



Toward Enabling and Inclusive Global Environmental Governance

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Abstract

Sustainable development has always been a compromise formulation that papered over real conflict between environment and development. Twenty years after Rio, the geopolitical climate is far less conducive to easy compromises. Given an embattled North and a rising South, particularly Asia, the language of zero sum conflict rather than positive sum cooperation is likely to prevail. Green growth offers one way to paper over these conflicts yet again, but it would be prudent to resist this temptation. There is incomplete buy-in to the green growth story, and some in the South are also concerned that this narrative will downgrade poverty alleviation and equity considerations from the sustainable development triad of environment, growth and distribution. In this context, Rio+20 can play a positive role by focusing on national and sub-national institutions and embracing a diversity of national political, institutional and legal contexts; seeking to impose uniformity is likely to chafe. Global efforts can play a supporting role by inducing normative change, stimulate national processes, and provide hooks for domestic policy actors. In addition, Rio+20 should ensure that inclusion of the weakest should remain firmly on the agenda. While the conversations may be difficult, Rio+20 will be most productive if it leads to engagement with fraught geopolitical issues than if, once again, these are papered over.

Keywords

climate change, energy, global environmental governance, India, Rio+20

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Rio+20 is aimed at renewing, refreshing, and updating the well-worn formulation of “sustainable development,” designed to reconcile competing pressures for economic development and environmental protection. However, sustainable development has always seemed an incomplete compromise that often allowed global policy makers to conflate continued discussion with productive outcome. Now, 20 years later, in striving for a new global narrative, what can we learn from the flaws of the last one? Also, in what ways does the dramatically different geopolitical context of 2012 versus 1992 matter? And given the lessons of the past and a different context, what could Rio+20 realistically accomplish?

As a framing device, sustainable development’s most useful contribution was signaling that development and environment need not be in conflict; it is the quality of the growth that matters to sustainable outcomes. Notably, the Earth Summit of 1992 was a departure point for subsequent, albeit halting, efforts to green industry, portions of which embraced this agenda. But this message does not, in practice, apply equally to all issues and concerns. In India, for example, struggles over the relative prioritization of a progressive new law providing rights for forest dwellers versus easy coal access for an energy-scarce economy forces difficult trade-offs. Internationally, global climate change negotiations have only proceeded fitfully because for many the issue is tied to conflict over allocation of carbon budgets. Sustainable development has not helped resolve these tensions, and by papering over them, may even have made resolution of them harder.

If forcing through agreement on conflicted issues was hard in the unipolar world of 1992, it has clearly become much more challenging in the multipolar world of 2012. In 1992, the G-77 and China were able to win a form of “hard” differentiation between the obligations of developed and developing countries in the climate negotiations. In December 2011, arguably the central narrative of the Durban talks was the concerted effort of industrialized countries to break down this divide and bind all countries together within a unitary legal framework. In 1992, the Earth Summit came in the wake of a lost decade for development for much of the South, which was reeling from debt-driven adjustment processes. A touch of magnanimity from the North—allowing a lag time for Southern action on global environmental problems—seemed in order.

Two decades later, the narrative is one of an embattled North—facing rolling financial crises, low growth rates, and structurally impoverished politics—negotiating a global landscape in which economic dynamism is concentrated in the South, and particularly resurgent Asia. With only a touch of hyperbole, academics are constructing scenarios of a new G-1—China. But for many countries in the South, the development battle is but half won. On climate change, for example, the dominant Indian view is that for the North to seek equivalent action from the South (implying equivalent responsibility), after two decades of failing to take action at home, is a scarcely disguised effort to keep newcomers down. There are, of course, different views and positions within each bloc. The EU is ahead of the rest of the west on climate change, and South Africa and Brazil have projected themselves as champions of global action among industrializing countries. Yet, on both sides, competition, much more rather

than cooperation, is the dominant mode of interaction. If the climate debate is any indicator, North–South divisions remain central to global environmental politics, and magnanimity, let alone generosity, is unlikely to characterize the Rio+20 discussions.

In this fraught geopolitical context, it will be tempting, once again, to conceal fractures and focus on the positive-sum aspects of the environment–development relationship. And a focus on “green growth” risks doing just that. There are at least two problems in treading this path.

First, there is incomplete faith in the green growth story. Will technological change, for example, enable a shift to a low-carbon future that is also low cost, or will there be an inevitable transition period when higher energy costs slow economies? It is precisely because there is unwillingness in both North and South to bear the risk of a high-cost transition to clean energy that a climate deal has been so intractable. Second, a predominant focus on green growth risks de-emphasizing focused efforts at poverty alleviation—in India inclusive, rather than green growth is the dominant mantra. For example, will efforts to promote renewable energy introduce greater costs that work against efforts at addressing energy poverty? They need not necessarily do so. Costs of an energy transition can be assigned disproportionately to the rich, but the objective, and the corresponding policy and institutional design, must be explicit. Green growth may de-emphasize an inclusion agenda.

So where to from here for Rio+20 and beyond? The answer lies in an appropriate structuring of the second part of the agenda: design of institutions for sustainable development. In a multipolar world, the prospect of national change driven by coordinated global agreement and action is highly unlikely. The primary focus needs to be on national institutions and policies, framed in ways that resonate in local contexts. In India, action on climate change in India is likely to take the form of a “cobenefits” driven approach, which explicitly forces consideration of policy options through the multiple objectives of economic growth, inclusion, greenhouse gas mitigation, and local environmental objectives. The trick will be to devise national and subnational institutional frameworks that stimulate creative policy options and provide a basis for making trade-offs explicit, and to move beyond simple formulation to effective implementation. The policy construct in the countries of the EU is likely to be very different, and focused on climate change and greenhouse gas mitigation as an overarching objective. The point is that efforts to develop a unitary construction for institutions to support sustainable development is likely to chafe; the outcomes of Rio+20 must be flexible enough to accommodate political, legal, and institutional diversity, while also facilitating learning across different approaches.

But this is not an argument for the irrelevance of the global level, far from it. Two approaches are worth striving for. First, global efforts can induce normative change, stimulate national processes, and provide hooks for domestic policy actors. For example, India’s efforts at promoting energy efficiency, while cast predominantly in national energy security terms under the cobenefits rubric, received an enormous fillip from the institutional mechanisms of the National Action Plan on Climate Change, itself a reaction to growing international pressure. The next 8 years of the climate

regime, from 2012 to 2020, will provide a critical test of whether the global community can construct soft law frameworks that achieve this creative dynamic, perhaps leading to a harder law framework in 2020.

Second, the institutions that emerge from Rio+20 should not only support green growth, yes, but also institutionalize inclusion as part of the agenda. The fragmented and incomplete governance of energy globally, for example, is ripe for a makeover. Although there exist institutions to improve supply security through global energy markets for oil, and a mode of networked governance is emerging around clean energy, the energy poverty agenda is almost entirely unrepresented at the global level. If the poverty lens continues to be the least powerful refractor of global policy choices, efforts at global policy coordination will be seen as increasingly illegitimate by many countries in the South, or at least by the marginalized within them.

Rio+20 is more likely to be useful if it enables hard conversations about inducing institutional change, than if it leads to celebrating partial commonalities and the papering over of fundamental disagreement. Placing national institutions and priorities on the front burner, crafting a supporting role for global institutions and processes, and making sure these explicitly support an inclusion agenda would be worthy goals to strive for.

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Bio

Navroz K. Dubash is a Senior Fellow at the Centre for Policy Research, a New Delhi based think tank. He works on a range of areas related to global environmental and energy governance, climate change, and is particularly interested in the intersection between national and global regulatory regimes. He is a member of India's Expert Committee on Low Carbon Strategies for Inclusive Growth, and is also a Lead Author for the Fifth Assessment Report of the IPCC.