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The Frederick S. Pardee Center
for the Study of the Longer-Range Future

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INSIGHTS

Rio + 20: Another World Summit?

Miquel Muñoz and Adil Najam

The year 2012 will mark the 20th anniversary of the landmark 1992 Rio Earth Summit – officially called the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED). It is more than likely that the

especially important not only because the Rio Earth Summit was, in fact, a particularly important event but also because Rio itself marked the 20th anniversary of an equally significant



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international community will choose to commemorate the anniversary in some fashion, possibly by holding a follow-up world summit. Is this a good idea? And if so, what might such a summit focus on to make it a worthwhile exercise?

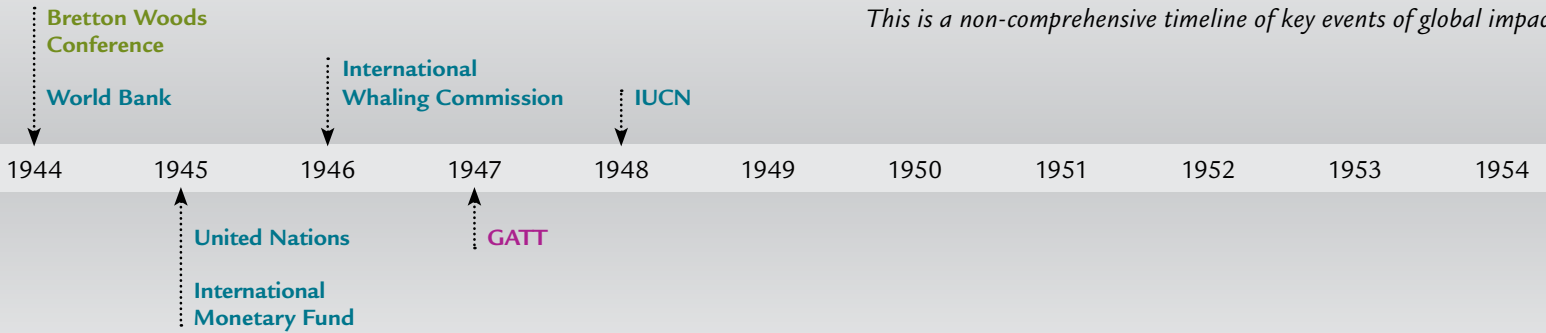
Of course, there is nothing magical about 20th anniversaries except that – like any anniversary – they provide a convenient opportunity to revisit, re-energize and reflect upon issues in a way that brings new attention and focus to them. The opportunity provided by this particular anniversary may be

milestone: the 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (UNCHE) held at Stockholm and credited with launching the global environmental governance (GEG) system, including the establishment of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

However, other ‘anniversary’ conferences have been far less memorable or meaningful. Few remember, for example, that there was a ‘Stockholm+5’ as well as a

Sustainable Development Insights is a series of short policy essays supporting the Sustainable Development Knowledge Partnership (SDKP) and edited by Boston University’s Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future. The series seeks to promote a broad interdisciplinary dialogue on how to accelerate sustainable development at all levels.

This is a non-comprehensive timeline of key events of global impact.



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‘Stockholm+10’ conference just as there was a ‘Rio+5’ as well as a ‘Rio+10’ meeting. None of these ever took on the hallowed status of the Stockholm and Rio meetings,

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even though Rio+10 — officially called the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) and held in Johannesburg — did gain comparatively more public attention and was planned and executed at the same scale of global summitry as the Rio Earth Summit. Simply having a global meet-up, even if it is at a summit level, is not enough, especially with today’s glut of global summitry.

There are very good reasons for the world to use 2012 to take stock of where we stand on global environment and development and to chart a course for future action, just as we did at Stockholm and Rio before this. To add one more anniversary to the mix, 2012 will also mark the 25th anniversary of the World Commission for Environment and Development’s (WCED’s)

influential report *Our Common Future*, which was greatly influential in putting the term ‘sustainable development’ into the policy lexicon. More than that, the world has

changed significantly in the last 20 years. We have new knowledge about the intensity of the challenges we face. We have new insight about the policy measures that do, and do not, work. We have an array of new global agreements, institutions and policy instruments. We have far greater public interest in sustainable development issues. We even have more resources committed to action for a more sustainable world. But above all, we also have a realization that the challenges that face us as 2012 approaches are even bigger than the challenges we thought we were confronting in either 1972 or 1992.

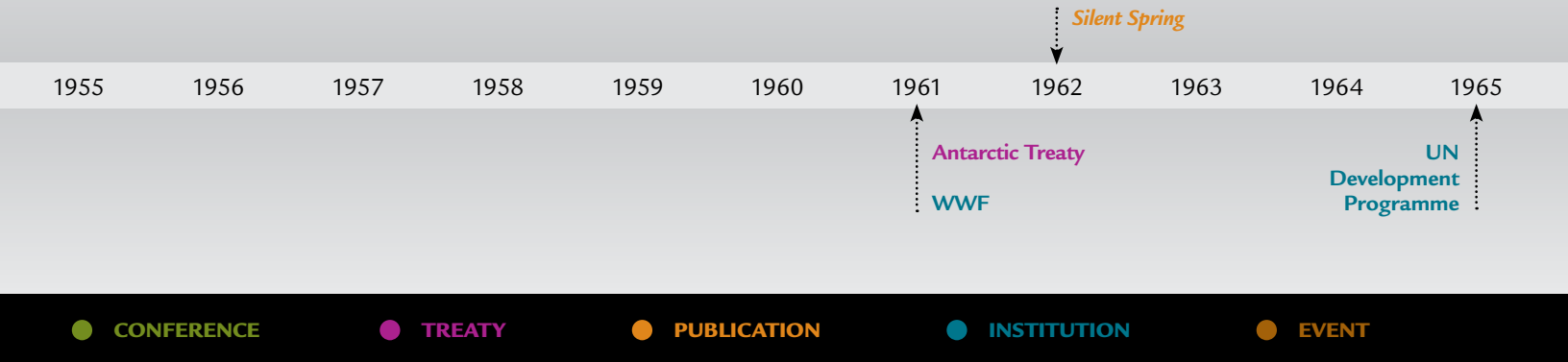
For all these reasons and more, 2012 could be a good opportunity for the world to take stock of where we have come from, what we have achieved, and where we should be headed. But before we invest too much

enthusiasm — and real resources — into 2012, it may be worthwhile to look to the past for some cues about how to move ahead.

The landmark summits, Rio and Stockholm, were precisely that — landmarks. What is it that made these meetings memorable, even when others organized with similar aplomb became forgotten as well as forgettable?

Both were special because the timing was right. But they were also special because they came to embody a grand purpose that coincided with a glaring need of the time and they resonated with a shared global sense of what needed to be done. Importantly, both were able to articulate the promise, or at least the potential, of grand global change. When there is a grand purpose, people might disagree on the answer, but not on the question. Stockholm marked the conversion of emerging sporadic national environmental movements into a global enterprise. There was a purpose, there was a need, and Stockholm delivered the institutions. Similarly, Rio saw the emergence of sustainable development, born from the alliance between the environmental and the development

The year refers to entry into force for treaties/conventions, year of publication for publications, and year of creation for institutions.



communities. There was a purpose, there was a need, and Rio began crafting the principles and rules.

Without Stockholm and Rio, the environmental movement and the structure of the GEG system would not be what they are now. By contrast, in Johannesburg there was no clear need or grand purpose for the summit, no necessary new thing to be debated or created. As a result, nothing transcendental was delivered in 2002.

When considering the possibility of a Sustainable World Summit in 2012, we must begin by asking ourselves: what is the grand purpose that this summit could fulfill? What is the grand promise that will excite the world enough to invest their energies and aspirations in this enterprise? The 2012 summit cannot be simply

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another ‘review’ exercise. While midcourse correction is a fine and desirable idea, it is insufficient, by itself, as the main purpose of a summit. Likewise, providing a

forum to talk is not enough either, particularly given the proliferation of alternative meetings and venues for dialogue. Too many past meetings, lacking a grand purpose, were either considered not as successful or faded into oblivion.



Looking ahead to 2012 one thing is clear: if there is no grand purpose, we should not waste time, effort and money on a world summit.

If, indeed, the world decides to hold another summit in 2012, we should put some serious thought into what the grand purpose of that event would be. We offer three possible

options, each a degree of aspiration higher than the previous, that could become, either singularly or in combination, the *raison d’être* of such a grand event. These options include an upgraded global environmental governance system, a new deal

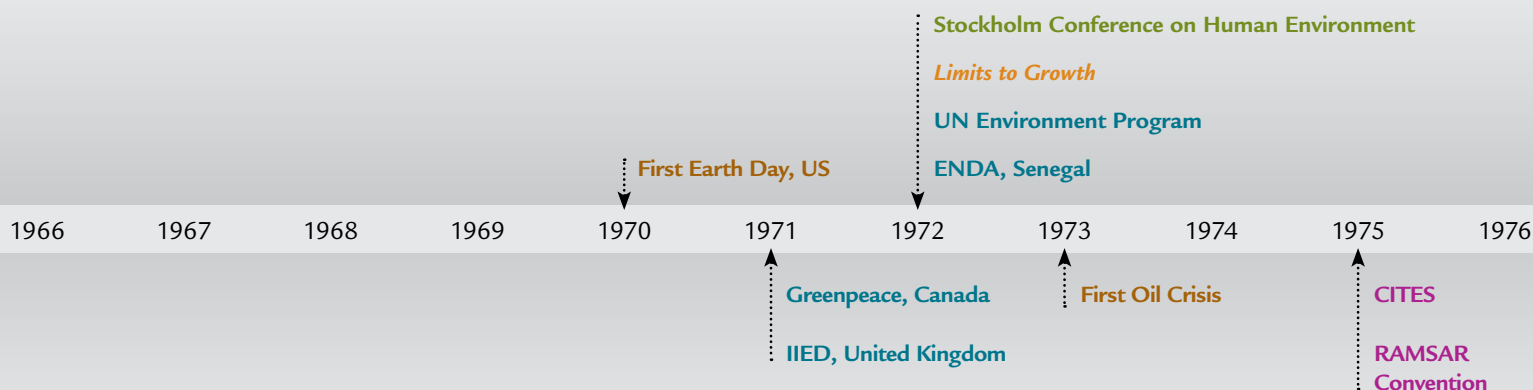


for sustainable development, and a reconsideration of the values we associate with sustainable development. There could be other purposes, but to us, any of these three could become the basis of crafting a worthwhile grand purpose.

#1. GEG 2.0

The global environmental governance (GEG) system, born at Stockholm in 1972 with the creation of UNEP, and given greater impetus by the institutions created at or around the Rio Earth Summit in 1992, has





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come a long way. The key operative question that propelled the GEG system during much of its early days was: ‘is an agreement possible?’ Since then, a formidable negotiation machine has been built. We now have ongoing negotiations, treaties, conventions, protocols and other instruments on most environmental issues. Without doubt, the world is better off than it would have been without such a system.

But the GEG system, in its current version, is facing serious challenges. The most important of these are: (a) the need to integrate development priorities into the system (addressed in the next section); and (b) the realization that the enormity and interconnectedness of the problems we face have outgrown the institutions we set up to deal with them. While things may well be better than they would have been without the institutions we created, in absolute terms most indicators of sustainable development, and certainly of environment, are actually worsening. So now, a few decades later, the operative question is: ‘are the agreements working?’

It is not a surprise that a GEG system that had been pulled together

piecemeal over three decades has turned out to be incoherent and fragmented. There is an acute recognition, including among the custodians of the system, that something is wrong. But various attempts — ranging from within the UN headquarters, from national governments, and from international organizations — have failed to ‘mend’ a system that clearly needs reform. Reform attempts have either tried to apply band-aids to hold the fragmented system from total disintegration, or have bordered on

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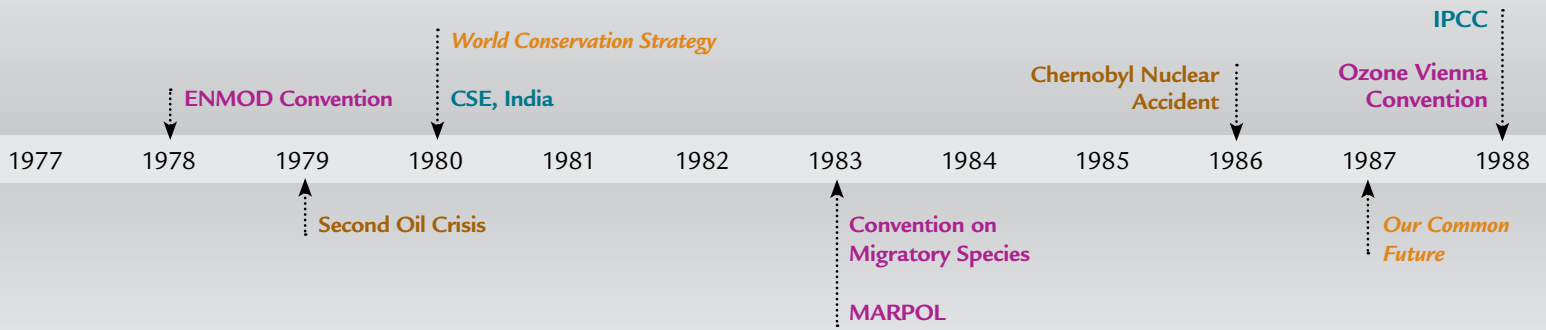
radical surgery that would require throwing out much that does work, inviting the political and bureaucratic wrath of deeply vested institutional and national interests.

It is clear that reform is needed. But it is also clear that reform must be holistic (i.e., system-wide), realistic, and politically acceptable to multiple stakeholders. Such reform is necessary, but will not be easy. It

also may not be possible unless it comes out of a high-profile, focused, process of global consultation — exactly the type of consultation that a 2012 summit might provide.

The specific details of what such a reformed GEG system would entail are beyond the scope of this paper; after all, that would be the purpose of the summit discussions. However, that discussion could be anchored in a vision of an upgraded GEG system — what we call GEG 2.0 — based on the following principles:

First, GEG 2.0 must be a *performance-based system*, as opposed to the existing GEG 1.0 system which remains *compliance-based*. This implies a shift from ‘reaching agreement’ to ‘implementation.’ The ultimate test of the system is not whether countries are complying with the provisions they agreed to, but whether the system is leading to an actual improvement in the state of the



- CONFERENCE
- TREATY
- PUBLICATION
- INSTITUTION
- EVENT

world we live in. A first step towards answering that question — even if the answer is already well-known — could be a review of the state of the world, not in terms of what countries have done for the global environment, but what has been the *impact* of those actions. To use a physics analogy, we do not want to measure the force applied, we want to measure the work done.

Second, GEG 2.0 need not require new institutions, but it does need much more *coherence* amongst existing institutions. There is a wealth of ideas for better coherence and coordination amongst international environmental institutions already being discussed on topics such as treaty clustering, back-to-back negotiation meetings, environmental financial tracking, pooled funding mechanisms, and so on. However, these discussions themselves are happening in varied institutions that do not communicate well with each other. A global summit that focuses, amongst other things, on targeted coherence for institutions could have deep and far-reaching impacts on global environmental governance.

Third, GEG 2.0 must become less state-centric and more open to new

actors, which is especially important if GEG 2.0 is to be implementation based. In particular, it must allow for a greater and more meaningful participation of civil society organizations (CSOs), sub-national

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and local governments, and the private sector. This would require opening up the policy space to create new opportunities for participation in implementation activities, to reach out to those local and national actors currently distant from GEG discussions, and to seek closer collaborations amongst the various institutional stakeholders in society.

#2. A New Deal for Sustainable Development

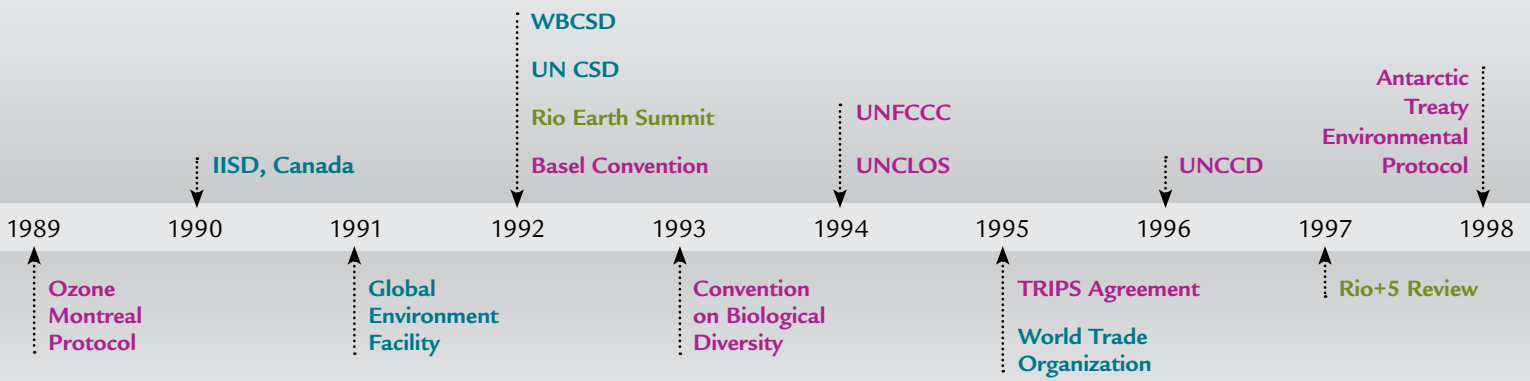
The need for a New Deal for Sustainable Development, including economic, social and environmental issues, is evident — and even being articulated — in the face of the multiple institutional crises that face

us. The global financial system nearly collapsed. The environmental order is a messy patchwork of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). The economic cooperation system is not yielding the expected results.

New and more globally mobile diseases are becoming an increasing challenge. The trade system is failing to incorporate social and environmental concerns and has stalled in never-ending negotiations. The global food system is under severe stress. Climate change is only solvable through — as yet non-existent — concerted global action.

Even though sustainable development is now amongst the aspirations of most global institutions — from UNEP to the World Bank — the systems of governance and implementation remain largely parochial in terms of either being ‘environmentally-focused’ or ‘developmentally-





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focused.’ The aspiration for sustainable development is shared as well as genuine, but the means of achieving it have not gone beyond simply sprinkling more and more of ‘environment’ over development institutions or of ‘development’ over environmental institutions.

If the goal is to move towards real sustainable development at a global level, such an incremental approach has severe limits, which may already have been reached. A 2012 summit may provide us with an opportunity to shoot for an ambitious, but truly exciting, goal: a New Deal for Sustainable Development – a new institutional architecture based on the principles of sustainable development. The ambition level of this goal would make the summit not only a follow up to Rio and Stockholm, but also to the 1944 Bretton Woods conference.

The common underlying problem is that the international cooperation mechanisms designed for much simpler times are becoming insufficient to accommodate the pressures of a shrinking planet with increasing and increasingly

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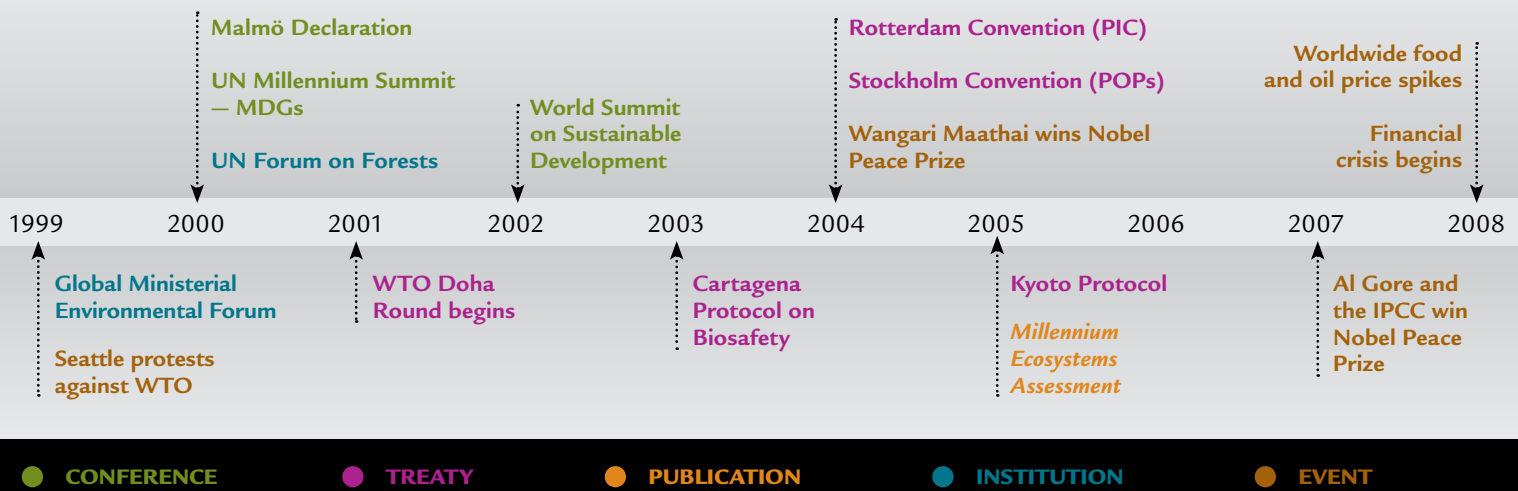
global appetites. Similar to children outgrowing their clothing, the world has outgrown the mechanisms of global cooperation (on trade, finance, environment, food, etc.), which might once have fit the situation but now are increasingly stretched and ineffective.

Each aspect of the multifaceted crisis can be addressed individually, patching the system as if with band aids. Indeed, that is what we seem to be trying to do. Or, a grand event – like the 2012 summit – could provide the world with the opportunity to

sit back and take on the challenge of formulating a new global deal – based around the principles of sustainable development – that leads to a new global architecture of institutions that not only work in better coordination with each other but also in sync with the new realities that face us today and will define our tomorrows.

Call it the sustainable new deal, the green economy, Deal-21, or whatever other name that catches your fancy. The real purpose is to lay down the foundations of a new system for international cooperation – encompassing trade, finance, climate change, environmental governance,





food, etc. — a foundation that builds on past successes and is structured around the principles of sustainable development.

Let’s be clear: we are not proposing the sustainable development agenda (or community for the matter) to take over the trade, financial, food and trade agendas, or *vice versa*. We are talking, instead, of a truly new architecture in which these issues — that are so intrinsically connected — are dealt with together in recognition of the connections, rather than in the haphazard, piecemeal, and conflicting ways in which current institutions deal with them.

regulations, market forces, public perceptions. In the aftermath of the current financial crisis, we see a similar unfolding in the realm of economic and trade decisions, as well as the gearing up for a possibly carbon-constrained world. A 2012 summit provides us with the opportunity to merge sustainable social, environmental and equity principles with the economic governance system.

#3. Values: Redefining Development

Our earlier points are incremental improvements — improving effectiveness and broadening scope —

The aspiration of unlimited economic growth has remained unchallenged. At the 1992 Rio Earth Summit, then U.S. President George H.W. Bush reportedly declared: ‘the American way of life is not negotiable.’ Today, many developing countries have also assumed Bush’s 1992 position, in the variant of ‘our right to growth is not up for negotiation.’ Any quest for sustainable development will remain unfulfilled until we clearly articulate the difference between growth and development, and begin focusing on human well-being as the cornerstone goal.

Such issues, together with others of more ethical character, tend to be lumped together under the issue of *values*, often mentioned as the missing “fourth pillar” of sustainable development (the other three being environmental protection, social development and economic development). Talking about values is potentially divisive and ultimately could lead to the redefinition of the social meaning of development and environment. But let’s remember that past successful summits also discussed at-the-time radical ideas. In 1972, linking development and environment was considered radical, yet Stockholm sparked

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This may already be beginning to happen, but in an *ad hoc* fashion. For example, the response to global climate change is not simply an environmental response. It is a response that comes from multiple quarters: business, governments, civil society; and in multiple forms:

to the current system which is based on two unspoken but very powerful assumptions underlying nearly all policies: (a) human *well-being* is correlated to *development*; and (b) *development* equates to *economic growth*.



that discussion. In 1992, involving non-governmental actors in the global environmental process was highly controversial, yet that is one of the main legacies of Rio.

Is sustainable development — and, indeed, development — merely an economic condition, and a condition that can be equated simply with economic growth? Or does development and human well-being also encompass a set of social values that go beyond economic values? These questions have been ignored and neglected for too long. They need to be confronted. What better place or time to confront them than at the 20th anniversary of Rio, the 25th anniversary of WCED and the 40th anniversary of Stockholm?

Conclusion

Summits seldom solve problems. But, when successful, they can frame the debate for years and decades to come. Both Stockholm and Rio did so.

Any world summit in 2012 will not be successful if it is held merely to grab the global limelight for a brief moment or simply because ‘it is time’ to meet again. To be meaningful, such a summit will need a grand purpose. In this essay we have suggested three possible purposes that, to our mind, meet that test — purposes that have the potential to define the next 20 years of sustainable development action, policy and discourse. We understand that each is more ambitious than the prior. But let not a lack of ambition scuttle away this moment of opportunity.

The world may not choose any of our three options as the grand purpose for a 2012 World Sustainability Summit. But whatever goal is chosen for a summit needs to be not only grand, but truly meaningful. If it is, then future generations will remember that event like we remember Stockholm and Rio. If it is not, then another summit is not what the world needs right now. ●

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brings together governments, individuals, institutions, and networks engaged in the production and dissemination of knowledge on sustainable development, including research institutions and sustainable development expert networks. Its aim is to organize knowledge on sustainable development and make it available to policy makers and practitioners. The Partnership is supported by the Division for Sustainable Development of the United Nations. *Sustainable Development Insights* is a contribution of The Frederick S. Pardee Center for the Study of the Longer-Range Future at Boston University to the SDKP.

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Sustainable Development Insights

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