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# Rio + 20: Sustainable Development in a Time of Multilateral Decline

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Steven Bernstein\*

The challenge of assessing UN conference diplomacy—especially in its immediate aftermath—is the tendency of analysts to pour in their hopes or skepticism, and then to conclude with “only time will tell.” And, there has been no shortage of postmortems on Rio+20, including now the ones in this journal.<sup>1</sup> Analyses of the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) are particularly susceptible to this pattern. Perhaps of all the big UN conferences of the last twenty years, it had the least focus, especially if we use the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development (the original Rio or Earth Summit) as the archetype. Its *raison d’être* appeared primarily to be coincidence—if there was a Rio+10, there ought to be a Rio+20. Although the conference had two themes—the green economy and the institutional framework for sustainable development—the lack of vision allowed the agenda to run unchecked into virtually every area of sustainable development, a term that itself has uncertain boundaries.

Thus, rather than an assessment of outcomes that undoubtedly would reflect my own prejudices, hopes, and disappointments, this short piece attempts to place the Rio+20 outcomes into the broader context of the global political system. In so doing, I put forward some conjectures on why Rio+20 produced the outcomes it did, evaluate them in terms of expectations generated by those propositions, and link the outcomes to what they signal about multilateralism more broadly and its prospects for addressing collective global problems. The baseline for these conjectures is the near universally low expectations for the conference and the argument that the conditions that led to those low expectations deserve our critical attention more than the substantive Rio+20 outcomes. Admittedly, in some cases those outcomes failed to even meet those lowly expectations, although Rio+20 also produced some surprises. Finally, I assess the surprises in light of the same set of conjectures.

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1. E.g. Cléménçon 2012; Dodds and Nayar 2012; Halle 2012; IISD 2012; Ivanova this issue; Powers 2012.

## Lack of Vision, Modest Ambition

The first conjecture on why expectations were so low stems from the framing and understanding of the conference by its main state sponsors and its secretariat. While many academics, stakeholders, and even some governments—the French can be singled out in this regard—argued that Rio+20 should be transformative or even a “constitutional moment,”<sup>2</sup> Rio+20 could never live up to that ambition for the simple reason that neither the UN General Assembly nor the conference secretariat presented a transformative vision. Instead, they saw the conference as being about *integration*, *implementation*, and *coherence*, a view shared by the strongest state sponsors—China, Brazil, and South Africa. *Integration*, *implementation*, and *coherence* or close variants appear 53, 134, and 25 times respectively in the outcome document.<sup>3</sup> These are terms of consolidation, not transformation. If these words had been matched by detailed plans and commitments to achieve them, the lack of vision could be forgiven. Low expectations prior to, and disappointment since, Rio+20 are understandable, however, when exactly what is to be consolidated has remained largely vague and undecided.

In the event, immediate and specific factors also plausibly contributed to disappointment. A different formulation of the “green economy” concept from the start might have sold better to skeptical developing countries and NGOs. A bolder and more effective secretariat and conference leadership might have stepped further in front of negotiations, got an earlier start, scheduled more negotiating time, or packaged reform better to highlight its transformative potential and build consensus. However, the lack of vision at Rio+20’s core makes a more transformative outcome difficult to imagine: Rio’s weak, conservative, and restrictive political mandate would arguably have militated against even the most entrepreneurial and politically astute conference leadership pushing for change.

## Normative Contradictions of the Green Economy

The second conjecture is that the one potentially transformative idea—the green economy—could not succeed when the underlying normative compromises that had held together since the 1992 Rio Summit were off limits. The green economy concept is precisely about a reformulation of some of those norms. On the one hand, it potentially challenges the norm of “common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities” (the 1992 Rio Declaration’s Principle 7) because it suggests *all* countries should participate in the green economy and adopt policies and practices consistent with it. Read more radically, the green economy might even require a transformation of global capi-

2. Along with many contributors to this journal, I too called for such a transformation in Biermann et al. 2012.

3. UN 2012.

talism. In that context, limited enthusiasm for the concept is even more remarkable since many proposed green economy initiatives fall far short of that aspiration, instead seeking to work with markets, private investment, and minimal government involvement—features consistent with dominant liberal market norms.

On the other hand, the concept suggests limits to the compatibility of free trade, liberal markets more generally, and environmental protection goals. That interpretation potentially challenges the normative view that these goals are perfectly compatible as expressed in the 1992 Rio Declaration Principle 12, the World Trade Organization preamble, and a large number of other declarations and treaty documents. For example, achieving a green economy might require relaxing rules on intellectual property rights (to ease the transfer or uptake of green technologies), treating green products and services as special categories, or admitting (and managing) at least short-term tradeoffs among environmental goals, social goals like employment, and economic growth. Haas has even suggested that the technological transformation to a green economy would only occur through “the broader transformative processes of creative destruction analyzed by Joseph Schumpeter.”<sup>4</sup>

Yet, any discussion of norms was off the table. This absence left the green economy concept open to multiple lines of attack. A distinctly unenthusiastic subset of developed country governments, traditionally skeptical of interventions in the economy, resisted any implication that the concept might lead to a relaxation of liberal economic norms. Meanwhile, for many governments in the Global South, it reignited old fears of green protectionism and a focus on the environmental dimension of sustainable development at the expense of the social dimension.

Norms generally only came up in negotiation to buttress the 1992 Earth Summit norms, especially common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities, in the face of perceived challenges. As a result, the Rio+20 outcome document masked real normative contestation that has arisen recently in attempts to implement earlier sustainable development commitments, most notably on truly global challenges such as climate change, or in major economic institutions such as the WTO. Rio+20 was a lost opportunity to confront those contradictions or find creative ways to acknowledge the need for differentiation while integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in policy; the political groundwork simply did not exist.

The Rio+20 outcome document’s tepid endorsement of the green economy, its adamant linkage of it to “the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication”<sup>5</sup> instead of framing the green economy as an economy-wide concept that is part of sustainable development, and its rejection of the

4. Haas 2012, 95. For an equally radical but less disruptive vision of transformation, see Stern 2012.

5. UN 2012: paragraphs 56–74.

idea of a roadmap with indicators to measure progress together indicate continued suspicion of the concept. This reception is all the more disappointing since the actual programs and policies attached to it could bear real fruit, especially those focused on green employment and on better access and learning platforms for knowledge and technology. Indeed, in one of the most promising developments on this front since Rio+20, UNEP's governing council in January 2013 endorsed a climate technology centre and network, following a decision in 2012 by parties to the UN climate convention to partner with UNEP on the initiative.<sup>6</sup> The problem is the normative foundation for the deeper acceptance of the conditions required for significant innovation, diffusion, and uptake—and regulatory changes that would enable a transformation toward a green economy—were not on the table.

More positively, preliminary evidence suggests that other key conditions attached to the green economy agenda in the Rio+20 outcome document—emphasis on country ownership of policies and programs and avoidance of one-size-fits-all prescriptions—will work in favor of uptake in the developing world. Recent evidence comes from an evaluation of the UN's "delivering as one" pilot initiative to consolidate and increase the coherence of programs and services delivery at the country level. It shows that country ownership is an important condition for fully benefitting from international initiatives and contributes to achieving sustainable development.<sup>7</sup> Of course, effectiveness and efficiency still require broad political support and resources for the programs and initiatives internationally, where Rio+20's longer-term impact is far less clear.

That domestic autonomy and ownership matter for sustainable development is consistent with numerous contributions to international political economy scholarship over the last thirty years. One of that literature's most robust concepts—Ruggie's idea of embedded liberalism—argues that a certain level of domestic autonomy and capacity of countries to intervene in their own economies constitutes a structural principle of securing social stability in a liberal order.<sup>8</sup> The reasoning comes from Polanyi,<sup>9</sup> who argues that to be sustainable, growth-promoting liberal markets must be embedded in social purposes, which today surely include environmental concerns alongside more traditional goals of social stability, employment, and equity embodied in the welfare state. As Ruggie has pointed out,<sup>10</sup> however, the grand post-World War II bargain of embedded liberalism in practice did not include the developing world.

The contemporary challenge in a more globalized world has been precisely to find ways to reconstitute global liberalism, re-embed it in social and environmental purposes both globally and nationally, and to bring the Global South into the bargain. It is the articulation and implementation of such a vi-

6. UNEP GC/GMEF 2013.

7. Evaluation Management Group 2012.

8. Ruggie 1982.

9. Polanyi 1944.

10. Ruggie 2004, 2007.

sion that is still lacking in the green economy concept. Absent that vision, the green economy concept generated fears among the old G-77 alliance of a one-size-fits-all agenda, which prevented its uptake as a driver of “the future we want.” What is left is a small toolkit from which to pick and choose a few modest programs and initiatives lest—in the eyes of less-developed countries—it be the “future they impose.”

### **Another Nail in the Coffin of Multilateralism**

My third proposition is that equally significant as Rio+20’s failure to present a transformative vision is what it signals about the ever-worsening state of multilateralism. The outcome revealed that articulations of political compromise or accommodation of rising economies—the main engines behind Rio+20—have not emerged. The practice of multilateralism has simply not caught up with structural changes in the system, especially when the actors themselves seem unable to move from older or very slowly changing identities. The politics of UN conference diplomacy only seems to reinforce and reward this G-77 versus developed-country negotiation dynamic.<sup>11</sup>

While some have read the Brazilian maneuver to take the outcome document out of the hands of negotiators as saving multilateralism,<sup>12</sup> I read it as signaling the nearly complete inability of a comprehensive multilateral process to produce commitments that require any serious tradeoffs or compromises. Let us recall what the Brazilians did: they took a clearly unmanageable and bloated outcome document, over two-thirds of it still in brackets, out of the negotiation process. Trimming it only slightly, they gave back 283 paragraphs of consensus language devoid of new commitments, leaving final decisions to the UN General Assembly and other follow-up processes, and then presented it as a take-it-or-leave-it document. Brazil is by no means the first host country to engage in what might best be called “rescue multilateralism,” although its negotiators took this form of diplomatic intervention to new heights when faced with numerous issues not ripe for resolution. It acted as all strong host countries should, expending significant diplomatic effort in bilateral and small group meetings to build a consensus document. The more important story is what its rescue mission highlighted: the traditional give-and-take required to generate substantive commitments in multilateral negotiations—especially of the near-universal kind—is increasingly impossible.

Thus, Rio+20 is symptomatic of what we observe in a growing number of multilateral forums that require compromises to build coherence and momentum on global concerns. In the WTO, for example, the idea of a single undertaking—which historically allowed linkages and tradeoffs of the kind now so important for developing countries—is all but dead in the Doha round. In-

11. Halle 2012; Hampson and Heinbecker 2011; Ikenberry 2009; Mukherjee and Malone 2011.

12. IISD 2012.

stead, Doha negotiations have occurred in pieces, with the likely result being plurilateral agreements that leave out many (mostly developing) countries that find the rules too burdensome or unfair. This dynamic militates against wider compromises and leaves fundamental conflicts unresolved among states at different levels of development. Meanwhile, the proliferation of bilateral trade and investment agreements—often the outcome of unequal bargaining power—proliferate to fill the vacuum. The single undertaking now only survives in forums like Rio+20, where hard decisions, tradeoffs, and commitments are not necessary. In capitalizing on the low stakes, Brazilian diplomats effectively threw in the towel on large-scale multilateralism as a means to address serious problems or differences. They did not rescue it.

### **A Few Surprises on Institutions**

The big surprises of Rio+20, even if modest in degree, came in reform of the institutional framework for sustainable development. Again, assessing the outcomes in the context of realistic expectations is important. The baseline is to acknowledge the complete absence of evidence for anything close to the required political coalition to upgrade UNEP to a specialized agency, as the most ambitious reformers desired. And, admittedly, the surprises are modest administrative and organizational reforms, not the broader enabling institutional environment for a “constitutional” or transformative moment many wanted. Still, reform efforts that date back decades finally produced concrete organizational changes that respond functionally to many criticisms leveled at the preexisting set of arrangements.

Three accomplishments are notable. First, on a functional level, the reform of UNEP essentially responds to every element identified in the Nairobi-Helsinki process—the intergovernmental exercise that identified options for institutional reform leading up to Rio+20—related to the environmental dimension of sustainable development.<sup>13</sup> Those reforms include universal membership, an improved funding structure, and improvements to the science-policy interface, among other changes. While serious questions remain about whether those changes will translate into significant new resources, more influence on the broader sustainable development agenda, or greater capacity in countries to promote learning and implementation, UNEP’s organizational structure and mandate can no longer be blamed for those deficiencies.

Second, the decision to endorse negotiation of a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) provides an opportunity to bring greater focus, political momentum, and resource mobilization to sustainable development. The idea gained traction in part because the secretariat and major state sponsors recognized that such a decision would deliver perhaps Rio+20’s only concrete commitment to political action. The outcome document, however, left many ques-

13. UNEP GC/GMEF 2011. Ivanova this issue.

tions unanswered about the SDGs, including how they might be combined with any post-2015 millennium development goals (MDGs), as well as the important issue of their institutional placement. Already, there are signs that the goals could succumb to the same political dynamics that undermined the transformative potential of the conference itself. On the one hand, the UN has set in motion one of the most extensive and complex set of consultations in its history for the post-2015 development agenda, including discussions on how to follow up the MDGs, while an open working group of the UN General Assembly develops the SDGs. On the other hand, the post-2015 process as a whole arguably makes the environment an addendum to economic and social development. The process risks separating out the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainable development rather than emphasizing how the goals might be integrated or address tradeoffs, in contrast to Rio's mandate for the SDGs.

While there is room for debate on how far integration can go at the expense of necessary tradeoffs (for example, unmitigated growth in energy consumption is probably not compatible with stabilizing the climate), the process lacks a unifying vision for the two parallel processes. This incoherence has left the old and oppositional formulations of development largely intact, belying hope of easily amalgamating MDGs and SDGs despite an explicit preference on the part of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon that the post-2015 development agenda be "rooted within one set of SDGs."<sup>14</sup> The addition of peace and security to the post-2015 development framework, while obviously an important global goal, only muddies the waters further. While sustainable development requires a minimum level of peace and security, achieving the latter sits largely outside the scope of policies or programs that could be formulated to address key sustainable development challenges (e.g., access to clean water, a stable climate, healthy oceans, biodiversity, access to energy, employment, a green economy, and alleviation of poverty).

Applying the lenses of the three propositions above, one again sees the ongoing consequences of the lack of normative consensus or vision. The MDGs, for all their limitations, came from the UN secretariat, which based them on consensus documents drawn from previous declarations and priorities. They were not negotiated. Building consensus for the post-2015 agenda around such a broad range of activities and purposes without an underlying vision presents a far greater challenge.

Third, the surprising decision to create a High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) on Sustainable Development creates, at least on paper, a significantly stronger political body to replace the Commission on Sustainable Development. Governments agreed to the format and organization of the HLPF in June

14. UN 2013. The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (2013:4–6) report to the UN Secretary-General similarly calls for "one sustainable development agenda."



2013. It was scheduled to meet for the first time at the opening of the UN General Assembly session in September 2013.<sup>15</sup> The forum has enormous potential. It will have universal membership. It will meet every four years under the UNGA at the head-of-government or state level, and in other years under ECOSOC at the ministerial level. Its functions include responding to emerging issues, reviewing progress on all UN conferences (it will take over and try to improve upon the annual ministerial reviews currently conducted by ECOSOC), and working with intergovernmental organizations, business, and civil society to integrate sustainable development goals, policies, and practices at multiple levels. At its best, the HLPF could play a major role in what Abbott and Snidal call political orchestration: working through intermediaries, given its limited direct capacity to govern and position in the system, to implement sustainable development.<sup>16</sup> Being an effective orchestrator would require links to international financial institutions and the increasing mixture of intergovernmental, private sector, and civil society initiatives that make up the polycentric arrangements of sustainable development governance. Ideally, the SDGs could drive and focus the HLPF's agenda, which could become the political focal point for their ongoing review and implementation.

Still, many questions remain. While its mandate and format respond to many criticisms of the Commission on Sustainable Development, it remains to be seen whether it will attract the high-level participation it needs, whether the SDGs will provide the focus and legitimacy required to fulfill its mandate, or whether the same multilateral dynamics that prevented a stronger vision and commitments at Rio will plague its operation.

## Conclusion

Can these modest organizational and institutional initiatives provide an enabling environment for political leadership to better integrate sustainable development not only throughout the UN, but also through promised new links and initiatives with the international financial institutions and polycentric governance systems? Through the lenses of the three arguments above, and the follow-up processes currently underway, expectations should be tempered. A lack of vision and ambition, normative blinders that mask rather than address legitimate contestation, and multilateral practices that have not caught up to new structural realities already militate against optimism. In acknowledging these political conditions, however, perhaps we can modify Young's<sup>17</sup> admonition that underlying institutional vision must precede organizational change, to ask: can well-targeted organizational change create political space to overcome ob-

15. UNGA 2013.

16. Abbott and Snidal 2009.

17. Young 2008.

stacles to needed institutional changes? If, for example, the HLPF manages to reach out beyond the UN system, intergovernmentally and through providing high-level political direction and support for partnerships and transformative activities of civil society and business, it holds some promise to work with complexity rather than battling against the normative and political conflicts bedeviling the multilateral system. Bringing about broader change through a virtuous institutional spiral may be a slower process than what is needed, but is perhaps as much as we could have hoped.

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