

The foundations and basis of “sustainable development”

By Martin Khor

Executive Director, South Centre

The main framework of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) 1992, its related agreements (the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), United Nations Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification) and its follow-up processes is to place the environment together with development in a single context. This is a unique achievement which has to be preserved and advanced, and not detracted from or diverted from.

UNCED was a watershed event that raised hopes of people around the world of the emergence of a new global partnership. This new partnership, arising from the "Spirit of Rio", would change the present course of international relations, tackle the growing global environment crisis and simultaneously strive for more equitable international economic relations that would be the basis for promoting sustainable development (including addressing the environment crisis) globally and in each country.

The unique and important achievement of UNCED was that through its long, open and participatory preparatory and Summit processes, the world's diplomats, policy makers and highest political leaders recognised not only the environment crisis in its many facets, but how this was embedded in economic and social systems, and that a realistic and long-term solution lay in dealing with both the environment and the development crises simultaneously and in an integrated fashion.

UNCED also involved thousands of non-governmental organisations, making it an important landmark for catalysing the development of a "global citizen movement" and also enabled a dialogue between civil society and governments. It generated an international community that shared an understanding of the integrated nature of environment and development, and a recognition that in the next few years there was the crucial need and opportunity to

save humanity from environmental catastrophe and social disorder.

The "compact" or core political agreement at the Earth Summit was the recognition that the global ecological crisis had to be solved in an equitable way, through partnership. This was captured in the principle of "common but differentiated responsibility" in the Rio Declaration. This principle acknowledged that developed countries have historically and at present been more responsible for the despoliation of the global environment, have more resources due to the imbalances in the world economy, and have greater responsibility in resolving environmental problems. Developing countries were hampered from meeting the basic needs of its people by their unfavourable position in the world economy, and their national resources were being drained through falling commodity prices, heavy debt burdens and other outflows. Development is their top priority and environmental concerns should be integrated with (and not detract from) development objectives.

The UNCED framework recognised and built in some of the key complexities of an integrated approach:

- It recognised the environmental crisis and the need for deep reform of production and consumption patterns. It recognised the sustainability principle, that present production should not compromise meeting the needs of the future. It recognised the precautionary principle.
- It also also recognised the "right to development" and the development needs and priorities of economic growth in developing countries plus social development goals including poverty eradication, jobs creation, food, health, education, etc.
- From the recognition of the above, the three pillars of "sustainable development" were

accepted as environmental protection, economic development and social development.

- It recognised the need not only for national action but also international policies and actions in understanding and addressing the issues, and that for developing countries national action must be supported by international policies and actions to enable implementation of sustainable development.
- In this context it recognised that countries played different roles in contributing to the environmental crisis, that countries are at different stages of development, and that these must lead to key principles and have important implications for actions and for the international cooperation framework.
- Out of this arose the equity principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. It recognised that the major contribution to pollution (including Greenhouse Gas emissions) and resource depletion was by developed countries, and that developing countries are now disadvantaged because there is little "environmental space" left, which has implications for their future development. In practical terms, there should be a three-prong approach to achieving sustainable development: (1) The developed countries have to take the lead in changing production and consumption patterns (their economic model); (2) Developing countries would maintain their development goals but take on sustainable development methods and paths; (3) Developed countries commit to enable and support the developing countries' sustainable development through finance, technology transfer and appropriate reforms to the global economic and financial structures or practices (this is why there were chapters on finance, technology, trade, commodities, etc in Agenda 21).

In concrete terms, the implications of the above were as follows:

First, the North would change its production and consumption patterns. It would take the lead in improving environmental standards, reduce pollution and the use of toxic materials, and cut down the use and waste in natural resources, including through changing lifestyles. By "putting its own house in order", the North would show an example to the

rest of the world that there is a need for a change in economic and social behaviour in order to solve the environment crisis;

Second, the North would help the South with financial aid and technology transfer, and through partnership in bringing about a more favourable international economic environment (through more equitable terms of trade, debt relief, etc). This would enable the South to have greater resources and a larger "development space" that would in turn facilitate a change in the development model that would be more environmentally sustainable;

Third, the South, having more financial and technological resources, would manage its economy better, give priority to policies that meet people's needs, improve pollution standards and reduce depletion of resources such as forests.

Fourth, international agencies and structures would help further this process; for example, by reducing the debt problem of developing countries and reviewing the content of structural adjustment policies, by ensuring that the trade system brings about more favourable results for developing poor countries, by helping to mobilise financial resources and providing technical aid in improving environmental standards.

Fifth, issues requiring an integration of economic and environmental concerns (such as the interaction of trade and environment; and the relation between intellectual property rights and environmental technology and indigenous knowledge) should be resolved through North-South partnership in which the development needs of the South would be adequately recognised.

If the above principles are to be followed, then the concept of sustainable development would have at least two major components, each balancing the other: environmental protection and meeting the basic and human needs of present and future generations. Thus, sustainable development would not only involve ecological practices that enable meeting the needs of future generations, but a change in production and consumption patterns in an equitable manner whereby resources which are currently being wasted are saved and rechanneled to meeting the needs of everyone today as well as the needs of future generations. In this concept, equity among and within countries in the control and use of resources in ecologically prudent ways is a most critical factor.

The centre of the North-South debate and negotiations was conducted in the negotiations on the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development and on the Agenda 21 Chapters on financial resources and on

technology transfer. The Rio Declaration negotiations became the heart of the UNCED's debate and later "partnership" on the political principles that would govern international relations in the treatment of global environmental problems. The developing countries insisted that the rich and poor countries should not be viewed on similar terms in relation to the causes and burden of resolving environmental problems, but that the North should bear a larger burden of costs and responsibilities due to their larger share in causing the problems and their relatively larger capacity to meet the costs. Eventually, much of the South's arguments and perspectives prevailed, as manifested in several of the Rio Declaration principles, especially Principle 3 that "the right to development must be fulfilled so as to equitably meet developmental and environmental needs of present and future generations", and Principle 7 that "in view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities" and that "developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command."

Meanwhile, intense attention was also focused on finance and on technology transfer, as these two issues had for the developing countries become the "proxies" or test issues to determine the seriousness of the North in extending assistance to or agreeing to partnership with the South. The central argument of the Group of 77 (G77) and China was that developing countries could successfully make the transition to sustainable development only if they could simultaneously take care of their development needs. In line with the principle of differentiated responsibility and partnership, the North had to contribute to "new and additional" financial resources to the South as well as facilitate the effective transfer of technology at concessional terms to

the South. Since the larger issue of redressing the inequitable and unbalanced international economic and trade systems had been side-stepped midway in the negotiating process, financial aid and technology transfer had become the specific issues on which North-South "partnership" would be negotiated and tested.

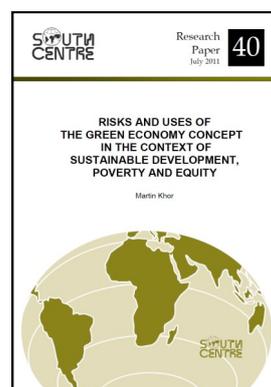
The conference in 2012 to mark the 20th anniversary of the Rio Summit is meant to review the implementation of the Rio outcomes. The review would be on the extent to which the sustainable development objectives have been met, identify the implementation gaps and propose measures for the way forward. As the "green economy" concept is being discussed as part of this process, it must thus be placed integrally within this holistic framework of UNCED, the Rio Principles and Agenda 21. This framework also was the fundamental basis of the UNCED and CBD. The green economy should have as its basis the environmental imperative, the development (economic and social) imperative and the equity principle that links the environment and development dimensions. The green economy should thus be defined and operationalised in this EDE (environment, development, equity) framework, which must also incorporate both the national and international dimensions. Objectives, principles, policies, proposals, initiatives, on the green economy should be within this EDE framework.



Chemin du Champ-d'Anier 17
PO Box 228, 1211 Geneva 19
Switzerland

Telephone: (4122) 791 8050
Fax: (4122) 798 8531
E-mail: south@southcentre.org
<http://www.southcentre.org>

Access the Full Paper



The full South Centre Research Paper 40 "*Risks and Uses of the Green Economy Concept in the Context of Sustainable Development, Poverty and Equity*" by Martin Khor, Executive Director, South Centre, can be accessed at the South Centre website on its front page: www.southcentre.org; or at:

http://www.southcentre.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=1598%3Arisks-and-uses-of-the-green-economy-concept-in-the-context-of-sustainable-development-poverty-and-equity&catid=69%3Aenvironment-a-sustainable-development&Itemid=67&lang=en