Realising Sustainable Development

Ring Statement



Half a generation has passed since the Rio Summit laid out its ambitious plan for a more equitable and sustainable global future. In that heady and hopeful time, governments first began to see how sustainable development might work in practice, agreeing goals based on the recommendations of Gro Harlem Brundtland's World Commission on Environment and Development. Yet two decades on, there is little evidence that the scale of action at any level is a match for the magnitude of the problems facing us all. We need to deal with the root causes – but make a major shift in the way we do it, by building sustainability from the bottom up.

"Mankind will gain nothing from going to the moon if we manage to lose the earth."

François Mauriac, author and journalist

s members of the Ring alliance
– a global consortium of policy NGOs dedicated to sustainable development – we have been enthusiastic advocates of the Rio Summit's vision and practice from the start. We have worked continuously to develop policies and promote activities rooted in the interests and capabilities of the poorest and most vulnerable. And there are reasons for hope – examples of sustainable development in action that we can learn from, and signs of change in the political landscape that could turn apparent stalemate into rapid improvement.

But the need remains for a quantum leap in dealing with the causes of our common problems. The Ring organisations, which span five continents, have built up unique insights into how this goal might be met. We work on the interface between poverty and the environment, helping to develop better ways to use environmental resources, brokering partnerships between different actors, finding ways to empower poor communities, and challenging powerful interests for the common good. Much of this happens at local and national level, but we come together as the Ring to bring our collective experience to an international audience, and to focus on the systemic barriers that undermine sustainability across the world.

Supporting initiatives that build sustainability from the bottom up is vital. Global climate change is already threatening the livelihoods of vulnerable communities in

poor countries: unpredictable shifts in rainfall, for instance, can trigger floods and drought and facilitate the spread of disease. To build on their resilience in the face of such changes, the poor need political and market-based support. But for this to work, their own skills, knowledge about their social and ecological context, and measures for adapting to change will need to be promoted over the imposition of uniform solutions from outside.

Many voices: the need for inclusivity

Yet this will not be enough: the accreted action of multiple communities will not, on its own, change the policy framework. The projected impacts of climate chaos are far too extreme to warrant any optimism regarding the ability of communities to address the challenges on their own or through uncoordinated actions. There is a need to bring the voice of those most likely to be affected adversely by any future changes into global policy fora and analytical frameworks.

Given that the prime causes of climate change lie in the developed world, it is also essential to challenge the economic and social norms that drive greenhouse gas emissions and perpetuate inequality and unsustainability. Rather than expecting poor people to adapt to climate change on their own, it is far more important to ask how the world as a whole, rich and poor alike, need to alter lifestyles, aspirations and social arrangements - including the day-to-day machinery of government and business – so they can respond to the challenge in a timely, useful, socially equitable and sustainable manner. Decisions taken now on urban planning and power generation will have impacts for decades to come.



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Tools and technologies with a global or regional scope can have a huge impact at the local level. For example, accurate models that can predict future weather patterns can be a vital complement to local resilience and help inform people's decisions. Technologies and approaches that work in one part of the world – say, for water harvesting and retaining soil moisture – can be shared in others. And information on the impacts the rich world is having on the poor needs to reach ordinary citizens so that they can push for change in their own societies armed with a better understanding of the importance of global public goods.

Climate change is only the most widely accepted example of an issue demanding radical change at all levels. Threats to the major ecosystems on which we depend are another. The 2005 Millennium Ecosystem Assessment concluded that 15 of 24 ecological services – for example, fisheries – are under severe stress, and the risk of unpredictable collapse is significant. Again, both effective local action, and better ways of doing business at all levels, will be needed to avert future crises.

The tyranny of economic growth

"If we are to have enough for pasture and plough, we shall have to cut off a slice of our neighbour's territory. And if they too are no longer confining themselves to necessities and have embarked on the pursuit of unlimited material possessions, they will want a slice of ours too."

Plato, The Republic

The assumption that social and environmental benefits will automatically flow from economic growth is still widely held throughout the world. However, in many instances such benefits have not materialised, and growth has often occurred at the expense of community stability, people's rights and wellbeing, and the environment's carrying capacity. The production of rhetoric around sustainable development has become an industry in itself. But while progress has been made in tackling symptoms of the problem, the drivers of unsustainability remain entrenched.

While the desire for improvements in the quality of life is both understandable and important, the enormous hunger for economic growth is driven by other factors – in particular, the massive inequalities between rich and poor both within and between countries, the fear of being left behind in a cutthroat world, and a perceived inability to address these fears through any other means. This insatiable urge drives every other consideration before it, and leads to the production of lopsided policies and social choices.

As a result, the main signals used to steer the economy fail to reflect the costs to the environment, the benefits accruing from natural resources, and the implications for social justice and equity. Because these issues are externalised, they do not figure in mainstream planning for the future, or the balance sheets that determine whether we are going in the right direction. The reliance of the poor and powerless on vulnerable environmental assets means the costs they pay are disproportionate, but this is not taken into account in high-level decisions.

We believe it is time to adjust the price system so that it reflects the social values of the environment. This will require articulating clear goals, holding politicians to account and being very harsh on those who fail. Our economies cannot otherwise respond fully to the costs of climate change and ecosystem degradation. With these growing pressures, it is possible to push for a global rethink.

In place of this obsession with economic growth at all costs and by whatever means, it is important to shift attention to the quality of life. The availability of varied, productive, enjoyable, secure and environmentally benign livelihoods is crucial to increasing people's wellbeing. Yet in most countries, the political and entrepreneurial classes continue to make decisions and engage in actions that serve their own interests, leaving the poor even more vulnerable to any impacts arising from the degradation of natural resources.

The human factor: resilience and society

Generating sustainable livelihoods ultimately relies on a sound social fabric – that is, one with a solid social culture, a significant degree of shared values and a high level of knowledge and respect for nature and society.

We need to make stronger links between the resilience provided by these informal structures and the resilience of ecosystems to threats. Deliberate and concerted efforts should be made to identify, promote and document indigenous knowledge, practices and value systems that promote equity and sustainable development at local levels, in particular those of minority ethnic groups.

Sustainable livelihoods cannot be planned or controlled from the top. But they can and must be enabled, supported and strengthened. The most meaningful role for governments and NGOs here is to create an environment in which local communities can themselves go through a process of empowerment and maintain the processes and activities that contribute to their resilience.

A cluster of villages on western India's Arvari River have shown just how stunningly successful those activities can be. In response to severe drought in the 1980s, one village resurrected a traditional system of water harvesting – earthen dams known as *johads*. Their success inspired neighbouring communities to follow suit. Now, with no outside financial support or government guidance, the villages have collectively succeeded in keeping local water supplies viable through every drought.

Setting clear goals and measuring progress towards them are key in holding actors to account and penalising them where they fail. We believe it is also important to recognise and practise sustainable development by identifying the processes, capacities, investments and behaviours with the potential to lead to sustainable development appropriate to its local context and thus able to benefit the community and its environment.

Some of these will come from the formal sustainable development "industry" (for example, partnerships involving the private sector, government and civil society organizations that have led to soft policy change in forest and fisheries). Others will be highly specific to the local context, and not linked at all to international efforts. If we are not able to recognise the effectiveness of initiatives such as those along the Arvari River, we will miss the opportunity to learn from success – and run the risk that local achievements will dry up through lack of support and obstructions from higher levels of governance.

A 'to do' list for the future

"One thing we have learnt over the years is that neither doom-and-gloom scenarios nor destructive criticism will inspire people and governments to act. What is needed is a positive vision, a clear road map for getting from here to there, and a clear responsibility assigned to each of the many actors in the system."

Kofi Annan, former UN Secretary-General

There are a number of key objectives that need to be reached if we are to meet existing challenges and revitalise the concept of sustainable development. The four below focus on the underlying structural problems we have noted, which limit the potential for major change and distort our understanding of what constitutes progress.

1 Create incentives to invest, innovate and administer for the long term across a wide range of contexts

Sustainability is not central to the drivers of social and economic change in our societies. There are niche markets engaged in sustainable production and aimed at aware and affluent consumers, but the mainstream continues largely unchecked. Funding for scientific research that prioritises sustainability and provides essential knowledge is dwarfed by budgets for product development and subsidies for unsustainable activities. Environmental economists are seen as mavericks within the profession. And the priorities and criteria that shape public planning and administration seldom take into account longer-term limits and impacts.

The challenge is rather to identify levers and incentives that can stimulate steady, incremental shifts through rewarding investment and innovation for the long term. This requires a far-sighted perspective from decision-makers around the world, recognising the need for:

- Research that generates solutions to resource depletion and ecosystem degradation
- Incorporation of the real social and environmental costs of production, and removal of unsustainable subsidies
- Clear goals for our societies that can form the basis for ambitious measures of progress and penalties for failure
- Systems for public administration and expenditure that reinforce these priorities.

2 Create the means for bottom-up drivers of sustainability Local organisations have generated most best practice in development and environmental management. A Ring study of effective "civic entrepreneurship" from around the world found local organisations had been highly effective across an array of programmes in areas including forestry and agriculture.

So for governments and international donors, success on the ground in development and environmental management depends on more effective, pro-poor local organisations, including local government and civil society organisations. But they face a twin challenge: how to scale up local success stories while ensuring activities at other levels do not undermine local processes.

Success here will require a major shift in priorities and focus: recognising the significance of effective, accountable local initiatives; understanding more about how to support them and create an enabling environment in which they can be more effective; and revising institutions and objectives to deliver this support.

Among the tools that could help in scaling up the effectiveness of good local processes are watchdogs to monitor whether initiatives are delivering change which are accountable both downwards and upwards; training and structured sharing of lessons from other contexts to stimulate local action; and national legislation and support aimed at improving systems of governance and realisation of community and individual rights at local level.

Plan for uncertainty

We live in a rapidly changing world. Twenty years ago, India and China had little economic muscle and were both major recipients of development aid. Now these two, along with Brazil, Russia and South Africa (the BRICS countries) have emerged as major economic powers. Other technological advances, political shifts, diseases and threats now shape our lives in ways that were impossible for the Brundtland Commission to predict.

We need to realise that yesterday's solutions may not work for tomorrow's challenges. Much of the machinery of government and other organisations is still directed at 20th century problems, and is unable to cope with shifts such as the rapid reshaping of economies under globalisation, the rising risk of pandemics, rapid population shifts from rural to urban, and changes in communication technology.

The pace and unpredictability of change will not abate in the coming years, so the need is for systems designed to adapt to unforeseen shifts while staying true to the core objectives of social wellbeing and environmental integrity. As policy research organisations, the members of the Ring have a particular interest in contributing to this transition, both in our own countries and at the global level.

Procus on the impact of affluence as well as poverty Deprivation and marginalisation usually go hand in hand with poverty. For the poorest, access to environmental resources such as soils, pasture, forests and water is key to the security of livelihoods. Conversely, environmental hazards such as floods, drought and climate change have a disproportionately high impact on the poorest people and their communities. Market access for small-scale producers in developing countries is also of critical importance in building communities' sufficiency and increasing income.

While much of the Ring's work lies in recognising and enhancing the capacity of poor people to use their assets effectively, we also know that there are factors entirely beyond their control that can undermine success and exacerbate problems. The impacts of the rich on the environment and on market structures are of critical importance.

Yet we see very little evidence of coherence in the policies pursued by OECD countries, or by the elite in other parts of the world. On the one hand, they recognise the threats presented by poverty and inequality, as the Millennium Development Goals attest. On the other hand, they aggressively protect privileged ways of life and instruments that perpetuate poverty and inequality, for example unequal terms of trade, or agricultural subsidies that render poor producers uncompetitive. Overconsumption – mainly but not only by affluent people in developed countries – and the inefficient use of energy and natural resources are causing environmental degradation across borders. Globalisation is meanwhile exacerbating the process.

A better match between policy and practice is urgently needed at all levels of governance if we are to tackle these problems. This is not easy to achieve, and goes against the compartmentalised nature and narrow agendas of government departments, companies and intergovernmental institutions. It will also require changes to the lifestyles of the rich, an issue not currently on the political agenda. But without change, the problems of unsustainability will continue to mount, while efforts by powerful actors to tackle the symptoms will lose credibility.

The Ring: who we are

The Ring is an alliance of 13 renowned policy research organisations promoting sustainable development through collaborative research, dissemination and policy advocacy. The network was founded in 1991 in the build-up to the Rio Summit, and has developed as an informal space in which a community of like-minded organisations work together to achieve shared objectives.

Members of the Ring are based in five continents, with the majority in Africa, Asia and South America. The network's goal is to improve environment and development policy processes, and to increase the regional and local impact of organisations working on sustainable development issues.

In future, the Ring aims to increase its impact on international decision-making fora, particularly in three broad areas: climate change, trade and the future of sustainability as an influential concept.

The vision of the Ring is to promote and develop collaborative working in support of sustainable development through:

- Linking grassroots communities and policymakers
- Linking civil society and research agendas
- Sharing and disseminating knowledge and experience between the North and South, and between regions.

The added value of the Ring is gained from joint research and information sharing and lesson learning between Ring partners. This gives the Ring a unique regional and inter-regional perspective on major sustainable development issues.

The objective of the Ring is to ensure that international sustainable development policymaking and institutions are informed and influenced by local realities, and hence are supportive and enabling of local action.

Some dilemmas the Ring aims to tackle

- How to address the myth that environment is not a priority for poor countries facing urgent development challenges
- How to ensure the challenge of sustainability is properly "owned" by those whose single focus is development
- How, in a world driven by economic considerations, can a sustainability framework be put in place
- How markets can be encouraged to function so that economic signals favour sustainability rather than undermine it.

"The Ring is a significant network in international environmental affairs: first, as a group of experts who bring new ideas to decisionmakers and challenge the status quo; secondly, as an alliance of predominantly Southern organisations, who bring lessons and ideas from the local level into global debates; and thirdly, as a group that is committed to environmental issues, but recognises the importance of achieving shared development goals."

Achim Steiner, Executive Director of the UN Environment Programme

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Development Alternatives (DA, India) – www.devalt.org
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