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RIO+20: Challenges, Opportunities and Responses

Twenty years after the 1992 Earth Summit, The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development will be held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. This conference, known as Rio+20, will focus mainly on promoting a green economy and reforming the institutional framework for sustainable development.

There are numerous challenges and the international community faces increasing difficulties to reach common agreements to take action, as illustrated by the effective implementation of the Kyoto protocol. Rio+20 is a unique opportunity to redefine a global framework for action, through institutional reforms, enabling a green economy and defining Sustainable Development Goals.

Do these responses meet these challenges? On the 10th of May 2012, GEPP organised a public conference to present and discuss these issues. **Daniel Ziegerer**, acting Head of Global Affairs at the Federal Office for the Environment in Switzerland (FOEN) and negotiator for the Rio+20 conference offered a “Swiss perspective” and gave some insights of the on-going negotiation process. **Sarah Cook**, Director of the United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD), presented a critical look at the green economy, emphasising the social dimensions of transition scenarios.

From Stockholm to Rio+20

Table (1) summarises the main objectives and results of the major conferences held on the environment during the last 40 years. The aim of Rio+20, as stated in the resolution 236 of the UN General Assembly is

“to secure **renewed political commitment** for sustainable development, **assessing the progress** to date and the remaining **gaps in the implementation** of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and **addressing new and emerging challenges**. The focus of the Conference will include the following themes to be discussed and refined during the preparatory process: a **green economy** in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and **the institutional framework for sustainable development**.”

Table (1)		
	Main objectives	Results
Stockholm 1972	Strengthening awareness of the environmental problems of the human beings	-Stockholm Principles on Environment and Development -UN Environment Programme
Rio 1992	Integrating environment and development through the establishment of rules, policies and objectives	-Rio Declaration -Agenda 21 -Rio conventions (Climate, Biodiversity, Desertification)
Johannesburg 2002	Review implementation of Agenda 21	-Johannesburg Plan of Implementation -Partnership Initiatives
Rio 2012	Renew political commitment to Sustainable Development (with special focus on Green Economy and governance)	-[“The Future We Want”] -[Sustainable Development Goals] -[Register of initiatives]

The Swiss position

On the **green economy**, the delegation of Switzerland agrees that the transformation towards greener types of economic activities is inevitable in the long run. The green economy discussion must take place in the context of sustainable development and poverty reduction. Framework conditions should be adjusted and concrete goals and measures adopted. Projects and programmes such as Cleaner Production Centers and sustainable public procurement policies should be continued and scaled up.

Regarding the debate on **the institutional framework**, Switzerland is willing to address current weaknesses at the international level. Concrete measures for reforming the UN Commission on Sustainable Development and UNEP, as well as the confirmation of the relevance of regional, national and local sustainability governance levels are high priorities.



On **emerging issues**, main commitments should be recalled to provide a basis from which Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and their targets can be drawn. Such SDGs should take into account and balance all dimensions of sustainable development, building on previous conference outcomes.

Bringing back 'the social'

Through the promotion of the concept of a green economy, Rio+20 is reinforcing a monetary approach that is viewed by some as the commodification of nature, 'selling nature to save it'. Market-based approaches might worsen inequalities and exclusion, and lead to a 'double injustice', as those most harmed by climate change are the least responsible and have the least resources to respond.

There is an urgent need for a coherent vision that contributes to coherent policy decisions, with economic, environmental and social goals that are not conflicting. This vision requires viewing the green economy through a social lens, with the following basic principles:

- **Social impacts & distributional consequences:** How do green economy initiatives and strategies impact on different social groups and patterns of inequality?
- **Knowledge & values:** Whose knowledge and values are framing the agenda and influencing policy?
- **Social action/agency:** What are the forms of social organization, mobilization and coalitions at local, national and global levels that are conducive to a green and fair economy?
- **Social institutions & governance:** What role do social institutions related to rights, regulation, ethics, trust, participation, collective action play in driving and shaping green and fair economy?
- **Social & solidarity economy "alternatives":** What is the potential of myriad local-level livelihood and production systems that meet the multiple objectives of sustainable development?
- **Social policy:** What are the tools and instruments to achieve the new coherent vision?

Social policies have always, in different forms, been a key instrument for facilitating major transformations – of the kind needed now. They are designed to manage risks to individual and family livelihoods, protect populations against contingencies, support processes of social reproduction, and invest in the capacities of people to contribute productively to the economy. There is a need to

articulate a much stronger role for social policy in these domains.

There is also increasing attention to interventions that might be 'win-win' in addressing economic/ environmental concerns jointly: where there are possible co-benefits or complementarities between economic, social and environmental outcomes; for example:

- Green jobs that are also decent jobs;
- Education and training for a transition from brown to green jobs;
- Ecological low cost housing;
- Renewable energy forms that may also promote better health;
- Agro-ecology that supports food security for the poor and the environment.

Beyond protection, social policies should also support changes in behaviour and consumption patterns, and support production and reproduction, through investments in infrastructure, housing and public transport. Finally, the social 'drivers' of change, such as rights, participation and citizen engagement, good governance and accountability, regulation, empowerment and building on local knowledge and capabilities, should also be mobilised.

Challenges and opportunities

Rio+20 will be held at a difficult time for multilateralism. Along a growing North-South divide, there are also widening North-North and South-South divergences. With a poor organisation of the process from the beginning and the reluctance of OECD countries to undertake further financial commitments, the present state of the negotiation is alarming. If there is no more political will to move forward, a failure of the conference is possible.

Nevertheless, Rio+20 could still be a success and make a real difference, in particular by:

- Establishing global Sustainable Development Goals, which will eventually replace the Millennium Development Goals;
- Taking concrete decisions on institutional reforms regarding sustainability and environmental governance;
- Agreeing on certain specific measures for greening the economy such as the elimination of subsidies on fossil fuels; and
- Establishing new goals on sectoral topics.