

Rio +20: Resisting market environmentalism and strengthening rights and social-environmental justice*



The Potential of Rio + 20

In June 2012 Rio de Janeiro will host an event that may symbolize the end of a period and the beginning of a new one. Rio + 20 is expected to carry out a comprehensive assessment of the 1990s UN conferences beginning with Rio 92 and including the conferences on population, human rights, women, social development and the urban agenda. It is also during 2012 that the Kyoto Protocol will expire.

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development / Rio +20 proposes to discuss three issues: assessment of compliance with the commitments agreed to in Rio 92, the green economy and the institutional architecture for sustainable development. Rio + 20 therefore, has the potential to be a moment to, at the same time, assess the successes and failures of the past two decades and also identify a new agenda of struggles ahead.

The Context of Rio + 20: fragility of the UN system in a scenario of multiple crises

Human beings and the planet are experiencing multiple crises that call into question the future of humanity. Neither the UN nor the governments, imprisoned in the past, are acting in line with the severity of the process of accelerated deterioration currently in progress. Organizations of global civil society, that have been autonomously meeting in spaces such as the World Social Forum and in ongoing processes and struggles that connect the local to the global, in side events at UN conferences, meetings of the G20 and of the multilateral financial institutions, which will also meet in Rio de Janeiro during the Rio +20 Conference, are challenged to strengthen and continue the fight for another world and to pressure governments and institutions of the international system to act effectively. The constitution of this global movement was intensified with the Global Forum, in particular the Global Forum of NGOs held parallel to the Rio 92. In 2012 an assessment of the state of global struggles and achievements will also be on the agenda.

The Conference held in Johannesburg in occasion of the tenth anniversary of Rio 92, the various Conference of the Parties (COP), the insignificance of the United Nations Environment Programme – UNEP, and the impotence of the UN in coping with humanitarian disasters, show the inability of the current international system to deal with the challenges that the future imposes on us and to enforce the agreements of the different conferences since Rio 92.

The Conference of the Parties responsible for implementing the decisions of the Conventions on Biodiversity, Desertification and Climate Change represent clear examples of this assertion. Biodiversity is historically associated with indigenous peoples, traditional populations and peasants, but despite a recognition of their role in theory, they are being systematically deprived of their rights, in many cases even being expelled from their territories. Measures to

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deal with desertification increasingly fall short of the challenges that this issue presents; the same can be said in relation to forced migration. The climate crisis in turn, is being appropriated by the market for the generation of profits. An evaluation of the commitments made at the conferences on human rights, women, social development and Habitat also leave no doubt about the gap between declarations of commitments and reality.

From Sustainable development to the green economy: recycling an unsustainable model

In an irreconcilable contradiction, the Rio 92 Conference, while recognizing the serious global environmental crisis - particularly in relation to biodiversity and climate - and the responsibility of industrialized countries, asserted the primacy of the economy as an engine for development, then baptized as "sustainable". The participating governments and the UN itself surreptitiously recognized the power of the capitalist economy above politics, or rather, as a driver of policy. The term "sustainable development" was established and quickly appropriated by the dominant economy and as such ripped from its reformist potential.

In order to replace the emptied sustainable development term, the Rio + 20 agenda aims to present the "green economy" as a new phase of the capitalist economy. Through the green market, a new environmentalism based on green business proposes an association between new technologies, market solutions and private ownership of the common good as a solution to the planetary crisis. This recycling of the classic *modus operandi* of capitalism, of its modes of accumulation and dispossession, represents a serious larceny with deep consequences. It gives new life to an unfeasible model and offers as utopia technology and privatization alone. It prevents any recognition of the crisis and the real dilemmas that humanity is going through. Therefore, it prevents the formulation of new utopias and the construction of civilizational alternatives.

As such we should question how sustainable development and the green economy are contributing to the protection and guarantee of human rights. The market leaves its defense to governments and the UN that maintain the rhetoric of human rights, including in the field of the right to water without the means nor the political will to implement them.

They increasingly turn to humanitarian interventions, which tend to replace the promotion of rights. With only normative power, the commitments agreed in the sphere of the UN are trapped by the power of sanctions and retaliation of institutions such as the WTO, IMF and the World Bank. In the face of the failure of the UN on one hand and the power of multilateral institutions that serve the interests of corporations on the other, the result is that governments and public and democratic policies are increasingly becoming spaces for agreements and policies that hand over our future to the private sector and to its newest version, the green economy.

The world is under the hegemony of capital. Capital has no vision for the future apart from the promise of an illusory development, predator of the environment, human rights violator that excludes countries and populations. The ideology of development, understood as economic growth that fuels the expansion of unsustainable modes of production and consumption, has deeply penetrated the minds and culture of all social classes, in the North and in the South. It has even guided the actions of elected governments in countries of the South with a mandate to trigger transformations, but which however, are unable to build a new correlation of forces

to leverage change and that also fail to accumulate political power and reflection in the direction of new paradigms.

For over two centuries, and with more intensity in recent decades, the dominant states have promoted the globalization of the economy. Colonial wars, the occupation of territories and slavery have been replaced today by bilateral agreements and multilateral fora that perform the same role of submitting and subordinating the countries of the South to the power of the dominant states. As such, they imposed upon the world a technical and economic, production and consumption model sustained by the exploitation of labor, over-exploitation of nature and exploitation of other countries.

If the exploitation of peoples and countries can be perpetuated in spite of the serious conflicts resulting in exclusion, the exploitation of nature shows its limits and begins to affect the reproduction of capital itself, directly and indirectly, when diseases, decreased quality of life and disasters begin to raise suspicion and undermine the basis of support of the model.

The crisis that emerged in 2008, initially in the financial system, leaves no doubt as to the deep character of its roots, which shows the breakdown of legitimacy and the economic, social, environmental and political basis of support for the reproduction of the current model. The current crisis explicits the loss of hegemony of the concert of power that perpetuates itself since the end of World War II and of the international institutions that economic and politically support it. The crisis thus leaves breaches in terms of disputes related to the democratization of the international system. The new and unstable coalitions between countries, no longer crystallized in North-South divisions, are symptoms of a global political landscape in motion. Rio + 20 may be an important point of leverage for a new correlation of forces and a new global agenda. It offers social movements, grassroots organizations, aboriginal and traditional peoples` movements, trade unions, civil society organizations that seek to reflect or express the desires of broad sectors of the global population, the opportunity to renew their protest and questioning of the direction that corporations, institutions and dominant countries, accompanied by the majority of the political and economic elites, are giving to the future of the world by designing their utopias and formulating, in a more consistent form, the alternatives they envisage.

Rio + 20 and the construction of alternatives

As a global event, Rio +20 will allow us to go beyond our borders; open ourselves to universal solidarity, beyond the particularities; seek common points of view, capable of moving and joining us, from many places around the world. But the condition for this should be that our point of reference be our peoples and marginalized and excluded populations, with whom we share the aspirations for a society based on the pillar of rights and social and environmental justice.

We don't have all the answers but we have a responsibility to, between the desirable and the possible, search for them. But even the possible will not take place if it does not bear the utopias that restore the bonds between humans and nature in the rural and urban areas. It therefore requires a complete change of paradigms that define Western civilization. It requires other ways of organizing societies than the Nation-States, other forms of democracy than parliamentary democracy, other economies than the capitalist economy, another globalization than that of the market, other cultures than those imposed by the U.S.A. Listening carefully to our peoples may help us find the directions of the future and formulate new utopias to motivate humanity, particularly the youth.

Across the planet hundreds of thousands of alternatives are being developed that may be the seeds for the construction of new utopias:

- Millions of peasants, landless, indigenous peoples and other traditional groups resist and fight for Agrarian Reform, agroecology and the definite ownership of their ancestral lands. Supported by appropriate technologies, they can guarantee food and nutritional sovereignty and security for the planet and make a decisive contribution to the preservation of biodiversity, water and mitigation and adaptation to climate change. They present an alternative to the dominant model of agriculture and livestock that cause the destruction of ecosystems and biodiversity, greatly contributing to the greenhouse effect and the contamination of water, soil and people.
- Experiences of solidarity economy and of strengthening local markets contribute to the reduction of energy consumption shortening the circuits between production, distribution and consumption, promoting micro, small and medium enterprises that create jobs, as opposed to the movement of goods across the world and the permanent delocalization of enterprises and technological advances that do not reduce the consumption of energy and raw materials and produce unemployment.
- The logic of the economy should not be the generation of profits, but to ensure dignified living conditions for populations. An economy of solidarity is being strengthened to struggle against the dominant economy that excludes. In cities, fields and forests in the South of the world, most working men and women are in the informal economy, forgotten by macroeconomics and inventing a microeconomics that is partly substituting and competing with the formal economy and partly innovative.
- Reconstitution of a decentralized and internalized urban fabric, new housing and urban policies, of sanitation and collective transportation. These proposals aim to address the imbalance within towns and cities, which have become export platforms surrounded by huge agglomerations of poverty and misery that, in addition to the disequilibrium in terms of human occupation of national and regional spaces, turn the popular classes in these cities into the first victims of climate change.

The construction of alternatives and the institutional architecture

The global scale of power prevents the advancement of human emancipation in terms of the ideals registered in international pacts and conventions. Therefore, the advancement of these and other alternatives involves disputes and questions regarding the paradigms of the international institutions and actors that support the current model. This does not mean that we believe in a sudden and radical change in the global economy. The process necessarily involves thinking about coexistence, in transition in the medium and long term. This transition will be carried out less through the internal reform of the current entities of intervention in the economy, which would seek to reorient their strategies, methods and priorities, and more by building new spaces, new institutions that are not tainted by their past but rather open to a new correlation of forces and new agendas. The current entities will continue to be challenged to act differently and also to be reformed, but it should be expected that they will gradually lose their significance, when and because something radically new that will economic and politically grow as a counterweight will be created.

For this to occur it is necessary to look at the process towards Rio+20 as an opportunity to invest in the accumulation of forces, at the basis of society, capable of competing for a new hegemony. After the period of ascension of counter-hegemonic movement that began in Seattle and expanded with the World Social Forum, and the relative decline that mass mobilizations have experienced in recent years, Rio +20 arises as a possibility to leverage and re-articulate a political initiative at the global level.

It is this vision that guides and delimits our willingness to participate in the process that will take us to Rio +20. Based on this vision, we join the call of the Brazilian facilitation group created by a set of collectives summarized in the following sentence: "It is up to civil society to draw world attention to the serious impasse experienced by humanity and the impossibility of the dominant economic, political and cultural system to indicate and lead the way out of the crisis. It is also, however, the responsibility of civil society to assert and show other possible paths".