

Taking Issue

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RETRIEVING RIO

Governments, the UN and major groups should realise by now that the multilateral consensus achieved at Rio to commit to sustainable development is unlikely to be achieved with present efforts. Strategy and tactics must be reappraised in order for an outcome true to the principles of sustainable development to emerge.

Key principles that emerged from Rio were that sustainable development should form a conceptual and political link between environment and development; equity; rights of people in this and future generations; changing production and consumption patterns; the precautionary principle should be practiced; common but differentiated responsibilities should underpin international efforts.

The excessive length and incoherence of the mammoth working group texts released over the weekend are indicative of the crisis of sustainable development as well as a crisis of multilateralism. There are five principle problems with the submissions in the texts:

- 1) They are normative viewpoints not an implementation plan;
- 2) Comments are offered but without modalities to implement the principles of sustainable development;
- 3) Well-established Rio principles are being rolled back within the document;
- 4) Sustainable development is being subverted by certain proposals;
- 5) The North-South Compact forged at Rio is clearly absent.

Developed and developing countries are straining in vastly different directions and neither is particularly comprehensive in

making the case for sustainable development. The present plan offered by the Chairman is for the working groups to reduce the texts to a workable length by the end of the week. This means that either no agreement will be reached if the task proves too daunting or that we will get a consolidated version of a generally poor document. NGOs and governments will have to engage in a “damage control” process in multiple areas (e.g. international financial architecture, production and consumption, patents and intellectual property, water and energy). In any case, political will for such a Type 1 outcome is likely to remain fragmented.

Likewise Type 2 outcomes of the “partnership” sort are likely to suffer or be quite poor in quality in this environment. Partnerships that would aim to implement Agenda 21 by pursuing ratification of key multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) would not survive. They would be like fish out of the water that would sustain them. The success of Type 2 outcomes rests on the foundation of genuine political will expressed in Type 1 outcomes.

A conducive environment for sustainable development is precisely what is needed but the resources in the texts for working groups I and II are not sufficient. To address the double crisis of multilateralism and sustainable development we should turn our attention to already existing multilateral commitments that fit within the sustainable development framework but are awaiting implementation. Rather than engage in torturous negotiations over a new set of targets governments should

aim to fulfill existing commitments consistent with sustainable development and bearing in mind areas of urgent action.

The Chairman himself has pointed to three principle sources of inspiration that could be used:

1. Previous decisions of the CSD and international agreements
2. The Millennium Development Goals
3. Doha and the Monterrey Consensus

Unfortunately these sources do not enjoy balanced support within the present negotiations. The order is reversed, references to Doha and the Monterrey Consensus flood the present document. However: 1) the Monterrey Consensus is a weak deal and NGOs have declared that they are not part of the consensus. 2) The Doha Declaration only mentions sustainable development rather than being committed to it in substance. It is also not a consensus text, many developing countries have not agreed to it and NGOs have also rejected it outright as several elements threaten to be “Everything But Development.” 3) The Millennium Development Goals are often mentioned whilst much good work of the CSD over the last ten years is generally absent. 4) Multilateral environmental agreements have not been receiving adequate attention and support.

Nonetheless there is sufficient substance here to form a better baseline of multilateralism and sustainable development than we presently have: 1) **International agreements negotiated within the UN (including multilateral environmental agreements) and the Millennium Development Goals already enjoy endorsement by member states.**

Governments will be hard pressed to refuse them. 2) Fulfilling these commitments should be taken as baseline targets rather than adding a new set which may never be achieved. Many elements therein already possess targets and timeframes. 3) This would shift friction from debating the elements of the implementation plan to the means of implementation and political will. 4) They furthermore uphold the environment-development linkage of sustainable development and offer a baseline to build upon. 5) The governance paper (working group III) offers a constructive governance framework for such elements, these should be further elaborated.

This endorsement of previous commitments is all the more necessary as multilateralism is increasingly in jeopardy due to “bad faith” practiced by key developed countries. The US has just attempted to “un-sign” itself from the International Criminal Court, it also weakened the Kyoto Protocol with its demands before abandoning the Protocol even though its original demands were met. Australia, Canada and Russia have also demonstrated bad faith in the Kyoto Protocol by refusing or stalling ratification after gaining generous concessions (at the cost of environmental integrity). Trust cannot be sustained in multilateral negotiations by either governments or NGOs if this continues.

Everything will rest upon the political will of states, we must focus our efforts there. Supportive governments and the UN must also champion an achievable framework that will be sustained by good faith and commitment to the Rio principles.

The Sustainable Development Issues Network (SDIN) is an issues network to assist NGOs to work towards the WSSD. It is facilitated by the Alliance of Peoples for Environment and Development (ANPED), Environmental Liaison Centre international (ELCI) and Third World Network.