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IISDCOMMENTARY

*Life After Rio: A commentary by Mark Halle, IISD**

June 23 and the planet continues its slow decline, unimpressed by the sustainable development summit that has just finished in Rio. Yet another UN mega-conference ends in disappointment, the low expectations fully justified. Once again, our governments have failed to demonstrate leadership, have lacked courage to make the compromises necessary to ensure a fairer, more stable world. Once again they have kept their eyes riveted on short-term electoral deadlines and sold out future generations. We have come to a sorry pass.

When, two years ago, the UN decided to hold this conference, there was no particular reason for it except that the twentieth anniversary of the original Earth Summit was looming. There were plenty of general reasons, including the fact that most of the decisions taken in 1992 have been ignored, most of the agreed actions never taken, and the planet has continued to decline. But nothing suggested that the necessary political will could be mustered to take transformative steps, to agree game-changing resolutions, or even to stimulate implementation of the myriad decisions, resolutions and undertakings that were made in Rio in 1992 or in the two decades since.

Instead, we pinned our hopes on the losing prospect that global expectations for Rio, the presence of Heads of State or Government, and the sheer mass of talent concentrated in one place at one time could effect breakthroughs for which our normal political processes have proved inadequate. But if this once worked, it no longer does. Heads of State are perfectly content to make flowery speeches, hobnob with their peers, and head home to face the electorate. Mass is no longer majesty, and large conferences, far from generating momentum, have, in the words of one commentator, become "too big to succeed." Global expectations of large UN conferences have, with considerable justification, sunk to very low levels on the back of repeated disappointment.

Things began to go wrong in the preparatory process. Groups of governments camped firmly on their positions; the UN secretariat offered no vision and little mobilizing power and failed to generate the funding needed to put together a proper team. And the host country, Brazil, never gave the sense that this conference was a high political priority. Instead, it looked very much as if it was more a dress rehearsal for the upcoming football World Cup and the Rio Olympic Games.

Despite adding extra negotiating sessions, only about one-seventh of the draft outcome document was agreed before the delegates assembled in Rio. Clearly, there was no way to complete negotiations in time for Heads of State to flourish the pen. So the Brazilians pulled a text from their back pockets and offered it on a "take it or leave it" basis to the stunned delegates. Leaving it would have meant a huge, public failure and, for many countries, an affront to their Brazilian ally. Taking meant giving up aspirations, but not much in reality since the text is free of genuine commitments. Accepting the text and declaring the conference a success was the easy way out, and the one taken.

* This commentary is the opinion of the author, and does not necessarily represent the considered views of the Institute.

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What's in the Outcome Document?

So what can we conclude from the outcome document, the fruit of tens of thousands of person-hours of effort, the expenditure of tens of millions of dollars, and the repository of so many hopes and aspirations for saving our planet?

Roughly one-third of the text consists of reaffirmation of decisions taken previously. In these reaffirmations, we declare that what we said before is still valid, that these aspirations still exist. By not slipping backwards and by not actually losing ground on these issues, we can to some extent hold the line. Some would say that, in the present global atmosphere of suspicion and mistrust, this is a positive result. If it is, expectations have sunk appallingly low.

Roughly another third of the text spells out considerations that governments should bear in mind in advancing along their development paths. These include the rights of indigenous peoples, the requirements of food security, the special problems of Small Island and landlocked States, and many, many more. While these considerations are no doubt worthy, they do not amount to new visions, new understandings or, sadly, new commitments. They simply spell out our understanding of what good development comprises.

The final third of the outcome document consists of language, mostly familiar but sometimes new, that identifies priorities in a wide array of areas ranging from oceans, cities and food security to water, sustainable consumption, economic development and institutional design. This is the section of the text on which most will focus. It is not that it embodies firm undertakings or calls for action that are targeted, specific and accountable. It is more that it offers hooks on which different stakeholders can hang their hopes. By referring to the specific language in the outcome document, they can claim that their special topic was endorsed by the world's governments in Rio and therefore constitutes a legitimate priority for attention.

The two central themes of the Rio Conference—the green economy and governance reform—fared poorly, in particular the latter. Hopes that the world community would anoint the green economy as the new guiding paradigm of economic development were dashed early on in the preparatory process when much of the developing world expressed severe doubts about it, fearing a resurgence of trade protection, a dominance of rich-country technology, and a commoditization of nature. In the end, the question was whether the notion would even secure a mention in the final text and the fact that it does—that it is offered as an option for countries to consider—is considered a success. It certainly is, considering the alternative.

The real disappointment comes in the failure of the conference to agree on any serious reform of sustainable development governance. If there is a consensus on anything in the international system, it is that the configuration of organizations, conventions and forums dealing with sustainable development is overlapping, inefficient and unresponsive to the fundamental needs. But 60 years of reform ambition have unearthed another immutable rule: that the multilateral system is in essence unreformable. It is possible to add new organizations, forums or processes to the existing maelstrom, but it is impossible to shift what is already there in any fundamental way.

Rio reaffirmed this rule. Efforts to upgrade UNEP by giving it a higher institutional status failed. The only genuine achievement was to give UNEP universal membership, something that in effect it had already and that is, in any case, a dubious gain. For the rest, UNEP will have to pick apart and analyze the language of the outcome document in the hope of finding something resembling a determination to treat it with more respect.

Nor did the New York end fare much better. The moribund CSD is put out of its misery after 20 years of underperformance; it will be replaced by some form of "high-level forum" whose shape and content is still to be defined. The debate now moves back to the shark pool of the New York UN community for resolution. How it will end up is uncertain, but on past record, it will join the long list of disappointments that the UN community has chalked up over the past decades.

A process was put in place to adopt Sustainable Development Goals by 2015. If successful and if set within a strong accountability framework, these goals might deliver on the specificity that Rio lacked. But this process, too, goes back to New York and will be tossed around on the political currents before sailing into harbour.

So what was good?

It is, of course, short-sighted to see Rio only through the lens of the official process and the conference in which it culminated. The vast majority of the participants did not come for that; certainly, they hoped that by some miracle Rio would prove to be a game-changer, but they came for something else.

Rio and similar events are, like the annual gathering of gypsy groups in the French Camargue, an important gathering of the tribes, a get-together of the vast and diverse community involved in the search for a better future. Without events like Rio, it is unlikely that they would come together in the same way at any other forum. So what is the value in this assemblage and interaction?

It is, of course, impossible to measure, so anyone can make whatever claim they wish. The networking that goes on is certainly precious; so is the exposure to other ideas, whether from business groups, indigenous peoples, or global think tanks. Rio served as a vast trade fair through which the curious could wander, taking in an exhibit here, a workshop or teach-in there, hearing about experiences often far from their own, and understanding better the issues some stakeholders face. It served as an open university at which you could expose your own ideas and proposals or learn from others. This certainly has some value; indeed, it is undoubtedly the most (and some would say only) valuable thing about the Rio events.

Was it worth it?

In the collective disappointment there were many who felt it was good that we didn't slip back, that we held the line. Many firmly believe that the seeds planted in Rio will bear fruit, that initiatives started here will develop and flourish, and it is certainly true that the value of Rio will only become clear in the next two to three years. Others extolled the energy that was evident everywhere except the official negotiations and came away enriched and inspired by the many encounters and ideas received. Others simply had fun, looking forward to dinners, parties, samba evenings or walks on Rio's wonderful beaches. And it is important not to lapse into jaded cynicism because the world did not take a great leap forward towards sustainable development.

There were, and always are, silver linings, and glittering bits of mica in the general dross. But it is important to step back as the Rio phenomenon fades and to remember that there are massive opportunity costs associated with the process and event, and that these must be justified by the outcomes.

This is where Rio really falls down. The event was called simply because an anniversary was approaching, not because the international community was building towards important consensus on key issues and required a high-level event

to secure the necessary breakthroughs. The preparations took up a huge amount of time and engaged a massive expenditure in travel, meetings, side events, exhibits and consultations. That was time and money not spent on alternative approaches. Given that it secured essentially nothing in terms of new engagement for sustainability, the process must be deemed a failure even on its own terms. It is like setting out to build a high-speed rail link between two distant cities and ending up asking people to be satisfied that the station signs received a fresh coat of paint.

Worse still, this failure is not an isolated one. Although it reached a consensus conclusion, what happened in Rio is a mirror of what happened at the climate change summit in Copenhagen, and resembles the failure of the last few WTO ministerial meetings. Far from being a sad exception, low expectations and disappointment in global intergovernmental process have become the new norm, at least when success requires consensus on economic policy. We can no longer afford years of straining that ends up giving birth to a mouse.

What can we do to move forward?

If the approach is not working, surely we must change it. So why are we failing and what can we do to fix it? The first observation is that the principal problem lies with national governments, and particular the groupings in which they congregate to negotiate. The rich OECD countries can no longer effectively impose their will on the rest; the G77 group of developing countries has even more problems in holding to their common positions. Everyone observes the new pride and confidence of the emerging economies—in particular China, Brazil and India—but the groupings to which they belong (BRICS, BASIC) have in common only the fact that they are all, well, emerging. They continue to have vastly different foreign policy interests and do not represent a credible negotiating group. So the old order is fading but the new order has not yet taken its place. We are in abeyance, and this explains much of the negotiation failure.

Further, international negotiation is perceived, especially by the developing countries, as having been long on promise and short on delivery. Nothing in all that we have achieved over the past decades has changed the basic inequity in the international system. That countries like China and Brazil can grow rich is a meagre consolation to poor countries like Malawi or Bangladesh. Impatience with the failure to address the equity agenda has been steadily growing and it has now reached the point where it is simply blocking all progress at the international level, whether in UNCTAD, in WTO, in climate change or in Rio. Every issue involving equity in the Rio process was contentious, and none of them was resolved except by draining the language of all genuine content.

If we are to move forward multilaterally, we will have to begin, finally, to address the glaring gaps between rich and poor countries, and the rich and poor within countries. And since we do not seem ready to do that, we must put a stop to the massive waste of money represented by events like the Rio conference. If our governments are not prepared to move towards sustainability, it is better that our voting populations know this. Calling a failure a success—even a guarded success—is to paper over the ever-widening cracks in the system.

So the first conclusion we must reach is that we should call a moratorium on all global multilateral negotiations on the environment and begin to address the thousands of unfulfilled promises and commitments we have made. To do so would be to build a momentum of success that would once again instill hope and belief among our populations. The various meetings, conferences of the parties, etc. should continue to convene, but with the single purpose of addressing the implementation gap and of raising confidence that there is a direct link between promise and fulfilment.

The second conclusion is that our intergovernmental structures are tired, lack vision and courage, and are increasingly left behind by the natural momentum of creativity and innovation in our societies. Worse still, there can no longer be any doubt that they are to all intents and purposes unreformable. Instead of once again launching attempts to streamline the UN system, we should simply assume that coordination, efficiency, accountability, responsible use of scarce funds, good governance and transparent process are now and always will be elusive goals and act accordingly. We should put our money and effort into organizations and processes that are not exclusively government-based.

If we follow these two recommendations, where should we then put our efforts? The good news, and the principal grounds for hope in the future, is that in the face of intergovernmental intransigence and lethargy, the world has not stood still. Instead, it has spawned an explosion of creativity and innovation that is truly impressive.

If national governments have found it difficult to progress, this is not true of sub-national jurisdictions. The movement among states, provinces, megacities and municipalities is taking off with the speed of a rocket, making commitments to the green economy or to climate change action that are truly inspiring. And even national governments, acting regionally, begin to feel that they may make more progress within the region than they can make globally.

The same is true of the private sector. For all the problems still associated with corporate activity, there is more advanced strategic thinking, more deep analysis of problems, more attachment to innovative thinking in the corporate sector than is evident in inter-governmental dialogue.

And, as always, civil society in its diversity and flexibility represents an untapped force which, if harnessed, would wield incredible power. Yet it is extremely difficult to herd the swarm of cats that civil society resembles. They cover the spectrum from multinational centres of intellectual power through to fronts for religions and a wide variety of cranks of all shapes, colours and smells. It is their connection to the ground level, to communities and local interests that gives them their particular strength and value.

So, on the one hand, we have a government-based process that is hopelessly stuck in the mud. On the other we have a mass of energy, creativity and strength that is not only committed to action but raring to go if only we can find the forms and channels to harness it. This, surely, is the creative field of endeavour for the future.

Upon this gifted age, in its dark hour,
Rains from the sky a meteoric shower
Of facts ... they lie unquestioned, uncombined.
Wisdom enough to leech us of our ill
Is daily spun; but there exists no loom
To weave it into fabric ...

Edna St. Vincent Millay

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IISD's vision is better living for all—sustainably; its mission is to champion innovation, enabling societies to live sustainably. IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c)(3) status in the United States. IISD receives core operating support from the Government of Canada, provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA), the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and Environment Canada, and from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations and the private sector.

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