

Toward a World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2012

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"We can't solve problems by using the same kind of thinking we used when we created them."
Albert Einstein

On the 4th of November 2008, the G-77 and China tabled a motion at the General Assembly calling for the organisation of a World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2012. Later that month, representatives of governments, stakeholders and UN agencies were invited to a workshop in San Sebastian, Spain, to consider the opportunities and challenges of holding such a summit. The outcome of that meeting is summarized in the Donostia Declaration – a 'non paper' intended to stimulate discussion on the focus and structure of a Summit in 2012.

Subsequently, on the 24th February 2009, during the Intergovernmental Preparatory Meeting for CSD-17 in New York, Stakeholder Forum convened an informal dinner to stimulate further discussion on the possibility of a summit. The gathering was attended by 22 individuals from seventeen national governments, three non-governmental organisations, one independent consultancy and one university. All participated in their personal capacity under 'Chatham House Rules'.

Participants expressed genuine appreciation for the opportunity to have a focused discussion with colleagues on the important idea of a summit. While several were ready to fully endorse a summit, others were hesitant or still evaluating the prospect of one. Several key themes emerged from the discussions. It is hoped that the following summary will provide valuable food for thought to assist all who are considering the idea of a world summit in 2012.

The meeting was chaired by a senior coordinator from the NGO community. The gathering was opened with two introductions. The first speaker presented the Donostia Declaration and identified a number of features that a summit could address and mechanisms by which those issues could be introduced within the context of an intergovernmental meeting of this scale:

- The UN Secretary General could set up a High Level Commission or Panel to identify key elements for a Global Green New Deal which would input to the summit process in 2011.
- The summit might address key critical issues under the banner of Human, Economic and Environmental 'In-Security' – that is, global insecurity over issues such as increased consumption patterns, urban growth, food, water, energy, health, migration, climate, resource availability and economics, which are going to impact all countries with increasing frequency.
- The review of Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) could be undertaken through this new lens of Human, Economic and Environmental 'In-security'.
- The UNEP-initiated Ministerial Working Group on International Environmental Governance (IEG) could report to the UNEP 2010 GMEF and that meeting could adopt a Ministerial Declaration on IEG principles and goals and then work on producing input to the Earth Summit 2012 on the reorganisation of IEG.
- There could also be a process initiated to re-evaluate sustainable development governance issues such as the CSD.
- Both IEG and Sustainable Development Governance (SDG) will need to include climate governance issues.

- Potential products of the summit could include two conventions; one on access to information, participation and environmental justice (Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration); and one on corporate accountability.
- Another potential outcome could be agreement on an Earth Charter.
- A model of 'web 2.0' – utilized effectively by the Barrack Obama presidential campaign in the U.S. – could be used to engage the motivated individuals in the summit and in the delivery of its outcome.

The other introduction was made by an ambassador mandated to speak formally for his / her government on what it would like to see a summit address. (S)he noted that a new United Nations conference on sustainable development is needed in order to create the political momentum required for concentrating disparate actions, channelling efforts and taking broad-reaching decisions on the sustainable development agenda. Three aspects seem to be bound to contribute to the success of a summit in 2012:

- The signs that the major actor is ready to re-engage in multilateral negotiations, especially when it comes to sustainable development;
- The financial crisis which, even as constituting a major stress for the global economy, calls for the re-evaluating the role of the State as regulator; and
- Provides the optimal opportunity to launch a "green economy" and planned growth in the context of sustainable development.

A Rio+20 Summit in 2012 would provide a time-frame for achieving concrete results stemming from specific policies and actions. The meeting would serve, in this regard, as a stimulus for action. The following areas and actions were identified for consideration:

- Conduct a review of IEG
- Examine and renew, at the highest level, the long-term political commitments made since the Rio Summit and review the fulfilment of the commitments deriving from the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI);
- Address the gaps in implementation of Agenda 21 and the Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs).

After the two opening introductions the dialogue was opened to the table. In order to guide the conversation a set of seven potential obstacles, or arguments for not holding a Summit had been identified by the organisers, and these were used to stimulate discussion (see Annex 1). The following text identifies some of the common themes that seemed to have emerged from the discussion, to which virtually all attendees contributed. It is important to stress however that there was only the one chance to tackle each of the seven potential obstacles in the two hour discussion, and much work still needs to be undertaken to consider them in more depth.

On the Newly Emerging Spirit of International Co-operation:

The election of President Obama in the United States has potentially created a new spirit of international co-operation. The support of the new administration for the UN and multilateral processes will enable more issues to be addressed in a practical and focused way. It was noted however that President Obama does not favour vague ideological theorizing, and demands pragmatic results that have a tangible effect: 'Real actions that yield real impacts for real people.'

On the Need for Global Governance:

Many attendees raised the concern that we have experienced an overall crisis in governance. There is a growing sense that we are living through a very sensitive and difficult period. People are anxious about crises that touch all of us. This growing anxiety at the global level would benefit from institutions that help provide confidence that people's worries are being addressed.

Many raised the issue of International Environmental Governance (IEG) and Sustainable Development Governance (SDG) and welcomed the setting up of a Ministerial Working Group by the UNEP Governing Council to look at IEG that was based on the General Assembly informal consultative process on IEG, Options Paper. A number of participants commented approvingly on the speech by South African Minister of Environment and Tourism on IEG at the UNEP GC calling for the next UNEP Global Ministers Environmental Forum to adopt a Ministerial Declaration (the first since Malmo in 2000) on the Principles and Goals of IEG. This would lead to a three year process on IEG and run up to a summit.

The issue of SDG was also raised and, in particular, the lack of impact the UN CSD has had. Some proposed re-evaluating the position of the Commission in the UN system and perhaps elevating it to a Council of the General Assembly, in the same way as the Human Rights Council, in order that it might deal with critical and emerging issues and mainstream sustainable development in the UN system as a whole.

A view was expressed that the world needs to manage its interdependence more effectively and find more effective structures and frameworks by which to do so. With the potential rebirth of multilateralism, the international community needs rules and regulations to shape economic actions. An interesting point raised was that the days of the regulation versus deregulation argument are over; now the question is, what type of regulation?

It was also noted that what needs to emerge is a new set of incentives for clean energy and a technological revolution that is shared with all.

On Common but Differentiated Responsibilities:

Major developed countries are signalling that they are now ready to accept the principle of common but differentiated responsibility – but that developing countries will have to take some responsibilities for action. One participant noted they see differentiation as meaning the developed countries must undertake all the action. Other participants commented that developing countries are willing to take on their share of responsibility – but are waiting to see developed countries take real action.

In the climate change debate, developing countries are already taking action responsibility. The Bali Action Plan framework is clear; differentiation is required if action is to be taken. It was also noted that for a summit to produce meaningful outcomes, we would need to disband the perceived division of the world into developing and developed countries.

On Inter-linkages:

Underpinning much of the discussion was the recognition of inter-linkages between many of the issues that might be addressed by a summit. The food crisis and biofuels offer a clear example of the need for integrated thinking. Such inter-linkages should be included as part of any new agenda. A key

characteristic of sustainable development is that it links economic and social development with environmental protection.

On Financial Constraints:

Many noted that the world is likely to be emerging from the recession after 2012, and thus will be in a better position to afford any new financial commitments that may stem from a summit. Others commented that preparations for a 2012 summit will have to begin during the current recession and resource constraints are a reality that will have to be faced by all.

On the Importance of Focus and Measurable Outcomes:

A number of attendees raised the question of whether a summit should take on a broad or specific agenda. It was mostly agreed that results will need to be focused on implementation and clear targets. A summit looking forward, perhaps to 2030, would enable an apposite Plan of Implementation to be drawn up. There was general support for an 'Agenda 21' type document to come out of such a summit which has a clear narrative of why an issue is important, what activities need to be undertaken and the means of implementation to do them and who will do them. It was noted that a targeted agenda will be necessary.

Inclusion of all Stakeholders:

Building levels of public support as experienced in the Rio Conference was thought to be critical. The use of communications technology, such as Web 2.0, could provide a creative way to engage the public in the process and for them then to become agents of implementation after a summit. Generating the public political will requires the involvement of all Major Groups and the media. If they can effectively be included in preparations from the beginning it will be more likely to succeed.

On Summit Fatigue:

Regarding the question of summit fatigue, it was pointed out that the issue of weariness is not so much over summits in general, but summits that fail. Summits that achieve results are welcomed. A number of the younger participants felt it was the time for their generation to have its attempt at idealistic cooperation, and that maybe they will produce a better result than those of the past.

On the Importance of Strong Preparation and Real Outcomes:

What can a summit achieve? Success on a normative level: Rio launched some of the most important processes related to sustainable development including Agenda 21, the Rio Principles, major conventions on climate change, biodiversity and desertification, as well as the Forest Principles. It also helped launch and establish the notion that stakeholder engagement within the UN policy discussions would result in better informed decisions by governments. It also set up of the UN CSD as a new functioning Commission on the UN Economic and Social Council. A summit in 2012 should be equally ambitious.

There was some discussion on using the summit process as a review, but many felt the present context required a new paradigm. It would be preferable to avoid the 'blame game' and to instead focus on generating a forward-looking conference which could galvanise a generation.

Furthermore, a summit would provide an invaluable opportunity to generate a new political momentum for sustainable development, in which case it will require a strong preparatory process. The model used

for the 1992 Earth Summit should be replicated, which would require starting expert working groups and a preparatory process up to two years prior to the meeting.

Finally, it was stressed that goals for a summit should be very tangible and universally understandable, not just meaningless words.

On the Desire Not to Distract from or Delay Progress Elsewhere:

We need to be aware of the danger that preparations for a summit might distract attention from dealing with issues at hand. It was emphasised that the summit should not go for 'low hanging fruit' and interfere with processes that are already well underway, such as those surrounding climate and biodiversity. The CSD process on Sustainable Consumption and Production will need to be protected.

We will also need to address the future of the remaining CSD cycle. There was no common view expressed on the issue (some suggestions are to be found in the Annex to the Donostia Declaration).

On the Challenge of a Complex Agenda

Sustainable Development is a complex issue and the inter-linkages must be understood. It was suggested that climate change may turn out to be the easiest challenges we will have to address in the coming years because there are clear technological solutions. By comparison, issues such as the running out of minerals and biodiversity do not present immediate answers.

On the Options Facing Humanity:

A participant commented that the world is at a critical juncture. Under pressure of the parallel crises of economics and climate change nations risk acting out of fear and turning to an 'each-to-their-own' style of nationalism, not just on the economic level but politically and culturally as well, which would have drastic implications for the future. Alternatively, nations and people could choose to act out of hope and confidence, and work together toward a common understanding – a global expression of "Yes we can". After years of mistrust, we stand at a pivotal point at which there is a real opportunity for renewed commitment for generating a positive and progressive outcome. A 2012 summit could provide a platform on which to vocalise that renewed belief that change can indeed happen.

It was noted that a major element of the success of the first Earth Summit in 1992, was its organizers systematic engagement not only of governments but of businesses, NGOs, academics and the media. It was the combined energy of the different sectors and stakeholders that helped create the political momentum that allowed governments to take bigger steps than even they had anticipated.

We would need to replicate that same broad, popular involvement in a 2012 summit in order to build political constituencies and a dynamic that could enable it to achieve success at negotiations and the will to implement them, there and in the years following. Whilst not the direct province of governments, the design of the planning process could go far to empowering the summit.

Like all sustainable development fora, a 2012 summit would include an amorphous mix of issues and actors. As such, there is a danger that other conferences, summits and agendas might collide and be disrupted. However, it was also noted that an 2012 summit could provide the space for the necessary integration and joined-up-thinking which has long been called for from all quarters.

A participant commented that a summit would be the one place that could integrate the energy of the UNFCCC, the environmental actions of the CBD, the social policy imperatives of the MDGs, and the financial actions to confront the global financial crisis. It could complement the actions of the more sectoral meetings by enabling opportunities for implementation and integration of their decisions.

The summit therefore could be a platform where we can pull together all these issues, in a way that is framed not as a battle between countries, but a vision for how humanity can work together. Another speaker added that (s)he sensed the world was indeed ready for a global paradigm shift.

On Success:

Maurice Strong, Secretary General of both the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment and the 1992 Earth Summit, once commented that when you gather world leaders on such a scale you have two possible outcomes: success and real success. If there are tangible goals which can be aimed for and achieved, let us do it. If the political will or objectives are lacking, it is not worth the frustration. We must resolve that question.

Some in the meeting shared their worries regarding the summit, but many recognized that critical issues are facing us and we will need to address them either in a summit or another yet undefined way. Ending the dinner, the view was echoed that we can either do it together or, as our options close off, the world will look quite different. We are living in worrying times. Human, economic and environmental security are key issues. The Rio Summit managed to generate energy in support of sustainability. If we can tap the [new] emerging spirit of cooperation and action, a whole generation could join in and lend impetus to the effort.

Annex 1

Tabled reasons for not convening a 2012 summit:

1. The upcoming CSD cycle on Sustainable Consumption and Production and the Marrakesh process is critical and we cannot let other issues or processes seriously disrupt or derail that agenda.
2. Is it really possible to address the problems on IEG – as the three processes that were started in the last few years have all ground to a halt?
3. Do we need another review of Agenda 21 and JPOI or should it be focused on critical new issues?
4. It is a costly endeavour, and such a project may be used solely for the purpose of trying to engender more money to development projects and divert it from the sustainable development/environment agenda.
5. By 2010 the Summit on the MDGs will take place, and a 2012 summit will only duplicate that work.
6. There is a general feeling among all governments of 'summit fatigue'.
7. There is a fear (expressed by some) that a 2012 summit may be used to weaken a possible strong outcome from the Copenhagen COP 15 negotiations.