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Priorities, please! UNEP and the quest for global sustainability

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Bonn, 18 February 2013. Last summer's Rio+20 summit, so disappointing in many respects, was followed by widespread frustration and apathy about the global sustainability agenda. In the meantime, however, the follow-up process of implementing the decisions taken in Rio is reinvigorating activity at all levels. One particular decision can be regarded as having already been implemented: the Governing Council of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) will be meeting this week for the first time after the summit and for the first time in the forty years since it was established this will be with universal membership. It remains to be seen whether this will help this small organisation – as UNEP director Achim Steiner, the European Union and others hope – to increase its political clout vis-à-vis the *status quo ante* with only 58 UN member states on a rotating, regional basis.

Of overriding interest currently is a further assignment decided at the summit: the formulation of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Now that the debate on actual sustainability goals is visibly under way, with the setting up of a UN working group for the purpose, it will also play a prominent part at a ministerial roundtable to be held during the UNEP meeting. The UN Environment Programme is indeed the proper place to call for appropriate environmental priorities in the still largely unfocused international debate and to back them with proposals for specific goals. This will give the assembled environment ministers an immediate opportunity to subject UNEP's new political weight to a serious litmus test.

Depending on the source consulted, the SDGs are to complement or replace the tried and tested Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but, above all, to take them as a model for setting explicit goals with timetables and measuring them against objectively quantifiable indicators. What essentially distinguishes them from the MDGs is their universal scope: while the original MDGs are addressed primarily to developing countries, the SDGs are to stipulate global sustainability targets that *all* countries must seek to achieve. To this effect, the final declaration adopted in Rio, pretentiously entitled *The Future We Want*, sets forth a list of topics as comprehensive as it is diffuse that underscores the significance of every conceivable problem area of

relevance to the environment and development, from poverty eradication through sustainable tourism to mountains. Setting priorities it ain't.

If the SDG Working Group is to put forward an initial proposal for actual sustainability goals by the time the UN General Assembly next sits in September 2013, there would appear to be an urgent need for a few crucial priorities to be set. The host of topics currently on the table is symptomatic of the Rio summit rationale and the lack of progress in the implementation of global sustainability policy: extending the summit declaration in a non-committal way to include everyone's pet subject was simpler than seeking a consensus on the areas in which the most pressing issues lie and action is most urgently needed.

Really meaningful and manageable SDGs are more likely to emerge if the international debates and negotiations focus on issues that are not only important from the perspective of the global sustainability agenda, but particularly urgent for two reasons: first, because the underlying trends will have irreversible consequences and the timeframes for counteracting them will expire in the foreseeable future; second, because they concern vital prerequisites for sustainable development.

This is true, first and foremost, of climate and energy policy. It is not without reason that the Rio+20 summit was often perceived in the media and by the public as a "world climate summit". The consequences of climate change are already affecting development prospects in many regions, developing countries being particularly hard hit. De-coupling economic growth and the CO₂ emissions so prejudicial to the climate is impossible without a fundamental transformation of energy systems, an increase in the use of renewable energies and greater energy efficiency. Access to modern forms of energy and adaptation to climate change are further development imperatives, especially in poor developing countries. On fundamental questions such as these a broad consensus has already been reached: all 194 signatories of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) have undertaken to avoid dangerous climate change, and the Sustainable Energy for All initiative launched by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon is also meeting with considerable international acclaim.

Less interest has so far been taken in the hardly less critical link between land use and soil conservation, which affects both climate protection and the protection of species and is of fundamental importance not least for the question of global food security. With the world population continuing to grow, it inevitably calls for rising agricultural production. Yet the sustainability principle proscribes the arbitrary expansion of agricultural land. Meeting the globally rising demand for food through the more intensive farming of productive areas already in use, without the soils concerned being permanently degraded, will thus be one of the principal challenges for future sustainability policy. Consequently, the basic functions of soil as a link between land and water resources, of providing vital ecosystem services and its importance as a carbon sink should similarly constitute an integral part of any SDG agenda that is to be taken seriously.

The SDGs should also address the production and consumption patterns of the wealthy sections of the world population as a matter of urgency, since sustainable production and an appropriate consumption pattern are essential if global development is to be sustainable. This politically charged insight therefore calls for practical changes to lifestyles and dietary habits, so that both resource intensity and environmental damage due to production and consumption may be significantly reduced. This is a challenge particularly to the wealthy industrialised countries and such emerging economies as China,

India, Brazil and South Africa, with their rapidly growing middle classes and consumer demands. These two groups of countries in particular must prove that they are willing and able to change their established patterns of production and consumption in the interests of global sustainability. The prospects of the global sustainability agenda in the foreseeable future will very much depend on the credibility of such signals.

If Germany intends to make its mark as a reliable advocate of global sustainability, these sensitive areas of activity must no longer be omitted from domestic policy. Unless it takes convincing action in its own back yard, the aspiring developing economies in particular are hardly likely to be persuaded to change their views. With its *Energiewende*, or energy transformation, attracting so much international attention, Germany can at least claim to be setting an example in the climate and energy policy sphere. The same can hardly be said of a sustainable global land use policy when even the implementation of the EU Soil Directive is left wanting. Where the decision-making power of UNEP's newly formed Governing Council is concerned, German Environment Minister Altmaier's priorities are also causing some scepticism: he will not be attending the historical UNEP meeting in Nairobi in person, having entrusted the leadership of the German delegation to the Federal Environment Agency, a body subordinate to his ministry.



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