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Sustainable development: twofold solidarity in the world of today and tomorrow

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Policy recommendations

In the run-up to the Rio+20 Conference (20-22 June 2012) the state of play as regards sustainable development (SD) has little to show in terms of progress since the 'Earth Summit' held, also in Rio de Janeiro, twenty years ago. Nadine Gouzée stresses that the compartmentalization of efforts at all levels – which the critics refer to as 'silo thinking' – is the principal obstacle to achievement of an integrated form of development. The aim of Rio+20 is to revive the international community's commitment to SD, focusing on the specific challenges represented by the green economy, by the need to improve world governance and by the new concept of Sustainable Development Goals. Only the presence of a strong social dimension to SD (virtually absent from Rio92 and still weak at Johannesburg 2002), with emphasis on the need for decent jobs and adequate social protection, can offer protection against the risks of injustice inherent in the transition to a green economy.

Sustainable development (SD) is a project conducted on a world scale, (Gouzée *et al.* 1999) first defined in 1987 by the Brundtland Report (WCED-CMED 1987) and on which the first agreements within the international community were concluded at the Rio Conference in 1992. The commitment to this goal signals a common political will to alter modes of development in such a way that they meet the fundamental needs of both current and future generations. In the interval SD has often been presented as a 'hotch-potch', as a case of 'wholesale recycling', 'hot air' or even 'toxic gases', subject to manipulation either naïve or duplicitous; there are now claims that it is about to be 'dethroned' by alternative responses that are supposedly more tangible (green growth) or more philosophical (de-growth). And yet the dilemma posed by SD is as topical as ever, for we continue to witness, on the one hand, the accelerated pursuit of growth as a means of increasing prosperity and, on the other, an increased focus on the negative aspects of such growth, particularly insofar as they are destructive of the environment. An inability to conceive of the possibility of reconciling opposing truths may well be the source of all heresies (as argued by Pascal), particularly in the current context of crisis and uncertainty on all fronts. And yet, as this contribution seeks to demonstrate, in a world in search of ways of changing society, SD retains considerable mobilising potential, not simply by way of recycling but, on the contrary, because it entails new forms of convergence and alliance. In spite of the fragmented and compartmentalised responses delivered by the scientific

and political world since Rio1992, the mandate of the Rio+20 Conference testifies to the fact that this multilateral project is still alive in 2012 and that it alone simultaneously pursues goals of increased solidarity over both time and geographical space.

1. What do we mean by sustainable development (SD)?

SD constitutes an urgent reminder issued by the international community about the goals and purposes of developing the planet: 'Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This quote from the Brundtland Report frequently reduces SD to an environmental concept because it is presented without the sentence that follows it in the Report and which emphasises its social priorities and technical and societal aspects by reference to the 'two concepts inherent in this notion':

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- the concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and
- the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organisation on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs' (WCED – CMED 1987).

In 1992, the preparatory work for the Rio de Janeiro World Conference on Environment and Development was certainly not lacking in ambition. A proposal was issued, for example, to introduce a world tax on energy. A number of the economists who supported this idea – which actually preceded that of the Tobin tax on financial transactions – hoped that the Conference would rapidly open the way to an energy tax at world level¹. But the internalisation of environmental costs for the purpose of protecting the common heritage of mankind is a matter of excessive magnitude for conclusion at a single summit. That Summit of the Heads of State and Government of the planet devoted its efforts above all to the prerequisites for setting in motion important changes, by initiating a number of more horizontal debates, leading to the adoption of some highly important and ambitious principles and conventions on sustainable development. Principle n° 3 of the Rio Declaration, for example, was more ambitious than the definition contained in the Brundtland Report because it introduced the notions of intra- and inter-generational rights and equity: 'The right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet development and environmental needs of present and future generations' (United Nations 1993).

Rio92 thus launched new processes at all levels (global, national, sub-national, local, and so forth) to respond to the gravity of the social, environmental and economic problems generated by maldevelopment. Its most well-known instruments are two Framework Conventions, one on Climate Change and the other on the (loss of) Biological Diversity. The Summit also launched the negotiations for the Convention to Combat Desertification, the so-called 'poor little sister', which, having received less media attention, is much less well-known and, insofar as it is unknown, lacks adequate support. The common reference shared by all these processes is geared towards action and bears the title Agenda 21 (i.e. agenda for the 21st century). The 40 social, environmental and economic chapters of this document – adding up to 800 pages of rather uneven quality – were subject to lengthy negotiation in advance of and during the Conference. One of the most controversial was Chapter 4 which advocates a change in unsustainable consumption and production patterns, given their impact on the environment and the social injustice inherent in the current use of resources. The Chapter explicitly blames the Western way of life generated and supported by economic growth, an accusation that prompted the United States to declare that its model (way of life, consumption, production, etc.) is not negotiable. And this multilateral agreement stressed – as long ago as 1992 – that 'some economists are questioning traditional concepts of economic growth and underlining the importance of pursuing economic objectives that take account of the full value of natural resource capital' (United Nations 1993: § 4.6).

A case of utopia? Not at all. This was a moment of acute awareness of the significance as well as the nonsense represented by the current development model. And it was the beginning

of an open-minded investigation that sets out to examine the systemic interdependences among the four Ps – Planet, People, Participation, Prosperity – of sustainable development. This moment thus saw the launching, at the international level, of the exploration of political and societal processes that is required to gradually define standards that could be used to make development sustainable, by way of coherent strategies conducted at all levels of governance and guided by the aforementioned principles and multilateral agreements.

2. Twenty years of slow progress characterized by 'silo thinking'

The last two decades have seen numerous evaluations of the sectoral and horizontal aspects of the implementation of sustainable forms of development². This contribution, covering the horizontal aspects alone, first of all describes under what conditions sustainable development policies can become viable. It then moves on to show that fragmented modes of thinking and operation characterised by a 'silo mentality' stand in the way of the effectiveness of such policies.

The implementation of sustainable forms of development calls for horizontal strategies requiring committed action in all departments and at every level of governance. To ensure that the various policies designed to achieve sustainable development are compatible with one another, potential conflicts among their goals must be anticipated, by uncovering potential synergies and forms of solidarity among actions embarked upon by different departments at different levels of governance. There has been some progress in this direction since Rio, but also some amount of 'SD whitewashing' in the course of which the ambitious label of sustainable development has been affixed to isolated measures (ecotaxes, ecolabels, etc.) or specific products. And yet, much more than it is a matter of promoting green products, sustainable development policy is an effort to take the structural action required to 'change' societal unsustainable states of excessive consumption or of deprivation. Development cooperation has also evolved but the socio-economic approaches to combatting poverty have remained too disconnected from policies on natural resources. At the same time, the 'costs of non-action', i.e. failure to act in favour of sustainable development, have built up, in conjunction with a business-as-usual pursuit of growth at world level, giving rise to increasingly irreversible environmental damage and destruction of jobs – or, in those cases where new employment is being created, to jobs that are 'indecent' and that affect, particularly, the lives of the 'working poor'.

Where the European Union is concerned, the Sustainable Development Strategy (EU-SDS), adopted on the eve of the Johannesburg Summit and revised in 2006 (European Council 2006), has been gradually set aside by the Commission, ousted in fact by the Europe 2020 strategy (European Commission 2010) which actually covers fields narrower than those tackled in the previous strategy package³. The Commission failed to deliver the report, scheduled for 2011, on progress in implementation of the horizontal goals of SDS-EU, which include sustainable

production and consumption models. The Europe 2020 strategy, while representing a much more short-term horizon, did impinge upon some of the specific fields covered by the SDS-EU. The Commission often presents Europe 2020 as a single strategic platform covering the short and the long term, even though the Europe 2020 strategy horizon clearly does not allow coverage of the inter-generational equity questions inherent in the sustainable development project and deals neither with the interactions among its aims and goals nor with the issue of North-South relations. In particular, it disregards the impacts of our unsustainable modes of consumption and production upon the rest of the world, this being an issue at the very heart of sustainable development strategies.

The operation begun at Rio twenty years ago has indeed to its credit the occasional victory, for instance the Kyoto Protocol. But the effort to develop an integrated approach to environmental and development issues has made very little progress and, more often than not, Rio's holistic legacy has undergone a process characteristic of 'silo thinking', i.e. where each department is compartmentalized and operates in isolation from the rest. This lack of systemic approach – and hence absence of synergy – is the main reason for the low level of implementation of the political undertakings made at Rio1992. In other words, it would be wrong in this case to point an accusing finger at the 'one-track-mind' approach characteristic of the market economy, for the reality is much more complex. If development policies have remained sealed off from environmental policies (because of partitions that are administrative, scientific, political or intellectual in nature and which operate even at the level of the activities of the pressure groups active in these policy fields), it is because the trans-disciplinary effort required to ensure horizontal coherence remained peripheral to the concerns of political decision-makers and to the majority of their advisors. Each minister focuses instead on the success of his own plan, generally without considering the horizontal compatibility of the various plans being pursued. Silo thinking has remained so dominant that, as soon as the first truly germane question of sustainable development, the matter of climate change, began to be properly thought through and to gain momentum among political priorities, its advocates called for the creation of separate sectoral institutions. We thus witnessed the creation, a decade or so after Rio, of climate services, climate departments, even climate directorates, consolidating this new compartment at every level and inevitably claiming a share of the public resources previously allocated to other challenges of relevance to the environment – chemical products, water, oceans, etc. – and sustainable development.

It thus becomes important to point out that, while the fight against climate change is the most emblematic component of the commitment to sustainable development, it covers only a portion of its challenges and that the usefulness of tackling the 'climate' aspects in isolation from other aspects of the fight for the four Ps of sustainable development remains undemonstrated. The incorporation of climate-related goals into an encompassing strategy of social, environmental and economic endeavours geared towards a broadly integrated form of sustainable development might even perhaps have come up against less obstacles and enabled climate to become the 'big tractor' of this form of development promoted at Rio on the basis of a systemic conception

of how to live together in society. And such a conception indeed gives rise to the 'challenge of the globality' or of the 'increasingly broad, deep and serious mismatch between, on the one hand, a corpus of knowledge fragmented into disjointed elements and scattered among different disciplines and, on the other hand, realities that are multidimensional, global, transnational, planetary and problems that are increasingly horizontal, multi-disciplinary, and even trans-disciplinary' (Morin 1999).

3. Rio2012, common goals and two central themes but where is the leadership?

Rio+ 20 is set to represent the outcome of 40 years of the history of sustainable development with all its ups and downs. After the Stockholm Summit, in 1972, which saw the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the Heads of State had launched the idea of an 'Earth Summit' to be held every ten years. The Summit thus held in Nairobi in 1982, undermined by the tensions of the Cold War, was a failure, after which the World Summit on Sustainable Development held in Johannesburg in 2002 – and which for the first time bore the name of the new concept – once again fell prey to the deleterious repercussions of the prevailing international tensions. The Johannesburg plan succeeded in consolidating the gains of Rio at the cost of some very tough bargaining but it was decided that this time 15 years should be allowed for the achievement of more visible results before the next Summit that was accordingly scheduled for no earlier than 2017. This explains the precipitate and chaotic nature of the preparatory work conducted in the run-up to Rio+20.

It was under the combined effects of hunger crisis, energy crisis, and financial crisis, that the General Assembly⁴, nonetheless, at the end of 2009, took the decision to hold, in June 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development at the highest level including that of Heads of State and Government or other representatives. Three goals were set: to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development; to assess the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development; to address new and emerging challenges. And the conference is to cover two themes: first, a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; secondly, the institutional framework for sustainable development. The European Union, in relation to these two themes, was so keen to push forward the environmental component of sustainable development by means of a road map for the green economy and the renewal of the UNEP that it regularly conveyed an impression of caring about hardly anything else.

The Rio+ 20 mandate was, however, at the outset, just as ambitious in its aims as had been the preceding conferences, even if it was significantly more limited in its themes. The main novelty of Rio+ 20 is not the narrowing of themes but rather the resistance of other countries in the world to the narrowing down of the holistic vision of sustainable development, and also the shift in the leadership. The European Union, which had piloted the SD ship at world level from 1972 to 2002, has in large measure

now forfeited this leadership on account of its own strategy on the outside and also the inside, as testified by its loss of commitment to its own SD long-term strategy. The process is suffering deeply from this lack of leadership, although it has also, to some extent, been taken in hand by others, like the leaders of the country hosting the conference, which, as stressed by Sha Zukang, Deputy General Secretary for economic and social affairs and the Chinese head of the Rio+20 Conference Secretariat, has demonstrated in the course of the last two decades its ability to turn sustainable development into a question of national and international development. Brazil acknowledges, furthermore, that it has responsibilities stemming from its own 'emergence', for this emergence has entailed also that of a broad middle class within its midst and whose production and consumption leave a daily expanding environmental footprint.

Will the Rio+20 Conference prove capable, under these circumstances, of supplying sustainable development with the second wind which, for the sake of intra- and intergenerational solidarity, it so badly needs? One month away from the Conference, its Secretary General Ban Ki-moon launched an appeal to the world leaders not to miss the historic *rendez-vous* represented by Rio+20 – 'This is a once-in-a-generation moment' – and to overcome their differences and rally to a common political leadership. At least a hundred Heads of State and Government are expected in Rio, alongside 70,000 business chiefs and representatives of social organisations, including trade unions and NGOs. Ban Ki-moon has now made sustainable development 'his priority' because all the threats perceptible twenty years ago have today become dangerous realities.

4. Rio+2012 wind in the sails of this twofold solidarity?

The notion of a green economy has been greeted by many developing countries with mistrust. Why is this? The reason is that a greener economy is a necessity all over the world, in every country, but that certain countries, particularly in northern Europe, naturally wish to consolidate at Rio the advantages deriving from their having been the first to move towards creating new green markets, and that they are in search of new outlets for their green products. This reality is the tree which hides the forest of socio-economic challenges entailed by the planetary organisation of a 'transition' towards a sustainable economy that is not *merely* green. What this urgent transition demands also is more social justice, an approach able to nurture a project for a sustainable society that will involve not only the provision of new jobs but also a transformation of existing ones.

As for the EU's priorities on environmental governance, these were initially subject to the challenge of how sustainable development was to be governed and to the interest shown by experts in this type of governance (incorporating social, environmental and economic policies⁵) in creating a genuine 'Sustainable Development Council (SDC)' at world level. An SDC of this kind would be more visible at world level than the ECOSOC committee that has been doing this work since Rio. While regarding both questions as important, the European delegation offered little

support to the SDC, for budgetary reasons among others. In the current world situation, the EU preference is for the creation of an ECOSOC forum that would become more rapidly operational than the process of setting up a worldwide SDC, and the EU remains at the same time more active in defending the improvement of the multilateral framework on the environment, in particular via universal membership of UNEP.

Whatever the form taken by, and name given to, the world forum on sustainable development that comes out of Rio+20 for the purpose of increasing solidarity among the generations, the credibility attaching to its creation could be greatly enhanced by another concept linked to SD and yet absent from the Rio+20 mandate voted by the General Assembly. Initially promoted by some countries of Latin America (Colombia in particular) and by civil society, this concept is the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), a multilateral tool the creation and development of which is due to be launched at Rio+20. Frequently presented as a post-2015 process, because their adoption should follow on from the Millennium Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are intended to be of the same type as the MDGs adopted in 2000, with indicators, targets and deadlines. But, unlike the MDGs, the intention is that they should be universal (not restricted to the developing countries) and should cover also the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainable development (i.e. not only issues related to poverty). If a process of this kind is launched, its management will have to be credible, i.e. supported by an experienced secretariat, served and inspired also by delegations competent on the holistic aspects of sustainable development and capable of filling the horizontal roles of this new forum within the ECOSOC.

In the face of financial, food, energy, water, ocean, and waste crises, and of the rise in inequality and forms of social tension, it would be inconceivable to continue to expect separate solutions to all the questions that have been being asked at least since Rio92. All these questions, far exceeding in breadth the two conference themes, are tackled in the draft final document entitled 'The Future We Want'. It contains an action and follow-up framework to Rio+20, constituting about half of the document, and deals with more than twenty economic and environmental fields, including a social dimension that is significantly stronger than at Rio and Rio+10. Only a holistic approach such as this can give a second wind to an international community still staggering from the shock received in 2008, in need of a solution to the unemployment of 200 million persons, and in search also of 400 million new jobs in the coming decade⁶. Initially discussed under the themes of 'eradication of poverty' and 'right to development' in connection with sustainable, inclusive and fair economic development in the developing countries to achieve the MDGs and re-establish harmony with nature, this social dimension of SD is here explicitly tackled under the theme 'to promote full employment and decent work for all'.

It is thus that the ILO contribution to Rio+20 is expectantly awaited, for its subject is to be the extension of social protection systems on a world level and the promotion of social inclusion in green economy policies. The introduction of a universal floor is an indispensable prerequisite for a just transition to a sustainable – in

particular low-carbon – economy because 'the green economy is not, in essence, socially equitable, inclusive and sustainable'⁷. In other words, solidarity with future generations via the environment is inseparable from solidarity among current generations. Only solidarity among current generations can ensure a just transition towards sustainable modes of production and consumption, because this process is neither exclusively technological nor even limited to green jobs. This challenge is also to achieve net decent job creation thanks to an association among the classic social partners (workers and employers or 'two sides of industry') with the participation of other representative civil society groups (NGOs from the environmental, development, scientific community, women, youth fields etc.) in the decisions concerning this transition. Only a form of social cohesion founded on this twofold solidarity among human beings, both those who will follow us and those with whom we live in a state of interdependence today on this small but unique planet, can enable realisation of the project concerning 'The Future We Want'.

Translation from the French by Kathleen Llanwarne

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- 1 Even the European Commission harboured such a hope at the time and it was in her capacity as expert on energy models that the author attended this conference as a member of the Belgian delegation.
- 2 Preparatory Committee for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (2010/2011) Progress to date and remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits in the area of sustainable development, as well as an analysis of the themes of the Conference : A/CONF.216/PC/7 Objective and themes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N10/706/57/PDF/N1070657.pdf?OpenElement> A/CONF.216/PC/8 Synthesis report on best practices and lessons learned on the objective and themes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/UNDOC/GEN/N11/213/65/PDF/N1121365.pdf?OpenElement> TFDD (2011) *Développement durable : 20 ans d'engagement politique? Rapport fédéral sur le développement durable 2011*, Bruxelles : Bureau fédéral du Plan, http://www.plan.be/admin/uploaded/201202151055350.CP_FR_rapport_DD_15_02_2012.pdf
- 3 'The EU SDS and the Lisbon Strategy for growth and jobs complement each other. The SDS is primarily concerned with quality of life, intra- and inter-generational equity and coherence between all policy areas, including external aspects. It recognises the role of economic development in facilitating the transition to a more sustainable society. The Lisbon Strategy makes an essential contribution to the overarching objective of sustainable development focusing primarily on actions and measures aimed at increasing competitiveness and economic growth and enhancing job creation.' European Council 2006: Paragraph 7.
- 4 Resolution 64/236, dated Christmas 2009: <http://www.uncsd2012.org/files/OD/ARES64236E.pdf>
- 5 Cf. the panel created by the UN Secretary General to update the Brundtland Report: United Nations Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012), *Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A future worth choosing*. New York: United Nations.
- 6 Evaluation quoted by the UN Secretary General on 17 May 2012.
- 7 Comment by Peter Poschen, director of Job Creation and Enterprise Development Department at the ILO, 05/03/2012

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