

Ramping up political commitment for sustainable development

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Expectations around the world are growing as we approach the Rio+20 Conference, now less than a year away. Rio+20 presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity for countries of the world to come together to respond to the multiple economic, social and environmental crises afflicting humanity by resolving to shift to a greener and more socially inclusive pathway towards growth and development. Rio+20 serves as a powerful lens to focus political energy at the highest level on building world-wide commitment to bold new action for achieving economic growth that eliminates poverty but keeps within the Earth's natural resource boundaries.

Major milestones along the way to the Conference include five regional preparatory meetings, numerous dedicated events hosted by governments, UN (United Nations) system agencies and major groups. Intense political negotiations in the first two quarters of 2012 on the draft will help bridge gaps, identify common ground and move member States toward a focused, forward-looking and action-oriented outcome document. In addition to a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development, member States and other stakeholders have so far identified a number of critical emerging challenges for Rio+20 to address, including:

- green jobs and social inclusion;
- energy access, efficiency and sustainability;
- food security and sustainable agriculture;
- sound water management;
- sustainable cities;
- management of the oceans; and
- improved resilience and disaster preparedness.

Climate change cuts across all of these areas, as well as being a high priority in its own right. Additional cross-cutting prio-

rities include sustainable consumption and production, means of implementation (technology, financing and capacity building), education, gender and population dynamics.

When discussions on the post-2015 development agenda beyond the Millennium Development Goals take off fully, they might usefully consider a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). One possibility might be for these goals to cover the above seven priority areas identified by Member states themselves. Delegations at Rio+20 could agree on broad areas for elaborating long-term goals. In a follow-up process, closely coordinated with the discussions on the post-2015 development agenda, these goals could be further elaborated.

A green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication

There is no consensus definition of a green economy. However, it is important to recognize upfront what a green economy is not. It is not a top-down, one-size-fits-all model of development; or an excuse for green protectionism or new green conditionalities on ODA and other finance; or a way of putting nature's wealth under corporate control. A green economy is or should be: a means to accelerate progress with implementation of sustainable development commitments; a vehicle for integrating the three pillars of sustainable development; and a way of reinforcing coherence among economic, environmental and social policies.

For developing countries, a green economy transition needs to be supported by adequate means of implementation, including finance, technology and capacity building. A green economy needs to be inclusive. It must create sustainable livelihoods for the poor and decent jobs for those seeking employment.

There is an emerging consensus on the need for a green economy roadmap. Such a roadmap can guide countries in the transition, offer a menu of policy options for building green economies, a toolkit with best practices and lessons learned to facilitate learning from one another.

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Green jobs and social inclusion

In countries both rich and poor, social exclusion remains an unmet challenge. Recurrent economic and financial crises and mounting public and private debts threaten the gains of past decades in social safety nets and the ability of both public and private actors to create jobs. Job creation is a big challenge facing all countries today. Unemployment is a scourge not only for those without work, but for their families.

Rio+20 is not just about the environment. It is also about social development. Rio+20 is a summit about people's lives and livelihoods. It is a summit about action to create more jobs, better jobs and more green jobs. At Rio, Governments need to share lessons on what kind of policies related to a green economy can help to create jobs.

Energy access and energy security

Energy security and energy independence are pressing priorities for all countries. At the same time, energy poverty is still widespread in Africa and South Asia. Some 1.4 billion people lack access to electricity, and almost twice that many continue to rely on biomass for cooking.

There is a proposal to launch at Rio+20 a global initiative for universal energy access by 2030. Ambitious goals for energy efficiency and renewable energy are also part of the package. If the international community can endorse such an initiative it would be a milestone. This is a genuine win-win proposal that would bring environment and development benefits together.

This package of energy goals is the first concrete step in moving the world's sustainable development planning horizon from 2015 to 2030. Other sectors must follow suit in the coming months.

Food security

Even with the great advances of the Green Revolution, nearly one billion people are still hungry or undernourished. Now, farmers around the world experiment with integrated soil, water and plant management methods. These methods blend modern science and traditional knowledge.

At Rio+20, we should aim to accelerate an "evergreen revolution." This revolution will meet the growing global food demand while protecting soils, water and biodiversity. This is the way of the future.

Sound water management

Water is essential to life and is the lifeblood of farmers. It has long been taken for granted. This must change. Rising demand is running up against greater scarcity. In many places, desertification and drought are becoming more severe. This is happening even as flooding takes a heavy toll on lives and livelihoods. The risk of conflict over scarce water looms large, as does the challenge of coping with water stress. Closer international co-operation will be needed to avert conflict. Rio+20 offers an opportunity for forward-looking action on integrated water resource management.

The challenge of urbanization

Cities are concentrations of human energy and creativity. They are both the source of sustainable development problems and the laboratories for solving them. Most of the developing world's population will live in cities and towns by 2020. Three-quarters of the developed world's population already does. This means that urban planners and managers, transport planners, real estate developers, architects and engineers all have a crucial role in shaping a sustainable planet.

It is estimated that buildings alone account for roughly 15 percent of global greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions. Add transport and the manufacturing of building materials, and the number rises to the 20-25 percent range.

Next June, the world's mayors and local authorities need to come to Rio to scale up successful experiences and set more ambitious goals.

Marine resources

The world's oceans are too heavily exploited and too little managed. The dire state of many fisheries is hard evidence. Many would like to see forceful actions agreed at Rio to accelerate implementation of chapter 17 of Agenda 21 on protection of the oceans. This is long overdue. Rio+20 must be as much about the blue economy, which is an integral part of the green economy.

Enhancing disaster preparedness

Significant environmental changes are already upon us, often affecting vast areas at a time. Natural disasters occur more frequently and their impacts are becoming more severe. Many economies and societies are under stress. They must adapt to difficult circumstances.



Building resilience is crucial. We need earth observation and early warning systems. Also crucial are enhanced prevention and preparedness. At Rio+20, governments and others could commit to work together more closely to strengthen international management of natural disasters and support resilience building efforts in vulnerable developing countries.

Means of implementation

To effectively meet these new and emerging challenges, developing countries will need international support. Technology cooperation, capacity development and finance will be crucial. The biggest challenges and opportunities are clearly in the fast-growing economies of the developing world. Scalable green technologies will need to be deployed widely in the developing economies. This will provide them the opportunity to leap-frog to a greener path to development than was taken by wealthier countries.

To acquire technologies to build greener infrastructure and industries, finance will be needed. Much of the financing for building greener economies will be mobilized by developing countries themselves. But, international financial support will be needed to move towards greener development, especially in the least developed countries (LDCs).

Perhaps Rio+20 will launch a new public and private financing initiative, like a global green economy fund. At a time of fiscal tightening and growing debt worldwide, Rio+20 must prove a showcase for creative and innovative solutions for development finance that go beyond the classic methods of the past.

Strengthening the institutional framework for sustainable development

We must consider what institutional structures for sustainable development will be most effective in advancing the integration of economic, social and environmental concerns, implementation of concrete actions and the coherence of policies and strategies at all levels. In this regard, the proposal for a sustainable development council (SDC) has been gaining interest. Its proponents suggest that such an SDC could raise the political profile of sustainable development, foster greater coordination in international institutions and, given a strong mandate, an SDC could monitor implementation. This could be done, for example, through voluntary reporting and review along the lines of the Human Rights Council.

Different proposals have been put forward on how to strengthen UNEP, including a proposal on making it a specialized agency. Other proposals argue that strengthening UNEP could be achieved without this particular transformation. Whatever the final option, one thing is clear – the world needs a stronger UNEP for there to be a more robust environmental pillar for sustainable development.

Combined, these challenges represent a tall agenda for world leaders at Rio. But, humanity stands at a crossroads. Nature waits for no one, and nature's warning signs are flashing. Sustainable development is the only path that allows all of humanity to share a decent life on this, one planet. This is the future that we all want for ourselves and for coming generations. Rio+20 must be the watershed that makes that future feasible.