

Prosperity for many or misery for all? In Rio we will choose the future we want

In just over a week, world leaders will gather in Brazil for the Rio +20 Summit to decide what kind of future we want. Twenty years after the original earth summit, the theme is the green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.

Why is the conference important and why the aspirations for a 'green economy'? A green economy is one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities. Growth in a green economy is driven by investments that reduce pressures on the environment and the services it provides us, while enhancing energy and resource efficiency.

Or put simpler, to quote an African diplomat: it is our own survival strategy. The green economy is a means to sustainable development; a strategy to get prosperity for people *and* the planet, today *and* tomorrow. There can be no sustainable development without social equity; no growth without proper management of our natural resources that our economies depend on. We need sustainable development to achieve prosperity for many instead of misery for all.

We have made quite some progress since 1992, but clearly not enough. Millions are still hungry every day. If we carry on using resources at the current rate, by 2050 we will need the equivalent of more than two planets to sustain us, and the aspirations of many for a better quality of life will not be reached.

The poorest in our societies will suffer most if we use our resources unsustainably as their lives and livelihoods depend very directly on water, land, seas, forests and soil. There are new and emerging challenges that pose a serious threat to sustainable development – from climate change and increasing water scarcity to low resilience to natural disasters and biodiversity and ecosystem loss.

However, we have the tools to tackle these challenges and turn them into opportunities. Many countries can leapfrog to efficient technologies and systems that will permit them to exploit their resources, from forests and biodiversity to land and minerals, in ways that are sustainable and capable of supporting increases in consumption. Between 70 and 85% of opportunities to boost resource productivity are estimated to be in developing countries. Countries that learn to use their natural capital in a smart and sustainable way will be the winners of tomorrow. The transformation to a greener economy could generate 15 to 60 million additional jobs globally over the next two decades and lift tens of millions of workers out of poverty, according to a report by the International Labour Organisation.

This is why the European Union will continue to fight for Rio 20+ to result in a focused and ambitious outcome. We want to start something irreversible; something that has real impact on people's lives. At the end of the day, this is a conference about people; about us, about our future. We have suggested goals and targets for key natural resources which underpin a green economy: water, the oceans, land and ecosystems, forests, sustainable energy, and resource efficiency including waste. These goals are essential for sustainable growth and inextricably linked to the issues of food security, poverty reduction and social development. These goals would drive the private sector to invest, spur technological innovation and create employment. One of the desired outcomes of Rio is that all listed and large private companies should include sustainability in their annual reporting, or else explain why they

don't. The World Bank has already launched an interesting initiative where companies would use natural accounting mechanisms in their statistics. This could be the start of a new reality, where natural capital counts and sustainability has a value. But it is clear change will not happen without everyone on board. Not only politicians will need to be convinced – we also need businesses, civil society and individuals involved.

While many countries are in better shape today compared to twenty years ago, the world's poorest will still need help getting access to education, the right infrastructure and skills. This is why the EU remains the biggest donor of aid in the world. In 2011 we gave 53€ billion in development aid – more than half of the aid in the entire world. And this is why we will stick to our promises. Despite the current financial crisis, the EU countries recently reaffirmed this commitment, which would translate into an important additional development aid by 2015, including for projects related to the Rio outcome.

So what kind of future do we want? Here's the answer from 17-year old Brittany Trilford from New Zealand, winner of the Future We Want competition and who will address leaders in Rio: "Frankly, I'd be happy to just have a future. To have that guaranteed. It's not right now." It's not only about the future of Brittany's generation and generations to come. It is already about us, it is our own future we put at stake if we fail to tackle the problems of finite resources, unsustainable development and mass poverty. Let's not waste our chance to choose the kind of future we want – while we still can.

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