

The Future Who Wants? A brief critique of the Rio+20 zero draft

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The zero draft of the Rio+20 outcome document, 'The Future We Want', has a number of positive elements, including:

- A frank admission of the failure to achieve sustainable development, and of the continuing crises of environmental degradation, poverty, and food insecurity.
- A renewed commitment to ecological sustainability, poverty eradication, and equity.
- Explicit acknowledgement of the importance of diversity, culture, and harmony with nature.
- Stress on various elements of 'greening' the economy, including renewable energy, phasing out of perverse subsidies that promote ecologically destructive practices in energy, agriculture, and fisheries.

However, it falls far short of pointing to an effective pathway out of the multiple crises the world faces, steering clear of the hard decisions that all countries need to take.

Root causes not identified: While admitting the failure to attain sustainability and other goals, it does not diagnose this failure. It is therefore silent on the root causes of the multiple crises we face: a fundamentally flawed notion of 'development', centralised and top-heavy governance systems, alienation from nature, the inability to reign in private corporations and profligate consumerism by the rich, and widening inequities of various kinds.

Economic growth not challenged: While talking of sustainability, it continues to place faith in 'economic growth', even though it is patently clear that the earth can simply not sustain a model that advocates continuous growth. It fails to suggest even an exploration of the various alternative macro-economic strategies that have been suggested, to achieve human welfare while sustaining the ecological systems of the earth, much less putting countries on a firm path to such alternative futures.

Outdated indicators still relied on: Linked to the above, it continues its faith on GDP as a measure of well-being, even though suggesting complementing this with other indicators; it fails to take into account the various alternative paradigms of assessing well-being which move away from GDP-like measures.

Even sustainable development only a partial strategy: It advocates incorporating sustainable development strategies in national development plans, rather than committing to the complete conversion the latter into plans for sustainability; does this mean that national plans can have some or many strategies that are not oriented to sustainability?

Profligate consumerism not challenged: It talks of sustainable production and consumption, but makes no explicit mention of the enormously wasteful consumerism of the industrial countries and of the rich in ‘developing’ countries, and advocates no measures to rein in this profligacy.

Private sector still wooed: It is exceedingly soft on the private sector, repeatedly talking of its role in achieving sustainable, not once acknowledging its enormous failure to adhere to principles of sustainability and equity, and not advocating binding regulations on this sector (rather, adopting language like “strongly *encourage* business and industry”; or “require ... private companies to *consider* sustainability issues” (italics mine)).

No central role for indigenous peoples and local communities: Contrarily, it gives no central governance role to indigenous peoples and other ecosystem-dependent local communities, who are the ones who have most shown the ability to live in harmony with nature, and who have a lot to teach those of us who have moved far away from sustainability or one-ness with nature (though it does acknowledge the importance of the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples).

Democratic governance changes half-hearted: Related to this is its weakness in advocating major governance changes towards a deeper, radical democracy, and political decentralisation, in which all citizens have the right and ability to participate in decision-making; and emanating from this, fundamental changes in governance of global institutions like the UN to include the voices of peoples and communities and not only nation-states.

Toothless monitoring of sustainable development goals: It proposes a set of sustainable development goals and a mechanism to monitor follow-up on these, but does not lay down any mechanism to take corrective action when countries do not meet these goals; in so doing, it continues the current inequity between international environmental agreements (most of which have no effective enforcement mechanism) and trade/economic agreements (which have various enforcement mechanisms including sanctions).

Trade regimes still unsustainable: It continues to place reliance on institutions like the WTO, though such a trade regime has been shown time and again to be against the principles of sustainability and equity; it fails to advocate a regime of trade, local to global, that stands squarely on such principles rather than on the imperatives of profit-making and economic domination.

Ethics of protecting nature missing: Finally, while acknowledging the need to protect our “life support system” and live “in harmony with nature”, it does not put this as an ethical imperative, by stressing that nature and all species are to be protected in their own right and not only because they are of use to humanity.

Without the above aspects, any global agreement or declaration arrived at in Rio this May, is likely to push ‘business as usual’ more than a genuine, effective path to

sustainability and equity. If the latter has to be achieved, we need a very different, much bolder, vision and statement.

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