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It'll take more than markets to build a green future

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ODYSSEY ACROSS THE CONTINENTS: The 'Earth from Above' exhibition as part of events during the upcoming Rio+20 summit.

AFP

The U.N. appointed panel's report on global sustainability is just not enough

In August 2010, the U.N. Secretary General set up a "High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability," to formulate a "new vision for sustainable growth and prosperity" for the world. Co-chaired by the Presidents of Finland and South Africa, the panel submitted its detailed report in January 2012. The report is under consideration in the Secretary General's office, and will be a key input to the upcoming U.N. Conference on Sustainable Development (the so-called 'Rio+20' event coming up in June in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil).

But how "new" is the panel's new vision, and how much does it break away from the current model of development that is clearly leading humanity towards massive ecological, social, and economic breakdown?

The Secretary General gave the panel a very broad mandate: it had the opportunity to redefine notions of human well-being, progress, and development. The panel comprised mostly heads of state and ministers, or former ministers, with the odd scientist (connected to government) thrown in.

And so we have a report that goes a certain distance in critiquing the current pathways of development — and recommending measures to "green" them — but stopping well short of the fundamental rethinking that is so desperately needed. In this sense, it fits well into the current negotiations towards what governments will come out with at Rio+20: a push for a "green economy," and for increasing reliance on market mechanisms to solve environmental and developmental problems.

Some optimism

The panel report has many positive elements. It admits that the "current global developmental model is unsustainable," notes the growing inequalities between the poor and the rich, and minces no words when it states such failures are a result of lack of political will. As part of its recommendations, it repeatedly stresses women's and youth empowerment, which is most welcome. It urges full respect for human rights, a move towards green and dignified jobs, universal education access, integrated governmental planning, regular reporting on sustainable development using multiple indicators, combining food, water and energy for sustainable agriculture, the spread of relevant technologies, the greening of finance, doing away with environmentally destructive subsidies (like India's for chemical fertilizers) and a close interface between science and policy. It stresses that governments must fulfil their responsibilities in all this, while seeking "stakeholder" participation.

So far, so good, but unfortunately, simply not enough. While the report talks about the need for democratic

governance, it does not stress that this should mean devolution of powers to each local settlement, to decide on their issues. It does not advocate even partial delinking of the local from the global, though it is now widely known that communities are increasingly vulnerable to the vagaries of national and global markets and politics, and though it is also widely known that they can, at least for many of their basic needs, be self-reliant. It does not explicitly challenge the obscene power of the private corporate sector, nor even demand that this sector be strictly regulated; rather, it talks of involving businesses more in a voluntary way. As if the corporations ripping off the planet are suddenly going to become moist-eyed on reading this report and suddenly become ecological heroes.

Concomitant with this, the report gives a great deal of space to financial and market solutions to the multiple crises, even though there is so much accumulated evidence that these often don't work, and certainly don't work to empower the poor.

Statistics

Here's an interesting set of statistics. The term "private sector" appears over 50 times in the report; add to this the words "businesses" and "corporations," and it crosses 70. The term "local communities" appears only seven times; perhaps extended to about 20 where the word "communities" is used to mean the same. The term "indigenous people" appears only once, that too to simply point to their continued marginalisation; they don't come anywhere in the recommendations. Of course, "civil society" and "stakeholders" come several more times, but these generic terms don't mean much, and could easily be interpreted by governments as anything. The complete failure of the panel to acknowledge the importance of empowering and learning from indigenous peoples (just about the only people who have shown long-term sustainability in their living) is astounding. Not only this, the report does not even once mention traditional or indigenous knowledge; all its attention goes to modern science.

An unprecedented opportunity for a very high-level focus on an alternative vision of human well-being has been missed. In a way, this is not a surprise, given the composition of the panel. No independent civil society member, no indigenous people's or local community representative. This is not to say that ministers are not capable of thinking out of the box; but this team did not quite manage it, and the governments where there is some really innovative thinking happening — Bolivia, Cuba and Ecuador — were not represented. Nor did the panel hold widespread consultations with civil society, indigenous peoples, though it did consult with some critical thinkers and practitioners.

India's Rural Development Minister, Jairam Ramesh, was a member of the panel. At a very early, informal meeting when he joined it, some civil society members had given inputs on how the panel could learn from the thousands of path-breaking, innovative initiatives in India and elsewhere, showing that there are fundamentally different ways of achieving human well-being, while respecting the Earth.

But then, when he and his government are not learning from these within India itself, it's pointless to expect a panel comprising ministers who are pushing the "economic growth" line in their own countries — with some honourable exceptions — to do something very different. If the U.N. Secretary General is serious about conceiving a vision of the future that will be truly sustainable and equitable, he needs to look elsewhere.

(The author is with Kalpavriksh.)

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