



## **The future we don't want: Some thoughts after Rio+20**

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### **Introduction:**

It was the year 1492 when the sailing float of Cristobal Colon, with money from the Spanish queen, reached the South American continent. From that year a period began of unlimited exploitation of natural (and human) resources to build up an European Imperia at the other side of the world. An active process of enrichment and impoverishment started. Also the gap between the so-called First and Third world increased, between developed countries and developing countries. This was not a kind of coincidental fact of history; on the contrary, this is the result of bad and unfair organized global economics.

It took nevertheless 500 years before the link was made between development and environmental degradation or bad management of natural resources. It is still for many a not existing link. Even after groundbreaking reports from the Club of Rome (Limits to Growth) and the Brundtland report (Our Common Future), and more recently Tim Jackson's work (Prosperity without Growth) the accumulation of wealth is still seen as positive. Not often considering from where the wealth is coming.

In 1992, the United Nations organized the UNCED Summit in Rio de Janeiro, better known as the Earth Summit. This Summit recognized 27 basic principles for Sustainable Development. The outcome document Agenda 21 is an interesting document with valid instruments to implement Sustainable Development at national and local level. Also two conventions saw their first light, one on biodiversity (CBD) and one on Climate Change (Kyoto). On Forest they designed principles for their global management. A lot of optimism was created to give alternatives to the current paradigms of development related to the environment. Ten years later in Johannesburg at the Rio+10 Summit, this optimism was already gone. RIO92 created an innovative way of thinking and awareness, but unfortunately not enough to change the dominant economic paradigm. Nor by governments, nor by business, nor at universities, and to be honest, nor by civil society organisations.

And then, 2012, again a Summit on Sustainable Development, some groups hoping that this time there will be a break through for a fundamental change of our economic system by using the Green Economy approach, other groups be interested in maintaining the existing system with some green brilliance, and other groups opposing themselves strongly against the concept of Green Economy.

### **The negotiation process**

The preparations of Rio+20 started with the so-called "Zero-draft", a compiled document of thousands of pages with input from governments, UN-institutions and civil society organisations. That document was already a false start. It lacked ambitions, clear analyses, innovation, targets and most of all no political leadership in pushing the process of greening our economies forward. Several preparatory meetings came after to discuss the document. This was a very slow negotiating process, as opinions of countries were very diverse. Some totally in favor of the Green Economy (in the context of poverty eradication and sustainable development), some countries very against it and others doubting as there was still no definition on what Green Economy meant.

In general you may say that Europe and USA saw opportunities in the agenda of the Green Economy, it creates (green) market, green jobs and green growth. Europe was a little more critical towards the concept, and asked for targets and timetables (a roadmap), also with the ambition to phase out the brown economy. The group of G77 and China did not speak with one voice. Also an impossible task if you consider the very different interests and possibilities of the countries. Some Latin American countries had fundamental reserves with the concept (Bolivia, Ecuador, ..): they did not see a solution for poverty eradication and justice in putting economy at the heart of the agenda. They also saw Green Economy as a tool for putting nature on the market and privatize the commons. They promoted the concept of the Rights for Mother Earth, but in the negotiating process they maneuvered themselves too much in a defensive mode to really put weight on the agenda, which was a pity. They also lost this way opportunity to build up alliances with non-governmental organisations. Being against Green Economy is not a smart strategy, as you block with this attitude constructive thinking towards a sustainable economy, and become automatically the ally for the governments and big business that want to continue with the brown economy because of their own interests. If we want to achieve Sustainable Development we have to change our economy, in whatever color, but a fundamental discussion is unavoidable. From Asian countries and civil society was a lot of skeptics as well towards the Green Economy, but with other arguments. They saw it as a new trade barrier for their export dependent economies. The BRIC countries saw the green economy as a booster for their economies, especially promoting the green growth focus.

Although the negotiations went very slow, there were positive elements to mention. It was namely for the first time in UN-history that the fundamentals of our economy were discussed. There were interesting debates on putting nature on the market or not, and if yes, how? If not, what then? How to move from a debt-based economy towards a common-based economy? How to deal with planet boundaries in an economy dependent on growth? And how to organize that technology is available for all, and which kind of criteria we need for new technologies, based on the precautionary principle. How to integrate Human Rights in a green economy? Those debates were not only necessary for the official delegates, also civil society struggled with very diverse opinions and doubts on those issues.

But the worse it went in the negotiations rooms, the better it went with civil society. Even the merely mainstream organisations started to be more radical in their thinking, as they felt that being too pragmatic would not help the green agenda forward. In- and outside the official negotiating process a lot of innovative actions happened, like the launch of the Peoples Sustainability Treaties<sup>1</sup>, that ended in 14 treaties and a common manifesto, with action plans and defined actors to implement those.

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<sup>1</sup> See: <http://sustainabilitytreaties.org/>

## The final result

Although there were a lot of interesting discussions, nothing fundamental is left in the outcome document that could lead urgently to Sustainable Development. There is no reference at all of planetary boundaries, limits of growth, fair share of natural resources, human rights based approach, sufficiency etc. All concepts that is basic in sustainable development thinking. So, if you refer to used common and scientific knowledge, this would be a Rio *minus* 20, even before the reports of the Club of Rome and Brundtland. But what is worst of all, is that everywhere in the text they see the ultimate solution in "sustained economic growth", which is totally the contrary of sustainable development. It is unbelievable that no country reacted on that fact, and that that ambition could enter 19 times in a sustainable development text.

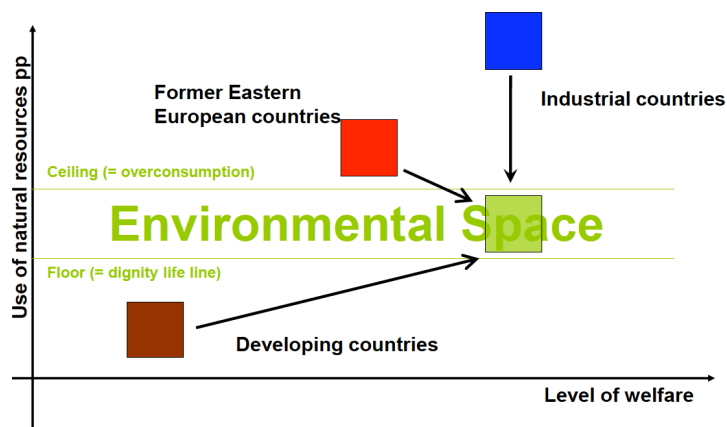
There is already a lot said on the outcome document, named "The Future We Want". Many scientists, activists and journalist wrote down their comments. Nobody is happy. UN-Secretary General Ban Ki-moon was unhappy too on Wednesday 20<sup>th</sup> of June. He urged the government to push for a stronger outcome, as the world needed that. On Friday he said that he was very happy with the outcome-document, although in the days in between no comma was replaced, no word added, nor deleted..

As ANPED we started an e-petition "The Future We Don't Want", within few hours hundreds of signatures of organisations and individuals were collected. The general feeling is that the outcome document is a step backwards as what we already agreed on in Rio92 and Johannesburg. The financial crisis is apparently more important to solve than the social and environmental crises. Own state interests are more important than global interests. But as Trade Unions reiterated many times: "there are no green jobs at a dead planet".

So, is the glass half full or half empty? No, it is quite empty with some drops left. As being an optimist is a moral duty, we have to restart the battle for a healthy and fair planet. We need to fill the glass again. Leave Rio behind, rethink our strategies and use the positive elements from the text.

We can certainly use the drops left for future work. The idea of designing Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), that will emerge or will be the follow up for the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). That is a good opportunity, as the MDG are overall quite traditional in thinking: collect money for "helping the poor". As long as our economic system is based on exploiting the South for maintaining the lifestyles in the North the MDGs will never achieve sufficient result. So it is very important for Civil Society to be very pro-active in the process for developing the SDG, and push, among others, the environmental justice and social equity approach forward. But also not focus on more and more economic growth, but using the contraction and convergence scheme. In the Global North is

it necessary to use less natural resources and emit less CO<sub>2</sub>, so that developing countries have some (environmental) space left for their economic growth, to cover the basic needs for well being. We have to respect the planetary boundaries (we are already going beyond them) and instead of trying to increase the cake we need to share it in a more just way. This is very crucial for Sustainability worldwide.



Another drop is the acceptance of the 10 Year Framework of Programs, the implementation part of the Marrakech Process for Sustainable Consumption and Production. In this Marrakech Process governments and stakeholders are working together and did already a lot of work on analyses and concrete proposals. It is very positive that this work is valued and can continue.

The upgrading of UNEP is also promising, although it is still not enough to have a real decisional mandate in the UN-system. What will happen with Sustainable Development as such in the UN-system is unclear. The existing CSD (Commission of Sustainable Development) will be abolished and a "High level political forum" will be installed. A process for launching this will be started soon.

### **How to create The Future We Really Want?**

Even if the ambition level of outcome document is lower than we did expect, we cannot just allow ourselves to think that nothing can be done anymore. The role of civil society organisations (CSO) is huge. Not only for them, but also scientists and journalist have to choose what their renewed approach will be? Setting the agenda, or just follow and support the mainstream approaches?

If we are convinced that we need a radical and systemic change we need to rethink our role in society. Maybe we need to be more watchdogs and have a proactive attitude. Too many CSOs are co-opted by governments and business. They argue that they want to be constructive and be in dialogue with them. Being in dialogue is of course very good, but if that (often) means that CSOs lose their idealistic and political attitude, then the cost is too high.

If you compare the ways of convincing people in the seventies and now, you will notice a huge difference. In that time CSOs were more political, they named and blamed criminal and unfair acts of big multinational corporations or governments. It became very clear where the "bad guys" were acting. Political pressure could change this. Nowadays most CSOs focus less on political work, but more on individual consumer behavior. Role of individuals is often limited to green consumer, instead of conscious citizen.

That became very clear in the discussions we had in the run up to Rio+20. A lot of (bigger Northern) organisations considered green economy as very positive approach, as their campaigns fitted very well in this thinking: consume green, promote Eco design, recycling, eco-efficiency etc. But "economy" is more than consumption and production, it is also about redistribution of wealth, managing the commons, gender equality, spatial (urban) planning, human rights and active democracy. It were mostly the Southern CSO that pushed hard for human rights, stop ecological debt, Millennium Consumption Goals, Rights for Nature and so on. Of course it is not so black and white, but it is very obvious that Southern CSO have more political content, and are less looking for only technological solutions. It is also about human rights, ethics and responsibility. The reality for most of those groups in the Global South is also harder. For them it is not about the choice of driving a diesel car or an electric car, it is about having possibilities for producing their food or having an empty stomach.

### **How to deal with power relations?**

A pertinent question that is getting more important is how to dismantle those groups (be it countries, corporations, financial institutions, investors, ..) who are against sustainable development. Where are the blockers? As I hear personal opinions of delegates, as I see all initiatives from civil society (both on lobby level as on the field), as I try to believe most of the good intentions from business, it is unbelievable that so less progress is made.

As you put it in a metaphor of having the train rolling towards sustainability, some groups are pulling hard, others are even pushing harder, but no notable moving. That is why I find it every time more interesting to investigate who is holding the handbrake so tough?

Without any doubt there are many groups that have interest in the current economic system. It is maybe not the largest group on Earth, but certainly the most powerful group.

At the Peoples Summit, parallel to the official UN-Summit, a lot of events were organized. One of them was of [EJOLT](#), an international program with environmental justice organisations. During that event victims of environmental crimes testified about their experiences; two of them were fishermen from Brazil, that actually have a conflict with Petrobras, the national Brazilian Oil Company. That company is building a pipeline into the sea, the place where the local people fish and receive their income from. This conflict is already long standing. Already some communities have been displaced by pipeline construction and their overall fishing grounds has been reduced to about 12 per cent of the area over the past few years. According to the fisherfolks, about 9000 families are involved in the struggle. The leader of the Fishermen Organisation 'Homens e Mulheres do Mar Association' (AHOMAR) – Association of Men and Women of the Sea in the Guanabara Bay, gets police protection 24 hours a day, as he receives many dead threats. The two fishermen that were present at the People Summit were found dead a few days after, murdered. This is just an example that fighting for sustainability and a green economy is not wanted by some groups that have more interest in oil exploitation.

Sustainable development is not a voluntary concept anymore. It is not a technical debate. It is not about savings bulbs or take the bike to the office. It is politics! For millions of peoples it is about life or death, living in dignity or in miserable conditions. Sustainable development is a highly political issue, dealing with huge struggles of power and (short term) economic interest. Time to take it serious!

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