# THE BIG THEMES OF RIO+20: SOME PREVIOUS NOTES

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The Rio+20 Sustainable Development Conference represent the meeting international environmental issues in recent years. The inherent transversality of the environment as well as the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development raise the political importance of the meeting to the highest level, since important conclusions will be derived from it that will guide the design of a wide range of public policies during the next years.

Rio+20 regards the Rio Earth Summit as an unavoidable reference de Janeiro held in 1992. Precisely at this summit, the Framework Convention on Climate Change germinated from which the Kyoto Protocol would emerge, also constituting the starting point for important international agreements such as the Convention on Biological Diversity or initiatives such as the Local Agenda 21, a process today widely disseminated among a large number of municipalities throughout the world. The central themes of Rio+20 are, in first, the **green economy** in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication and, second, the **institutional framework** for sustainable development.

**Green economy**

The green model of economic growth fits perfectly within the framework of sustainable development, proposing a **new vision of the way in which we should produce and consume worldwide** in order, in addition to creating wealth, to attend to the main environmental challenges of our era and achieve the human development objectives that are defined in the Millennium Development Goals.

It is important to understand, therefore, that **the green economy in the United Nations is presented as**: a term inherent to sustainable development; a conceptual framework that proposes a new model of economic growth also aimed at eradicating poverty; and as an opportunity to promote green economic sectors, including job creation. The **sustainable development concept** is based mainly on the consideration and integration of social, economic and environmental variables in decision-making both from the public and private spheres. For its part, the **green economy concept** essentially focuses on the intersection between the environment and the economy, recognizing the importance of maintaining and increasing the health of ecosystems to ensure the well-being of present and future generations. . **According to UNEP, the green economy is characterized by its low carbon emissions and efficient use of natural resources**. Income and job creation are achieved by public and private investments aimed at:

- Reduce carbon emissions and pollution.
- Promote energy efficiency and efficient use of resources.
- Avoid the loss of biological diversity and ecosystem services.

In this way **the green economy contemplated within the framework of sustainable development is called to preserve, improve and restore natural capital as a fundamental economic asset and source of public income**. At a global level, the transition to a green economy requires the implementation of a wide range of measures related to regulations, policies, subsidies and national incentives, international markets, legal aspects, and trade and aid protocols.

Economic globalization has spread patterns of production and consumption that are increasingly putting more pressure on the essential ecosystems for the maintenance of life on Earth, making it necessary **at an international level** to implement measures aimed at improve trade infrastructure, enhance trade and aid flows between nations, and boost international cooperation.

**At the national level**, some of the measures to be adopted are related to changes in fiscal policy; use of new market-based economic instruments; public investment aimed at environmental improvement in key sectors; promotion of green public purchasing; or the improvement and execution of norms and regulations that favor the environment. On the other hand,**according to UNEP, the main guidelines in relation to the green economy go through**:

- Establish strong and stable regulatory frameworks.
- Prioritize public investment and spending to promote environmental improvement (increased efficiency, prevention of impacts, etc.) of the economic sectors.
- Limit spending in areas that deplete natural capital.
- Apply taxes and market-based economic instruments to change consumer preferences and stimulate green investment and innovation.
- Invest in skills development and training (towards green jobs).
- Strengthen international governance.

**Institutional framework for sustainable development**

Twenty years ago, at the Earth Summit in 1992, some important advances related to governance in the framework of sustainable development were achieved. Advances embodied in the Rio Declaration, in the launch of the Agenda 21 processes, and in the establishment of the so-called Rio "conventions": on biological diversity (BCD), to combat desertification (UNCCD ) and the fight against climate change (UNFCCC).

Just as the concept of green economy will be discussed at Rio+20, the United Nations has also chosen the subject of **governance for sustainable development**understanding that, on the one hand, it is necessary to establish a common framework agreement and understanding at a global level on this issue and, on the other hand, perceive that there is some potential for real change and progress to improve the institutional framework in related areas.

The eradication of poverty, on the one hand, and the increase in a population that has access to increasingly higher levels of consumption, on the other, represent the two great challenges that, ultimately, must be addressed at Rio+20. **A new global agreement must be established that defines the role of public institutions in promoting a green economy**. An agreement that helps to improve the trends of poverty in the South and hyper-consumption in the North, which, inevitably, go against social justice and the health of ecosystems.

As can be seen from the preparatory meetings for Rio+20, **the issue of governance will be addressed through the proposal of reforms in existing institutions related to sustainable development**, and it is noted that the key issue of the meeting will be how to strengthen the institutional framework of sustainable development at all levels.

The United Nations considers that **progress towards sustainable development must be supported by institutional reform not only at the global level, but also at the national, regional and local levels**. Given the vast differences in history, overall institutional capacity, and sustainable development challenges and priorities, it is not considered necessary to prepare a common plan to establish the institutional foundations for sustainable development at the national level.

Appropriate institutional structures should be modeled based on local realities, although it is clear that countries and regions with similar characteristics and challenges should exchange experiences, for which Rio+20 offers the ideal setting in which to engage in this type of debate.

**National sustainable development strategies are another key institutional issue for sustainable development**. From the United Nations it is stated that in many countries these strategies are the result of the gradual reform of the existing institutions, and that in some cases in which there were no planning processes or when these were not effective, it has been useful to establish new processes in relation to with national sustainable development strategies. It should be noted that a national sustainable development strategy is a process that requires continuous learning. In the context of these strategies, it is important to establish effective coordination mechanisms at the government level. In many cases, the creation of inter-ministerial councils and working groups headed by a central body (the Office of the Prime Minister or the President, or the finance and planning ministries) has been effective. In contrast, the idea of mandating some institutions to increase vertical coherence at the national and subnational levels is often less developed. Another institutional aspect is the need to find mechanisms to review existing strategies, such as internal and external expert review, peer review, or exchange processes.

In the document Beyond Rio+20: Governance for a Green Economy Boston University presents a series of suggestions that can be a good starting point to address the issue of institutional governance at Rio+20:

- **Daring proposals and *radical incrementalism***. Do not look for a single solution, but develop a package of proposals that combine financial initiatives, R&D, capacity development, public support, etc.
- **The business as usual scenario, in terms of economic policy, is not feasible**. Fundamental changes are needed at the micro and macro economic level and therefore a change in economic institutions. In particular, changes in the regulation of international trade and the financial sphere must be addressed.
- **Assess what already exists: there are public and private initiatives in pursuit of the green economy that are already underway**. The challenge is not so much to create new structures but to coordinate and improve the existing ones, evaluating their progress and effectiveness. In this sense, UNEP should be strengthened through funding and giving more stability and authority to the institution.
- **Focus effort on application rather than negotiation**. This requires more actively involving public, private and civil society agents at both the national and regional levels. A new multilevel governance focused on the application of measures must be launched, reaching the municipal level.
- **Although the participation of civil society and markets is necessary in the transition towards a green economy, the role of the state must remain central**. The state must favor and improve the participation of non-state agents and foster institutional innovation.
- **Human well-being: it should be the central concept of Rio+20,** which leads to paying attention to intra- and inter-generational equity, a central element of the green economy. In turn, this is linked to the review of the consumption model within the framework of sustainable development.

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