



Rio+20 - United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development - Audio

Business as usual in the landscape of change

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Ian McEwan's protagonist in his novel *Solar*, the Nobel physicist Michael Beard, summarises how many people feel when at the receiving end of a lecture on climate change:

'Beard sank into a gloom of inattention, not because the planet was in peril — that moronic word again — but because someone was telling him it was with such enthusiasm' (McEwan 2010: 36).

Perhaps it shouldn't puzzle us that that the promise of rapid environmental and social change is greeted with a 'gloom of inattention'. For forty years environment and development debates have played with the highest rhetorical stakes, but despite the UN Summit on sustainable development being the biggest political gathering on these issues for twenty years most people are barely aware that it is happening. Why is that? The reason might be precisely that the stakes have been set so high; full of catastrophic talk of the end of times.

The meeting in Rio sets out to 'renew political commitment to sustainable development'. I want to suggest that if it wants to do that the international political community needs to stop conjuring large-scale threats and lurid images of the end of times. We need to turn down the rhetorical heat and look at how we can understand risks better and how we can respond to them in ways that also make the world a better place to live for humans and their companion species.

The habit of inflating the urgency of our situation and the scale of the challenge, while failing to implement simple practical steps to improve it, goes right back to 1972. That first UN environment summit in Stockholm forced a contrast between developed world environmentalists and the ambitions of the developing world for economic development. The Earth summit in 1992 sought to square this circle with the verbal magic bullet of sustainability. The goal of 'global sustainability', of integrating environment, society and economy sounds something like pursuit of a 'global Sweden'. In other words a stable democracy, robust economy, generous welfare system, food on the table - perhaps plenty of cycle lanes and triple glazed windows. It sounds like an imaginary place a long way away. But its not just that it doesn't sound plausible - with apologies to Swedes – it doesn't sound all that attractive either. My guess is that a more sustainable future world society is going to be far more messy, and argumentative than the formal rhetoric of sustainability implies.

The dour rhetoric of planetary boundaries being crossed also tends to disguise the progress that has been made in recent years. In terms of awareness, things are more advanced than one might have expected. New knowledge about biodiversity and climate change is difficult. It demands that we think in new ways about time, responsibility and the future; environmental science and policy is run through with complexities and uncertainties. Yet after only a couple of decades of being considered at international level, around 70% across the planet are 'concerned or very concerned' about climate change. We are at a hinge point where people in both boardrooms and faith communities think about the natural world in new ways. The great majority of the world's governments have signed up to climate change, biodiversity and human development agreements. These are signs of progress, and, in terms of human history, they've happened in the blink of any eye. But continuing with the same refrains about enormous and urgent global problems may make it harder to pick up pace.

Instead they should concentrate on building the political capital needed to deliver on some well focused jobs. Here are four that I would pick.

First, agree on a global carbon tax, to be balanced with locally identified reductions in other taxes. Bind this together with means of rewarding countries and communities that protect ecosystems and carbon sinks.

Second, revise trade rules such that the principle of fair trade shifts from being a consumer choice to an embedded function of the economy.

Third, chase an urgent expansion in investments in women's access to education and health services, and in food security: these are the only routes to stabilizing population growth, and they are all a spur to economic development.

Fourth: throw weight behind a global financial transactions tax. This would generate funds for improving healthcare and food security, and make the banking system a little more stable in the bargain.

All these measures need to be understood as taxing bad things and rewarding good things. These moves don't trash the capitalist system but instead revise the rulebook in ways that make every exchange more fair and sustainable. They mean that every transaction in the economy might express within it a good guess at full social and environmental costs. Sustainable development is a tired old phrase, possibly moribund. Rather than trying to resuscitate it every few years with a global shindig we should draw strength from one very important insight that sits at the heart of it: the economy is a human artefact that we made, and can remake according to changing priorities.

The measures I propose won't deliver a global Sweden but they do greatly increase the chances of humanity coping decently and reasonably well with the challenges we face. By aiming for a handful of ambitious but specific and achievable practical goals, and by giving up on the tired rhetoric of eco-disaster we can convince people that the place we're going could be so much better than the place we are now.