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# 18 months after Rio+20 – did the conference have any impact at all?

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## Introduction

Tens of thousands of people representing governments, civil society, NGOs and many other pressure groups gathered, trying to build on the momentum of 1992. When we came back from Rio, disappointment dominated, both in our media releases as well as in the coverage by the media. Another useless summit - that was the main echo. The German NGOs commented on the summit being “even more disappointing than expected”.

However, this does not mean it was entirely useless. The same criticism was the case after the first Rio conference itself, and indeed essentially after all other such meetings, including the Kyoto conference 1997. After some time, we look at these conferences with a milder attitude. Sometimes it takes a few years until you can really assess how meaningful a conference, a decision taken at a conference really is. The

decision to launch negotiations about “Sustainable Development Goals” or SDGs may be such an example. This was a proposal put forward in Rio by Guatemala and Colombia, two countries that are rather unlikely sustainability champions that got momentum when it was supported by the Brazilian hosts. The Europeans, who like to be seen as the quintessential pioneers of sustainable development, were initially rather lukewarm – after all, SDGs would apply to all countries, not only to developing countries like the “Millennium Development Goals”.

So the SDGs got agreed, with a rather bureaucratic text: “*We resolve to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals that is open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly.*”

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I can't remember anyone – including myself – coming back from Rio who celebrated this decision as a success. Another non-binding set of goals, not even negotiated at the Rio conference itself, but only in the years to follow?

Well, the United Nations is a slow organization, like any organization that has to work by consensus. Looking back at the role model for the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) agreed in 2000, we must admit, they were nonbinding but probably more effective than a whole lot of legally binding treaties. The MDGs developed a dynamic of their own, became a focus for the entire development agenda of the world, multilateral development banks paid tribute to their implementation – and hopefully the SDGs can become something like that.

In fact, the MDGs were a pure and in many ways quite traditional development agenda – and of course, that is a rightful agenda for the poor of the world. In Rio, many reports were presented about successful development, hundreds of millions of people lifted out of abject poverty, children enrolled in elementary schools, health services provided to rural populations, and so on. At the same time, many reports were presented about the deteriorating state of the world's ecosystems, oceans being emptied of fish, forests being cut down at record speed, soils deteriorating due to inappropriate ways of agriculture, groundwater levels falling to levels never recorded in history, and so on.

The problem is, if we would have been more successful in poverty alleviation,

more successful in development in a traditional way, the reports about the state of the world's environment would have been even more disastrous. Even more forests would have disappeared, even more fertile soils would have been degraded, even less fish would have remained in the oceans, and so on. And this means, our model of development is unsustainable, and we are undermining the very basis of our development success stories. How can you fight hunger when your fertile soils are shrinking, when fishermen around the world get less and less fish, when entire regions become arid due to falling groundwater levels? It is impossible.

Indeed: The black spot of the old MDGs was sustainability. The MDGs, approved only 8 years after the first Rio conference, ignored the lessons of sustainable development, ignored that there is a difference between development and sustainable development. The consequences can be felt now. So it was high time to close this sustainability gap, it was high time for Rio+20 to decide that we do not only want the scheduled MDG review process with a new set of global goals for the period 2015-2030, but to complement them with Sustainable Development Goals.

It was a positive move that the UN General Assembly in September decided that there will be one single set of goals for sustainable development, the merger of the MDG review process and the SDGs from Rio, to be approved at the General Assembly in 2015.

Let me be clear – we do not yet know what will be in this new set of goals for sustainable development, in UN jargon the “Post-2015” agenda for

sustainable development. The big difference between traditional Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals is – only SDGs realize that there are planetary boundaries, that the ecosystems of the planet are limited and that human economic activity has to stay within these limits, otherwise we are not only destroying the environment but also the very basis of human development. In every country of the world, it is a constant political battle between powerful economic interests and common sense to accept these limits.

The lessons of the Rio process are, we will never get a global understanding about the fundamentals of sustainable development without global justice. As long as the rich world continues to claim a disproportionate share of the planet's resources, there will be overexploitation and ultimately destruction of these resources. Gandhi once said, the earth has enough for everybody's needs but not for everybody's greed – and when he said that, the world had 3 billion inhabitants. So with 7 billion it is even truer. The "ecological footprint" of the global consumer class therefore has to shrink in order to

allow everybody a decent life free from poverty.

Can the Post-2015 agenda for sustainable development deliver that? It may well be that we will be disappointed, that we will criticize it as not ambitious enough, not sustainable enough, and so on. It is actually likely that this will be the case. At the same time, the new set of development goals will most likely be more of a sustainable development agenda than the old one, it will not be completely blind to the environmental limits of development, and so we will see small incremental steps towards more sustainability.

In that sense, Rio+20 made a difference. A small difference, compared to the enormous efforts that went into organizing this mega-summit. It is appalling how much effort was needed for such little substance – substance that first was not discernible even with a lot of goodwill. And we must admit, these results are fairly indirect results. It may well be that even without Rio the UN would have agreed to a new set of development goals with more sustainability than the first MDGs – simply because the environmental problems cannot be ignored any longer. But that is speculation, and essentially pointless.