including those set out in 'Agenda 21', and resolved to adopt a new ethic of conservation and stewardship. They also reiterated the need to make efforts to enforce the 'Kyoto Protocol', to intensify collective efforts for the management of all types of forests, to press for full implementation of the Convention on Biological Diversity and the Convention to Combat Desertification, to stop unsustainable exploitation of water resources by developing relevant management strategies, and to intensify cooperation to reduce the number and effects of natural and man-made disasters (Millennium Declaration 2000, paragraphs 22 and 23).

Now, nearly a decade after these major commitments to sustainable development at Rio, we need to take stock, particularly in view of the upcoming World Summit on Sustainable Development, scheduled to take place in Johannesburg, South Africa, in September 2002.

'Agenda 21' produced mixed results. On the one hand, a large number of local communities in the developed countries took it as a challenge to engage in a participatory process of redefining strategies of local development and of restructuring the energy and transport sectors. They were supported in this by relevant strategies at the national and regional level (as in the EU). On the other hand, 'Agenda 21' did not find much acceptance and support in most of the developing countries. There is a strong need, therefore, for the international community to rectify the deficiencies in implementing 'Agenda 21', and for the World Summit in 2002 to reactivate this major global initiative.

The UN conventions signed in Rio and after (i.e. the climate, biodiversity, and desertification conventions) have also produced only mixed results. While energy efficiency and renewable energy have become the subject of major efforts in some countries and regions, in others they have not. The 'Kyoto Protocol' has not been enforced and the chances of its being so (at the time of writing) are bleak. While the issue of biosafety was brought forward in the framework of the Biodiversity Convention, protection of the world's forests is still insecure. In the case of desertification, remarkable progress has been made in the countries experiencing serious drought, especially Africa, and in making this a matter of common concern to both North and South. The issue of water shortage, however, is basically not understood as a global problem, although some progress has been made in communicating the seriousness of the threat to health and food security in a growing number of developing countries. The problem of the decrease in the quality and quantity of soils has not yet received the necessary attention, even though the problem is already a very real and not only a potential threat. Recently, however, the issue of persistent organic pollutants (POPs) has begun to generate interest, and the multilateral agreement on the means and measures to address the problem has made headway, at least in banning or reducing the so-called 'dirty dozen'.

An intensive debate is underway about the institutions that were charged with handling the global aspects of sustainable development, particularly the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Global Environment Facility (GEF), and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). Institutional innovations are needed. They should include restructuring these institutions, redefining their mandate, strengthening their capacity, and putting them on a sound financial footing. A consensus seems to exist that the GEF should be enlarged, and there is a feeling that UNEP needs to be strengthened, although the question of its future form remains open. Experience tells us that form follows both function and finance. Therefore, the functions of global governance for sustainable development should be discussed, and financing should be decided on.

There remains the issue of consistency. First, we need to address the problem of co-operation between these major institutions and other environmentally relevant global institutions, particularly the Bretton-Woods institutions (World Bank and International Monetary Fund) and the World Trade Organization. Second, we need to address the problem of co-ordination between these major institutions and the UN agencies that have a specified, though limited, mandate relevant to sustainable development, such as FAO, WHO, WMO.

The forthcoming Johannesburg meeting – 'Rio +10' – provides a real opportunity to discuss in depth the conceptual issues associated with sustainable development, the functioning of the various environmental conventions and multilateral agreements, and those global institutions whose primary and foremost mandate is the implementation of sustainable development. It is time to

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look for institutional innovations that would upgrade the pressing tasks of environmental and development policy in the eyes of national governments, international organisations, and non-governmental organisations, improve the institutional setting for the negotiation and implementation of new agreements and action programmes, and strengthen the capacity for action on these matters in both developing and developed countries.

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