What Does Rio+20 Mean for Sustainable Development?

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ABSTRACT *The UNDP Administrator reflects on the Rio+20 Conference: the challenges it sought to address, the context in which it did so, the outcomes it produced, the key messages, and opportunities for action emanating from it.*

KEYWORDS *fossil fuel subsidies; green economy; human development; integrated planning; people-centred development; Rio+20; social protection; sustainable development; sustainable energy for all; zero hunger*

I thank Lincoln University for the invitation to deliver this year's State of the Nation's Environment address.¹

This year's address takes place in the 25th anniversary year of the release of the Brundtland Report – the UN Report which, in defining sustainable development, helped facilitate a global consensus on its importance. We also meet just two months after world leaders gathered in Rio de Janeiro to agree on steps to advance sustainable development at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, Rio+20.

Advancing sustainable development worldwide is central to the mandate of the UN Development Programme, which I lead. I am especially pleased, therefore, to join you today to examine what the Rio+20 Conference means for sustainable development for all of us. My lecture tonight will address three issues:

- First: The background to Rio+20, and what happened at the conference.
- Second: What Rio+20 means for engagement in and leadership of sustainable development.
- Third: How the outcome of Rio+20 could be translated into policy solutions to pressing global challenges.

What happened at Rio+20?

Mixed media accounts have depicted the conference outcome – some are hopeful, while others are rather dour and pessimistic. Before drawing conclusions about its success or failure, however, we need to look at what the Conference was intended to achieve, and what it actually did accomplish. We also need to consider the context in which it took place.

The negotiations of UN member states on the outcome document for Rio+20 occurred against the backdrop of significant political and economic tension in Europe, the United

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States, and elsewhere. Economic uncertainty and the prospect of slow growth polarized the political discourse on growth and austerity, and left leaders reluctant to be proactive in addressing global challenges, including through development assistance and environmental protection.

Development cooperation does have a vital and catalytic role to play in advancing sustainable development. If traditional donors are reducing the quantity of aid, that does not help the atmospherics around a conference like Rio+20. Indeed, the volume of official development assistance, as measured in real terms by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development, dropped for the first time in 15 years (see <http://www.oecd.org/newsroom/developmentaidtodevelopingcountriesfallsbecauseofglobalrecession.htm>). That is not the ideal backdrop for a major UN conference related to development.

For these and other reasons, failure to agree on any outcome whatsoever at Rio+20 remained a distinct possibility up until the arrival of high-level delegations at the conference itself. Months of negotiations in New York had produced few results. Inability to agree on an outcome would have been disastrous, making it more difficult to generate the momentum needed to address the linked challenges of environmental degradation, social inequity, and economic volatility.

Unfortunately it is not unknown for major multilateral meetings to fail to produce significant outcomes: the UN Committee on the Status of Women could not agree this year; the Commission for Sustainable Development struggled last year; the Copenhagen Climate Conference struggled the year before; and the WTO's Doha Development Round has been in trouble for years.

After much debate and late night negotiations, however, the 193 UN member states at Rio+20 adopted the compromise outcome document submitted by the host, Brazil. Its title, 'The Future We Want', restates the global commitment to achieve sustainable development, and calls on all actors to reinvigorate their efforts. Considering the global political context, this outcome must be seen as a glass at least half full.

To assess the value of the agreement, we should also view it in a longer-term historical context, and

consider what the Conference was established to achieve.

The Rio+20 outcome document concludes that sustainable development is the only viable path for development, and, therefore, that for development to be effective it must be sustainable. It highlights how environmental protection and economic development are linked, and gives, for the first time at a global conference of this kind, equal emphasis to the social – or people-centred – dimension of sustainable development. This is of great importance to UNDP, which both promotes human development and works across the three strands of sustainable development, seeking synergies between them.

Thus the Rio+20 outcome reflects an advance in thinking that brings the consensus of member states closer to the conclusions of the Brundtland Report 25 years ago.

In 1983, the UN Secretary General had asked Gro Harlem Brundtland to chair a *World Commission on Environment and Development*, citing her experience as Norway's Prime Minister and Environment Minister. The Commission's Report gave us the concept of sustainable development, which is widely used today.

It defined *sustainable* development as 'development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs'. This definition linked the concept to a fundamental tenet of justice and to human development: that no one should be denied the ability or opportunity to live lives they value because of their gender, ethnicity, or any other factor, including, in this case, the generation in which they happen to be born.

It argued that sustainable development was about both advancing social justice and human progress *and* about maintaining the integrity of ecosystems, and went further to suggest that the economic, social, and environmental strands of sustainable development represent interconnected objectives which countries can and should pursue together.

The Report's powerful and compelling ideas popularized sustainable development, bringing the term and concept into mainstream development discourse in developed and developing countries. It also laid the ground for the United Nations

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Conference on Environment and Development held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. That Conference, commonly referred to as the Earth Summit, focused mainly on moving the environmental agenda forward – which it did in powerful ways. It agreed on Agenda 21, the Global Environment Facility, and UN conventions on climate change, biodiversity, and desertification, thereby establishing a strong foundation for sustainable development. Its implementation, however, has been uneven. Twenty years later, Rio+20 was intended to be a ‘review’ conference, which would assess the progress made since 1992. As such, its aims, on paper at least, were more limited than those of its predecessor.

The opportunity offered by a major global conference to advance sustainable development, however, was one not to be missed. Many argued that to tackle growing global challenges of inequity and unsustainability, quick, bold, and concerted action was needed from Rio+20. It was hoped that leaders might re-create the ‘spirit of the Earth Summit’, and determine to move past short-term, sectoral thinking; learn from best practice on sustainability; and make commitments to tackle the pressing challenges – from ocean acidification and diminishing biodiversity to food insecurity, entrenched poverty and much more. In so doing, the misconception that sustainable development is only or mainly about the environment could be dispelled.

In the third week of June 2012, some 100 Heads of State and Government, many ministers, and more than 40,000 other representatives of governments, non-governmental organizations, the private sector, and civil society gathered at Rio+20, making it the largest ever UN gathering.

It is true, however, that the agreed outcome document included no new binding targets, few concrete initiatives, and little new financial and institutional support. That left many activists, NGOs, scientists, and development actors disappointed. Measured against the scale of the global challenges – including environmental degradation, growing inequality, and economic volatility – the outcome document does fall short.

But it is also true that the document has wise things to say about every aspect of sustainable

development, and provides a platform to which to link action by all who want to act, from citizens to governments. The challenge arising from Rio+20 is how to advance economic, social, and environmental objectives simultaneously, lifting integrated policy-making to new levels.

The outcome signals a broad understanding that the systems and behaviours that have brought us to this point in history – reaching planetary boundaries and societal breaking points – must change. If I were to choose the three key messages from the document, they would be to integrate policies and programmes, green the economy, and set ambitious but realistic goals.

Integrate policies and programmes

Rio+20 calls on governments and the UN system to work across sectors to identify the policies and programmes that will grow economies and reduce inequities, while also protecting the environment.

In some quarters, economic growth is looked at as antithetical to environmental protection. Rio turns such thinking on its head – encouraging us all to identify how entrepreneurship, job creation, and social protection can be generated through and linked to environmental protection.

In my work, I encounter countless examples of such action – for example, just last month in Senegal, meeting local women committed to replanting and protecting the mangrove forests, which, once re-established, nurture fish and shell fish stocks, thus generating new sources of incomes for families.

UNDP is committed to help countries learn from and scale up ‘triple-win’ policies and programmes, which many countries are already employing and which are designed to advance economic, social, and environment objectives together.

Green the economy

Rio+20 emphasizes that economies must be made both green and inclusive. It singles out poverty eradication as the world’s most pressing challenge, and calls for targeted efforts to reach the poor and vulnerable, including by creating jobs and opportunities. Negotiations on the green

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economy were particularly heated, due to the fears of developing countries that the term could be code for new conditions on trade and aid. It was agreed that the green economy should not be seen as a rigid, restrictive set of rules. In other words, no firm pathway was agreed on. There is much that can be done, however, to identify locally appropriate ways to generate green jobs and incentivize shifts to sustainable production and consumption. UNDP and sister agencies expect to be heavily engaged in supporting developing countries to do that.

Set goals

Rio+20 calls for continued efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by their 2015 target date. Looking beyond 2015, Rio+20 also agreed to craft 'sustainable development goals' – which should: (a) build on the significant success of the MDGs in focusing development efforts and mobilizing diverse actors around a common cause; (b) fully reflect all three strands of sustainable development; and (c) raise the level of global ambition to eradicate extreme poverty.

Overall, while the agreements reached at Rio are voluntary rather than binding, and overarching rather than specific, they do strengthen the international community's commitment to implement sustainable development and provide a platform for action by those willing to act.

It should not surprise us that the concerns raised by the Brundtland report 25 years ago found more resonance with world leaders gathered in Rio this June. The more polluted and unequal our world becomes, the more governments will tend to view environmental and social protection systems not as luxuries to be acquired when countries become wealthy, but as necessities, vital to sustain development and meet the needs of citizens.

This conclusion is increasingly compelling for developing countries with restless young populations, overstretched services, and rapidly expanding cities. The challenges are especially daunting for small island countries faced with obliteration from rising sea levels, and for other poor countries also bearing the brunt of extreme climate

events – including through the deadly droughts affecting parts of Africa and the catastrophic flooding in Pakistan and elsewhere.

What Rio+20 means for engagement and leadership

Let me make a few observations on the signals provided by Rio+20 on the future of engagement and leadership by key stakeholders: developing countries, especially Brazil, civil society, the private sector, and the social media.

The role played by developing and emerging market countries

It was evident in Rio that new groupings of countries have realized the importance and relevance of pursuing sustainable development at home and through global collaboration and international action. Alongside the Conference's official proceedings, developing and emerging market countries met in side events and shared success stories. Many revealed new and innovative policy approaches and displayed their willingness to collaborate across borders for sustainable development. Through South-South cooperation, developing countries are sharing best practice and lessons learned. It was notable that while the majority of the G8's leaders stayed away from the summit, emerging economies were generally represented at a very high level, strengthening their voice in proceedings.

The role of Brazil

Brazil played a major role as the host in steering the conference, and is determined that there will be a legacy from it. As part of that, an announcement was made during the conference by Brazil's Minister for the Environment and me that Brazil and UNDP will establish the 'Rio+20 World Centre for Sustainable Development'. Located in Rio, the Centre will promote implementation of the outcome of Rio+20, share best practice, and support countries' efforts to adopt integrated policymaking and pursue objectives across the three strands of sustainable development.

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A new member state forum at the United Nations

At the global level, member states at Rio+20 agreed to establish a universal membership, inter-governmental, high-level political forum for sustainable development at the UN, which builds on the strengths, experiences, resources, and inclusive ways of working of the current Commission on Sustainable Development, and subsequently replaces the Commission. An intergovernmental process will define the features of the new forum which is expected to convene at the beginning of the 68th session of the General Assembly in September 2013.

The overall mandate of the High Level Political Forum will be to help countries implement the outcome of Rio+20. It could do this by reviewing and monitoring progress on sustainable development, and by providing a platform for countries to share their experiences on implementation, rather as the Development Co-operation Forum associated with the UN's Economic and Social Council does. It could also promote coordination across the UN system on sustainable development programming and policies, and seek to strengthen the science-policy interface.

The level of engagement beyond the UN's member states

UN global conferences like Rio+20 traditionally work through the good faith, legitimacy, common understandings, and shared principles generated in inter-governmental negotiations and dialogue. But Rio+20 broke the usual mould with the very large presence of civil society, business people, and local governments.

The *voluntary commitments* made by businesses, development banks, cities and regions, UN agencies, and NGOs and civil society activists were among Rio's most significant outcomes. More than 700 formal commitments were registered, and more than US\$500 billion dollars were pledged. For example:

- Unilever, Tesco, and Johnson and Johnson committed to end deforestation in their supply chains for beef, soy, paper, and palm oil by 2020.

- The 1,800 largest companies listed on the London Stock Exchange committed to disclose their greenhouse gas emissions.
- The cities of Beijing, Cairo, Delhi, London, Moscow, New York, and Sydney, among others, committed to reducing a gigaton of carbon emission reductions, and agreed to report on their progress through an annual report card.
- Eight development banks committed to spending US\$175 billion in grant and loan funding by 2020 to support sustainable low carbon transportation.

This outcome suggests that motivated leaders from across the economic and social sectors and sub-national governments can help accelerate sustainable development. Many of these are well ahead of many governments at the national level, and certainly well ahead of what UN member states can agree on. They are not waiting for governments to act – nor should they. The need to act is urgent.

Progress on implementing the more than 700 voluntary commitments made at Rio+20 needs to be monitored. UNDP will be working with civil society partners and in-country networks to support such monitoring, which can also help grow constituencies for sustainable development by raising awareness of what can and should be done.

Social media engagement on a global scale

Global constituencies for change can also be built, following on from the successful '*Rio dialogues*'. Held in the lead up to the Conference, these were a series of structured online discussions, which originated from the Government of Brazil and UNDP's drive to consult citizens on what should happen at Rio+20. The initiative engaged 60,000 people around the world in voting for the specific sustainable development actions that were most important to them. The results were presented to the leaders attending Rio, setting precedents for new levels of citizen engagement and offering a glimpse of what future of UN summitry could be.

The UN Charter begins with the words '*we the peoples*'. Through the strategic use of new media,

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the UN can convey the message that the capacity to expand peace, freedom, and sustainability does not rest in the hands of diplomats in meetings in New York alone, but with all of us – the citizens. We are all the shareholders of Planet Earth.

Translating Rio+20 into policy solutions

Turning to practical question, Rio+20 has built consensus for rapid action on a number of sustainable development objectives, namely sustainable energy for all, zero hunger, measuring human development, scaling up of protection systems, eliminating wasteful fossil fuel subsidies.

Sustainable energy for all

Rio+20 drew attention to the pressing need for universal access to modern and reliable energy services, at the same time as a need to move away from the current high level of dependence on fossil fuels.

The International Energy Agency (IEA) reports that in 2001, 1.3 billion people lacked access to electricity (<http://www.iea.org/newsroomandevents/news/2012/november/name,33793,en.html>). Without access to clean fuels, 2 billion people use traditional biomass for heating and cooking. An estimated two million people, mainly women and children, die each year as a result of exposure to indoor smoke from such fuels. Reliable access to energy is essential for providing basic health, education, and sanitation services. It also lightens the domestic burden of women.

At Rio+20, member states noted the UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon's 'Sustainable Energy for All' initiative (<http://sustainableenergyforall.org/images/content/SEFA-ActionAgenda.pdf>) and expressed their 'determination to act to make sustainable energy for all a reality'. The Secretary-General's initiative has set three targets for 2030:

- achieving universal access to modern energy services;
- doubling the share of renewables in the global energy mix; and
- doubling the rate of improvement in energy efficiency worldwide.

Of the US\$500 billion pledged through voluntary commitments at Rio+20, more than 60 percent were dedicated to this initiative. UNDP is helping take this initiative forward in the 55 countries which have signed on thus far, using the convening power of UN Resident Coordinators, who are also the UNDP Representatives, to bring stakeholders together to identify how to overcome barriers to achieving sustainable energy for all, and to act to do so.

Zero hunger

At Rio+20 the UN Secretary-General also issued an ambitious challenge to achieve 'zero hunger' in his lifetime (see <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MaAYbDtO2RM>, and <http://www.un.org/en/zerohunger/#&panel1-1>). Specifically, he called for a world in which:

- everyone has access to sufficient levels of nutritious food all year round;
- there is no malnutrition in pregnancy and early childhood;
- all food systems are sustainable;
- smallholder farmers have the inputs and opportunities they need to double their productivity and income; and
- food losses stemming from waste, poor storage capacity, and infrastructure are brought to an end.

Food is produced today in quantities, which could feed everyone; yet the FAO estimates that in 2010, 925 million people were chronically undernourished (2012, <http://www.fao.org/docrep/016/i3027e/i3027e00.htm>). Nearly a quarter of the population of sub-Saharan Africa is affected by hunger. This means children are denied the opportunity to reach their full potential, and adults suffer from lifelong poor health and low productivity.

About a third of global food production intended for human consumption is lost or wasted each year. In developing countries, more than 40 percent of food losses occur post-harvest. Grains are eaten by vermin, and fruits and vegetables rot before they can be sold or eaten. Reliable electricity for cold storage and local processing

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facilities, and better rural infrastructure, are essential for expanding food security in the developing world.

Investments in sustainable agriculture have the potential to alleviate food insecurity and malnutrition, mitigate climate change, and protect the environment. As well, UNEP estimates that these investments have the potential to create up to 50 million more jobs by 2050. The growing numbers of young people in sub-Saharan Africa will need these opportunities in agriculture.

Measuring human development

Rio+20 has given impetus to finding new ways of measuring development progress, and ending the tyranny of measurement by GDP. UNDP has for 22 years produced the Human Development Index, which encompasses health and education components alongside income. Yet, still today, countries are more likely to be judged by the speed at which their economies grow – rather than by the education or health status of their populations, or by their ability to reduce chronic hunger and provide work.

This year, the UN Statistical Commission adopted a System of Environmental-Economic Accounting to monitor progress on increasing green investment, creating green jobs, improving energy and resource efficiency, and recycling.

UNDP is exploring the possibilities of adapting the Human Development Index to reflect environmental and other sustainability indicators better.

Scaling up protection systems

Rio+20 showcased innovative social protection systems that are designed to have environmental benefits. Brazil's Bolsa Verde, South Africa's 'Working for Water' (see <http://www.dwaf.gov.za/wfw/>), and India's National Employment Guarantee scheme (<http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.php?page=view&type=99&nr=47&menu=20>) are all good examples. Brazil, for example, established an environmental conservation support initiative (<http://www12.senado.gov.br/internacional/09-30-2011/senate-approves-the-creation-of-the-201cbolsa-verde201d-program>), which employs impoverished

families living by forests in support of their protection.

These are just some of many examples of 'triple win' policies of the kind that UNDP supports around the world, showing that economic, social, and environmental objectives can be advanced together.

Eliminate wasteful fossil fuel subsidies

Rio+20 called on member states to eliminate, or at least seriously reduce, 'harmful and inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption and undermine sustainable development'. A grassroots campaign against fossil fuel subsidies went viral in the social media before and during Rio+20, and had an impact on negotiators. The IEA estimates that in 2010 the world spent roughly US\$409 billion in subsidies on the sale of fossil fuels (see <http://www.oecd.org/env/49090716.pdf>). In some countries, fossil fuel subsidies now exceed the total budget allocated to education, health, and social programmes – one reason why finance ministers are increasingly supportive of their removal.

Ending or reducing such subsidies would promote energy conservation, attract investments in renewables, and free up significant funding for policies that meet the needs of the poor and advance sustainable development – such as social protection, mass transit systems, or renewable energy.

While fossil fuel subsidies disproportionately benefit wealthy households, strategies to remove or reduce subsidies need to mitigate the impact on the poor. Without a commitment to such measures, governments can expect savage reactions, as seen in Nigeria a few months ago.

Effective mitigation might involve directing energy subsidies away from energy companies towards vulnerable households. To do this, however, countries must have the institutional capacity to identify vulnerable households and compensate for the estimated impact of higher energy prices. Public awareness campaigns and revisions to the underlying social compact may also be needed to convince sceptical publics.

A large share of the world's fossil fuel subsidies is provided by G20 countries – which have pledged

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to phase them out. In Rio, a petition with one million signatures was presented to the G20, asking them to make good on their pledge.

Integrated low carbon development planning

Rio *can* make good on its promise if increasing numbers of governments meet their Rio+20 obligations through integrated and low-carbon development planning. The report of the Secretary General's High Level Global Sustainability Panel (*Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing*) (http://www.un.org/gsp/sites/default/files/attachments/GSP_Report_web_final.pdf) suggested that 'most economic decision makers still regard sustainable development as extraneous to their core responsibilities'. Yet we know the contrary can be true: that integrating environmental and social issues can be vital to the success of economic decisions.

Strong leadership is required to build broad constituencies for sustainable development. International development assistance, climate funds, and other sources of investment are needed to help overcome the capacity deficit most developing countries face.

Cross-sectoral cooperation and integrated approaches to policymaking require effective public administrations and governance systems. UNDP is committed to supporting countries to develop these capacities and implement low carbon development plans, which can achieve national development priorities, while limiting future emissions

and responding to the needs of vulnerable, poor, and excluded groups and communities.

At the 2011 Durban climate conference, Ethiopia launched its low carbon, climate resilient, green economy strategy (http://www.et.undp.org/index.php?option=com_news&id=132). Ethiopia aims to lift its people out of poverty, but to do so in a way that does not wreck the environment. If one of the world's poorest countries is determined to act in this way, surely all countries can?

Conclusion

The significance and relevance of global summits like Rio+20 ultimately lie in their ability to connect with and influence what people are doing on the ground around the world to 'think globally while acting locally'.

Rio+20, with its huge engagement of sub-national governments, NGOs, communities, and businesses, can be seen as promoting bottom-up leadership for sustainable development, based on pragmatic, multi-sectoral, issue-based coalitions. In the end, what will motivate governments to act is the knowledge that there is a groundswell for change.

The outcome document from Rio+20 is a solid foundation on which to build. To paraphrase Winston Churchill: Rio+20 was not the end for sustainable development, nor was it the beginning of the end. It may, however, have been the end of the beginning. It does not mince words on the seriousness of the challenges our world faces. It challenges us all in our various capacities to act to put our world on a more sustainable course.

Note

- 1 This is an abridged version of a lecture delivered at Lincoln University, New Zealand, 20 August 2012.