



Report of the Roundtable

Brundtland Report plus 20, EcoLomics International plus 5 : Quo vadis Sustainable Development?

Thursday, October 18, 2007, 14.30-18.00 h
Faculty of Law, University of Geneva, Uni Mail, Room 4050

Organization:

Trade and Environment Research Group (T&ERG), Faculty of Law
EcoLomics International, Geneva

Edited by Urs P. Thomas

In light of the fact that this Roundtable aimed at a dynamic and informal but well informed exchange of ideas rather than at well thought through debates or a coherent discourse, and also because the discussions which followed the presentations were important, it appears justified to structure this note through loosely defined topics rather than based on the presentations. The presentations are therefore not outlined specifically here, please refer to the speakers' list in the Roundtable Program for details. It should be noted that the opinions expressed here represent statements that were made. These include some open-ended questions which might be of interest for future discussions.

Geopolitics and Sustainable Development

The emergence of environmental and sustainable development practices occurred in two waves: the first one started with the publication of *Silent Spring* by Rachel Carson in 1962, the second one was triggered by the '*Brundtland Report - Our Common Future*.' The 1992 Rio de Janeiro Earth Summit was a key event of the second wave in spite of the fact that no real commitments were made. Nevertheless it started a number of important intergovernmental processes mostly through the United Nations.

The Environment and the Role of Science

The environmental community needs to undergo a change. It has misunderstood the role of science and its relation with politics and the economy: it has wrongly assumed that scientific evidence will spur politicians into action. Solutions are available but they are not implemented.

The Environment and Politics

Leadership is facing great difficulties in tackling long-term problems because of the usual election time span of about four years. This is true in spite of the fact that many polls show that more than half the population -- tendency increasing -- thinks the environment is a "serious" problem. One of the key functions that we have to ask from the political authorities is the development and implementation of incentives for more environment-friendly practices and habits. The message needs to be promoted, with solid arguments, that environmental measures are good for the creation of jobs, the economy, peace, and equity.

Environmentalism does not have a good image in the media, it is often seen as doom-saying and as a negative attitude. Sustainable development on the other hand is seen as more hopeful, doable, and oriented toward economically feasible objectives and activities.

We are not in a "sustainable development logic." We do try and we hope, but at the same time, with our lifestyle and our behavior, we go in the wrong direction. We need to reconsider our lifestyle.

The Environment and the Economy

The linkages between trade liberalization and the protection of the environment need to be emphasized more, for instance in the case of the reduction or elimination of environmentally detrimental subsidies in areas such as energy, logging, fishing, mining, or chemicals. The potential for win-win solutions has not been fully exploited yet since there are strong vested interests that are interested in maintaining the status quo.

The WTO has made progress by initiating the Doha Round: this is the first time in the history of GATT/WTO that environmental issues are not just vaguely discussed but seriously negotiated. In any case, trade-related environmental measures (i.e. import restrictions or bans) are allowed provided it can be demonstrated that they are based on scientific evidence. As a matter of fact, a major portion of all trade concerns, perhaps 20%, are related to environmental considerations.

At the institutional level there are joint meetings of the Secretariats of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and the WTO which have led to fruitful discussions. It is relatively easy to find an agreement at the level of general principles and concepts, the devil is in the details.

Institutional and Organizational Issues

What is meant by inter-organizational cooperation at the UN, e.g. to tackle the linkage between climate change and desertification? In reality, these interactions are often limited to exchanging reports. Some coordination and facilitation mechanisms that might have an important potential are disappointing. The Commission on Sustainable Development for example is criticized a lot for not being effective.

Generally speaking there are too many agreements and UN bodies, hundreds of them that are active in sustainable development issues. The whole field is splintered up too much. As a result the diplomatic playing field is not transparent, it is often difficult to discern where the center of gravity concerning a specific problem is located, which makes system-wide coherence difficult to achieve.

Complicating the matter is the fact that there is increasing competition for the hosting of international organizations. Geneva is very much feeling this, its attractiveness can no longer be taken for granted.

The Environmental Management Group (EMG) in Geneva is an attempt to improve the UN's system-wide coherence.¹ That objective is an old challenge, probably since the UN exists. The scattering of offices, not to mention geographical locations, does not make the task any easier.

At the level of NGOs, the WorldWatch Institute in Washington DC was especially mentioned for the important work it does in the implementation of sustainable development objectives. It was pointed out that in the domains of transportation and city sprawl, in the depletion of fish stocks, and in renewable energy technologies its impact was particularly significant.

¹ The Environment Management Group (EMG) is a grouping of all UN agencies and Secretariats of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) as well as the Bretton Woods Institutions and the World Trade Organization working together to share information about their respective plans and activities in the fields of environment and human settlements: to inform and consult one another about proposed new initiatives; to contribute to a planning framework that permits the plan and activities of each participant to be reviewed within the framework of the whole range of activities being carried out by all participating agencies; and to consult with each other with a view to developing an agreed set of priorities as well as to institute measures through which each participating organization can best contribute towards the implementation of those priorities.

<http://www.unep.org/documents.multilingual/default.asp?DocumentID=43&ArticleID=4326&l=en>

Corporate leaders who knowingly violate environmental rules ought to be punished severely.

The Concept of EcoLomics

There was some discussion about the importance of social aspects. The fact is that although they constitute one of the three pillars of the sustainable development paradigm, this term is often used where social aspects are not really taken into consideration other than in the context of poverty alleviation at the aggregate level, e.g. at the WTO. That is why the EcoLomics concept, i.e. the interaction between ecology and economics (including collective poverty alleviation), may be more appropriate for the WTO than the sustainable development concept. In any case the difference between the two terms is by no means a question of the hierarchy of concerns but of a pragmatic focus in certain applications and of the efficiency and organization of work.

Questions Raised that could set off Further Discussions

In light of the lack of commitments of the international community, one may wonder what set of conditions would be required to trigger a process of more serious commitments by national governments, perhaps via intergovernmental organizations or non-state actors, which would lead to the implementation of more serious environmental commitments. As we have seen, Hurricane Katrina had not impact on the US government in terms of climate or energy policies.

What is going wrong in light of all the warnings we are getting, many of which in fact are not disputed or controversial (e.g. the rapid melting of glaciers or the Arctic ice cap)?

What means or techniques of communication could be more effective than the status quo?

Is there enough interaction among related UN bodies and mechanisms, and are such communications carried out effectively? How could they be improved?

There is a lot of talk about integrating environmental considerations into economic planning. But the environment is too broad to be integrated. Why not the other way around: integrate the economy into the ecosystem?

What is meant by a good government? Jim MacNeill, the Secretary General of the Brundtland Commission (1984-87), was cited as providing the following sardonic definition: "a bad government in a hell of a fright..."