



RIO+20
United Nations Conference
on Sustainable Development

Now is the Time! Why “Rio+20” must succeed

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Now is the Time! Why “Rio+20” must succeed

In June 2012 world leaders will gather in Rio de Janeiro for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (“Rio+20”) to advance a global green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. Moreover, governments pledged to kick start overdue reform of the United Nations institutional framework for sustainable development. We call upon the heads of state and government to seize this historic opportunity with bold decisions rather than continued incrementalism.

The international community has reached a strong and overarching consensus that the world needs a much smarter, more comprehensive model for sustainable development and poverty eradication. This is supposed to ensure “the balanced integration of economic development, social development and environmental protection”, as reaffirmed by the UN General Assembly’s very resolution that mandates the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. Moreover it is understood that the United Nations are to facilitate the global transformation towards a green economy through adequate institutional reform.

Similar proclamations have been made time and again. Too many opportunities have since been missed, too many commitments failed to be honored. Poverty remains a persistent challenge, even as the world economy grows at impressive rates. Meanwhile, the world environment continues to be exploited as if there were no planetary boundaries. In a view of unprecedented global systemic risks, as highlighted in recent years by the triple crisis of financial stability, food security and global warming, the time has come to act at last: Rio+20 presents a unique opportunity to finally reconcile economic prudence, social responsibility and environmental awareness. It must not be wasted yet again!

A green economy to advance sustainable development

As the world braces for Rio+20, the notion of a “green economy” has become instrumental. Not only does it provide fresh impetus but also an overarching framework to transform the world economy into a more productive, truly sustainable and socially responsible global system given due consideration of development and equity issues.

The UN General Assembly has thus recognized it as a tangible framework to synthesize the economy and the environment pillars of sustainable development and emphasized the need to move towards a green economy *in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication*. A green economy would thus aspire to realize innovation potentials, to harness renewable low-carbon energy sources, to support access to green technology, to build resource-efficient “smart” infrastructures and cities, to create green jobs and to value ecosystem services while keeping poverty alleviation and equity considerations at its core. It thus offers rational vantage points and suitable instruments for both developing and developed countries to pursue sustainable development within a coherent framework, in which global ambition and “bottom up” policy-making facilitate and amplify each other.

We hence implore our governments to translate the visionary notion of a green economy into a tangible roadmap for action. At the Rio+20 summit world leaders should rise to the occasion and agree upon an ambitious green economy strategy that gives equal emphasis to sustainable development and poverty eradication. As such the strategy will need to be solid enough to serve the present and future generations of the world as a whole, and flexible enough to meet the needs of every individual country.

One UN System that delivers

The United Nations are instrumental to implement a vision of such universal scope. Yet, in their present state they are hardly fit to deliver on a scale commensurate to this ambition. At Rio, governments must finally enable UN institutions to live up to their mandates! The prolonged inadequacy of the status quo is simply unacceptable. Inconsistent policies, uncertain and insufficient provision of funds and institutional fragmentation – all of which is exacerbated by inter-agency bickering – increase the costs of the system and hinder the efficient and effective delivery of results. Ultimately, this is detrimental to the aspirations of developed and developing nations alike.

As highlighted by the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel on System-wide Coherence in its 2006 report "Delivering as One", the United Nations require stronger authority and better instruments if they are to tap their full potential in advancing sustainable development. This is particularly apparent in the realm of international environmental governance.

A breakthrough to boost International Environmental Governance

Much like the global financial system, the world environment bears profound systemic risks for the international system, the global economy and thereby the prospects of human development. It is in urgent need of an authoritative global advocate. Indeed, preservation of the world environment is in the best global interest: While the prospective costs of inaction will be immense for both developed and developing countries, sustainable development in a green economy can benefit all. Yet, the prevailing incrementalism in international environmental governance falls shamefully short of what is necessary. At Rio governments must finally overcome the debilitating incrementalism of UN reform. If the United Nations are ever to walk the talk as purveyors of sustainable development, the summit calls for some far reaching decisions on international environmental governance.

Guided by the principle that form should follow function, any substantive reform of international environmental governance will need to adequately reflect development concerns of individual countries within ecologically responsible limits. To this end, the United Nations' environmental institutions will need to be responsive to and coherent with broader development objectives. Adequate and predictable funding and a sound scientific basis as well as credible commitments to capacity development and technology transfer will be essential to build and maintain universal ownership and trust. Again, while there is broad and explicit Intergovernmental consensus on these functional objectives of prospective reform, the reality of international environmental governance lags behind.

Meanwhile, intergovernmental deliberations have crystallized into two concrete options to overcome the status quo:

- an organizational "umbrella" to restructure the very ways in which the United Nations run their environmental and sustainable development policies;
- a UN specialized agency that builds on the United Nations Environment Programme, i.e. the centerpiece of the current architecture of international environmental governance.

A priori, neither option can be considered better than the other. Attention to detail will be paramount. Both options clearly point beyond the incrementalism that has stalled international environmental governance reform in the past. Either option will require bold decision making at Rio, including a clear mandate for broader reform.

Leadership wanted!

One year ahead of the event, the intergovernmental run-up hardly warrants great expectations. So far, it reflects a business-as-usual-approach to global summitry that appears complacent in its lack of ambition and sense of urgency. For Rio+20 to become a truly groundbreaking summit both the stakes and the pace of the preparatory process urgently need to be raised. This calls for strong political leadership! Heads of state and government must not treat Rio+20 as yet another summit unless they seek to deliberately undermine the potential of multilateral process.

At present governments are in the process of drafting an outcome document for Rio+20. If it fails to table big ideas and bold action plans for the actual summit, a unique opportunity is bound to go to waste. Indeed, the window of opportunity that Rio+20 presents in the context of the current global crises would be likely to close for the foreseeable future. Adjournment and incrementalism are hence no longer forgivable, if the emerging transformation of the global economy is to match with the properties of the earth system.

Against this background it is not too much to ask of our governments to live up to their collective responsibility! We hence call upon our governments to prioritize the Rio+20 summit and its consensually agreed themes on their domestic agendas without further ado, to thus brace their societies for a transition to a green economy in the context of their respective country's particular situation, and to finally enable the United Nations to act as a global advocate for sustainable development particularly by strengthening its authority in the realm of international environmental governance. It is now or never also means that it is not too late – yet!

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