Eurostep Analysis of the Council Conclusions "Rio+20: Pathways to a Sustainable Future"

On 9 March 2012 the Environment Council adopted new Conclusions on Rio+20, the conference on sustainable development that will take place on 20-22 June in Rio de Janeiro, 20 years after the first Earth Summit. It was important for the EU to update its positions following the release of the zero draft of the outcome document in mid January. The zero draft is a compilation of the inputs sent to UNDESA by UN member states and other stakeholders[1] and constitutes the basis for the negotiations on the outcome document of the conference. We set out below an analysis of these latest conclusions.

While the Council recognises the "unique opportunity" that Rio+20 offers "to secure renewed political commitment" to move forward the sustainable development agenda, it lacks a sense of urgency that scientific data suggests is merited given the ecological and social challenges faced. It is stressed that "the world is facing multiple crisis and challenges that are mutually interlinked" and this is identified as providing a "unique opportunity" to "rethink the current perception of growth and consumption, inclusion and how we utilise our limited resources" in order to safeguard the needs of future generations. This could be interpreted as recognition that radical changes are needed to secure a sustainable future, but the Council Conclusions suggest continued reliance on predominantly the same economic approach. The clock is ticking and the mounting ecological debt is already eroding the assets on which such a future depends.

Although there are repeated references in the Conclusions to the importance of the three dimensions of sustainable development the principal emphasis is placed on the environmental dimension and on greening the economy. Making the use of resources more efficient is viewed as key for achieving this. If we look at the forecasts concerning population growth, energy need or food consumption and at the boundaries of the planet's ecosystem - some of which have already been crossed[2] - a more ecological and efficient economy will not in itself lead to sustainable development. This approach inevitably relies on technological innovation to a considerable extent, and while it has much to offer, there are risks too. A long term vision cannot be envisaged without the full respect of the precautionary principle adopted at the Earth Summit in 1992.

The Council emphasises the need to value natural capital so as to fully reflect the cost of depletion and internalise environmental and social costs in production. While the polluter pays principle is a fundamental principle of the 1992 Rio conference and should be applied by governments and other stakeholders, giving monetary value to natural capital risks the commodification of natural resources in a market based economy with ownership being acquired by powerful economic actors – to the cost of local communities.

Eurostep is a network of autonomous European non-governmental development organisations working towards peace, justice and equality in a world free of poverty. Its membership, rooted in their own societies, works together to influence Europe's role in the world, particularly in pursuing the eradication of injustice and poverty. It advocates changes in Europe's policies and practice based on the perspectives drawn from direct experiences of an active involvement of its members and their partners in development in over 100 countries across the world. The members of Eurostep include: 11.11.11 (Belgium), ACSUR Las Segovias (Spain), Alliance Sud (Switzerland), Concern Worldwide (Ireland), Deutsche Welthungerhilfe (Germany), FDSC (Romania), Hivos (Netherlands), Kepa (Finland), Marie-Stopes International (UK), NEWW (Poland), Oxfam Novib (Netherlands), People in Need (Czech Republic), Sloga Platform (Slovenia), SNV (Netherlands).

[1] UN Member States, Political groups, Major groups and UN Organisations were invited to send their contributions to the zero draft of the outcome document by 1st November 2011. While stakeholders were able to participate in this consultative process, the proposals and suggestions of the UN member states and political groups constitute the bulk of the zero draft of the outcome document. This is normal as Rio+20 is an intergovernmental conference although major groups are recognized as crucial actors.

[2] See, for example, the findings of the Stockholm Resilience Centre: http://www.stockholmresilience.org/planetary-boundaries

An approach that does not address imbalances of power and global inequities, and that continues to rely on the growth of materialistic consumption is surely doomed to failure[3] with the result that our ecological debt will continue to mount. Radical changes require a paradigm shift in which social equity, as well as environmental sustainability, is placed at the centre of economic approaches.

In primarily concentrating on the green economy the perception is given that it is possible to return to sustainability through increased resource efficiency, avoiding the necessity of tackling global inequity in the use of those resources. The Council does refer to poverty eradication, an economy that is inclusive, and growth that is equitable, but how these are to be achieved essentially remain rooted in current economic mechanisms that are more ecological. Creating green jobs and a better management of natural resources will no doubt contribute, but these will not address power imbalances and inequities which are fundamental requirements for the achievement of sustainable development and also goals of SD in their own rights[4].

The Rio+20 conference takes place in a context where the total resource use of the global community is greater than the capacity of the world's ecosystem to sustain, with the overuse increasing year on year; where the share of the resources used by societies in "advanced" economies is significantly greater than those in other parts of the world; and where the consequences of global unsustainability are primary borne by citizens of poorer countries who are least responsible. The concept of Common but Differentiated Responsibilities, adopted in 1992, is a key principle of sustainable development and is a conceptual tool to address global inequity between countries. The Council rightly identifies that "sustainable development cannot be achieved without respecting and promoting democracy, human rights, the rule of law, good governance, education, the role of youth and gender equality" which are as applicable at a global level, as at any other. As peoples in different parts of the world strive to increase their standards of living they inevitably seek a greater share of global resources, increasing pressure on already unsustainable resources use. Meeting basic needs for all and extending opportunities for achieving people's aspirations for better lives will re-enforce this trend, and while a more efficient use of natural resources can mitigate the impact, it requires acceptance in societies whose lifestyles draw disproportionately in the use of natural resources that radical change is inevitable. The reality remains that citizens in "advanced" economies such as the EU hold significantly more of the total acquired ecological debt per capita than those of developing countries or of the emerging economies, and subsequently have significantly more responsibility for putting in place changes for sustainable development to be achieved, in a timeframe that protects the rights of future generations.

Only by striving for improved equity, at the global but also at the national level, better regulations and control mechanisms towards the economic and financial sectors activities and rethinking fundamentally its current development model that relies on unsustainable consumption and production patterns and favours corporations interests to the detriment of public rights, will the EU make a real contribution to sustainable development. There are hints in the Council's conclusions towards some elements of these measures being promoted, but the radical changes that are needed, and needed urgently, are not evident.

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[3] See, for example, the conclusion of Tim Jackson's book "Prosperity without Growth" or the recently released UNCTAD discussions paper "Some Reflections on Climate Change, Green Growth Illusions and Development Space" http://uncsd.iisd.org/news/unctad-discussion-paper-questions-green-growth-potential-to-reduce-ghg-emissions/

[4] It is interesting to come back to the fundamental texts on sustainable development and read, for example, in the Bruntland report, which defines the concept of sustainable development, that "A world in which poverty and inequity are endemic will always be prone to ecological and other crises. Sustainable development requires meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to satisfy their aspirations for a better life". http://www.un-documents.net/ocf-02.htm#II