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RIO+20: TOWARDS SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

FORUM SUMMARY - KEY INSIGHTS



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HC Coombs Policy Forum

Forum Summary

Rio+20: Towards sustainable development

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Background

Rio+20, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) will be held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012. In the lead up to the Rio+20 conference, the Australian Departments of Sustainability, Environment, Water, Population and Communities (DSEWPaC) and Foreign Affairs and Trade (DFAT) invited the HC Coombs Policy Forum to convene a forum on one of the themes of Rio+20, 'a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication'. Academic, non-governmental and other stakeholders were invited to participate in the Forum, which was held in Canberra on 23 and 24 November 2011. The Forum agenda and list of participants are available at

http://publicpolicy.anu.edu.au/coombs/workshops/rio20_towards_sustainable_development/.

The objective of the Forum was to discuss and explore both a strategic framework for, as well as practical initiatives to help give effect to, the theme 'a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication.' Particular emphasis was given to considering how to work towards ensuring a framework that achieves the right balance of conceptual focus and practical initiatives, supports developed and developing countries, and addresses sustainable development and poverty eradication for 'blue and green economies'. Special emphasis was placed on the need to ensure that the outcomes from Rio+20 adequately address the challenges of a 'green economy in a blue world' – recognizing that marine resources and ecosystems are a foundation for sustainable development for many countries. The outcomes from the Forum's deliberations are presented below in the form of policy insights.

Summary of key insights

Many ideas and issues were discussed at the Forum, but five key insights emerged and re-emerged over the two days. The five key insights highlighted the need to:

1. Confirm Australia's commitment to the **Sustainable Development Goals** and showcase the excellent work by the Australian Bureau of Statistics in developing sustainable development indicators.
2. Establish a '**sustainability learning community**' or similar mechanism to collate, disseminate and promote the results of sustainable development initiatives for application in other jurisdictions, especially 'win win' and 'no regrets' strategies such as natural resource stewardship. Such a facility would need to provide knowledge feedback in both directions ie from the local level through to the national and international levels, and then back again to the local level.
3. Develop a formal framework for establishing **multiple regional frameworks** in support of the global multilateral process, noting that these regional frameworks would not replace multilateral fora and initiatives but instead provide platforms that are consistent with the agreed goals, targets, norms and principles of sustainability that have already been established at the global level.
4. Establish a mechanism to **harmonise existing multi-lateral environmental agreements** relating to land and water, as part of the institutional reform envisaged as part of the Rio+20 negotiations. A related insight was to reframe United Nations processes and initiatives to reflect overarching themes such as 'human wellbeing' and 'food security', thus demanding a higher degree of integration between a myriad of related issues.
5. Explore **innovative, long term financing initiatives**, possibly to be adopted in parallel with the regional frameworks identified above. The Nature Conservancy's debt relief proposal was proposed as particularly salient.

Australia's submission to the zero draft: Key points

The Australian Government's submission to the Rio+20 Compilation Document

<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?page=view&type=510&nr=692&menu=20>

heralds Rio+20 as 'a crucial opportunity to renew political commitment to sustainable development, and to set the agenda for the next twenty years' and calls for Rio+20 to 'overcome divides between developed and developing countries to support practical initiatives to promote sustainable development'. The Forum's discussions were framed by the Australian Government's submission.

Overall, the Forum participants endorsed Australia's submission whilst also providing a number of additional ideas and insights. A summary of the key ideas and insights that emerged from discussions at the Forum are presented below.

Summary of Forum discussions

Sustainable development: State of play

Forum participants generally agreed that since the 1992 Rio conference (United Nations Conference on Environment and Development), much has been learnt by the international community about the theory and practice of sustainable development. Strong progress can be found in the areas of natural resource stewardship, securing agricultural livelihoods and enabling social governance, for example. Yet it is not enough that isolated cases of success occur. Learning mechanisms must be established which allow the results of sustainable development initiatives – both successful and not – to be recognised and fed back into United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development discussions.

Forum participants suggested that one key reason why the results of previous sustainable development initiatives tend to be overlooked is the scales at which these efforts occur. It is apparent that many of the most successful sustainability initiatives are occurring not at the international or national level, but rather at sub-national levels or as sectoral linkages between countries. A practical challenge for the Rio+20 conference, then, is to create a structure which can recognise these successes, apply them more broadly in other jurisdictions (horizontally) and transfer them across different scales (vertically). The establishment of a ‘sustainable learning community’ would go some way to overcoming the disconnect between the local and international levels.

A strong and recurring theme throughout the Forum was that the international community needs to openly and honestly confront the ‘reality gap’ between the magnitude of the challenges it faces and the scale and urgency of its responses to date. It was suggested that for all the gains we have made, the gap between what we are doing and what we know we need to be doing is widening. There is therefore a crucial tension to be resolved between the art of the necessary (as determined by the scientific community and voiced by the international community’s most vulnerable members) and the art of the possible (as determined by current political paradigms, including those pervading international discussions at conferences such as Rio+20).

Considerable attention was dedicated to the importance of framing the Rio+20 conference within the longer-running sustainable development discussion. Forum participants agreed that Rio+20 needs to showcase leadership and demonstrate what is possible. As will be clear from the discussion below (see Strategic framework for Rio+20), however, it did not follow for participants that absolute consensus will be necessary at the international level in order to begin making strong practical inroads towards sustainable development. Participants also emphasised the importance of understanding why previous sustainability goals set by the international community have not been met, and ensuring processes for community engagement with future goals.

Forum participants recognised several political realities ahead of the Rio+20 conference. First amongst these is that the benefits of sustainable development still need to be convincingly articulated, especially for still-developing countries. Sustainable development is often portrayed as a zero sum game between the environment and the economy, a myth which must be tackled with renewed vigour given current global circumstances (see Unpacking ‘development’, below). It was suggested that one way of making sustainability arguments ‘stick’ is through identifying and promoting ‘no-regrets strategies’ such as natural resource stewardship and investing in the protection and sustainable management of ecosystems and biodiversity. These concerns are common to all countries and some successful policies and initiatives can be identified and used as models for the broader international community.

Forum participants suggested that a second political reality which needs to be addressed over the next five years is the handing to emerging economies of the 'sustainable development baton', to reflect geopolitical shifts which participants note are already manifest. As four-fifths of the economic growth to 2050 is expected to come from developing countries, it is decisions made in these countries which will increasingly shape the contours of global environmental impacts. Of course, there are concerns around the historical responsibility for present environmental conditions which cannot be ignored and the economic power of the EU and USA will continue to exert its influence. Nevertheless it is clear that sustainable development pathways must be pursued equally in developing as well as developed countries in the coming decades.

Unpacking 'development'

The Forum participants agreed that discussion of sustainable development must acknowledge the present global development divide and the implications for national and regional priorities. Most of the world's nations are still focused primarily – if not exclusively – on economic development for poverty alleviation, as both a priority and a right.

Participants discussed the consequences of bringing all countries up to western development standards through current western development pathways and their unsustainable modes of production and consumption. It was generally agreed that although these development objectives are self-evidently legitimate, achieving global sustainability requires changes in the modes and patterns of production and consumption. Opportunities discussed included:

A key strategy for achieving low-impact development centres through the possibility of 'leap-frogging' straight to environmentally friendly modes of development, for example through extensive use of global telecommunication technologies such as mobile phones, innovative transport and waste systems, and ensuring the design of new cities is guided by sustainability principles. Half of the infrastructure which will exist in 2050 has yet to be built, an idea which led participants to note that the tendency (and danger) behind this statistic will be to promote and sell what we in the western world are already familiar with, even if this may not be sustainable, especially when writ large across the globe. In discussions about the institutional framework to enable 'leap-frogging', financial and technological transfers were noted as crucial elements, including 'south-to-south' and 'south-to-north' transfers in some instances.

The question also arose of where priorities should lie, whether in retrofitting existing systems (such as Australia's national energy grid) or in enabling the uptake of sustainability design and technologies in new or rapidly expanding cities. It was generally accepted that a measure of cost-effectiveness should be applied to determine where the best opportunities exist for environmental benefits, although the responsibilities of – and capacity to act in – the developed world should also bear on this outcome.

Forum participants noted two myths which may need to be addressed at the Rio+20 discussions and beyond. The first myth centres on the idea that an unavoidable trade-off exists between environmental sustainability and economic growth, and hence that considerations about environmental health necessarily take place in the context of a 'zero sum game'. A second myth is the notion that decoupling economic growth from resource use is a luxury which only the developed world can afford. As discussed above in the context of 'leap-frogging' in development, the benefits of decoupling can actually be greater for developing countries, which are not yet locked into an environmentally-destructive development trajectory. However, it was further noted that decoupling rarely happens without good policy and government leadership. So it is vital that the many practical examples of successful decoupling are brought to the attention of governments.

Forum participants also endorsed the idea that the quality of economic growth matters, and should become more prominent in sustainable development discussions. Refocusing attention on ‘secure, equitable and durable’ economic growth – including through the development of appropriate metrics (see Practical approaches within the strategic framework, below) – will enable more emphasis on minimising long-term economic and societal risk through efforts targeted at natural resource stewardship and addressing strategic threats such as climate change.

Greater concern with the quality of growth as it relates to human health and wellbeing and a more comprehensive understanding of societal aims would engender a richer and more ethically-framed narrative on ‘development’. This more nuanced framing better reflects issues of inter- and intra-generational equity and the implications of different development pathways. Indeed, participants saw potential to reframe the development narrative by recognising that most people are less concerned about sustainable development as a concept than they are about their own personal and communal circumstances, for example relating to the health of fish stocks or water quality.

Strategic framework for Rio+20

During discussions, Forum participants suggested that what is needed most from Rio+20 are:

- a clear vision for sustainable development,
- frameworks that enable strong and supportive innovation in a direction consistent with the overall vision, and
- ensuring national, international and regional programmes are continuously informed by the best-, better- and worst-practice lessons learnt nationally and internationally.

The latter point in particular was reinforced throughout the Forum, with participants confirming that there are many innovative solutions and initiatives being undertaken daily all over the world, but that they are often not heard of beyond the immediate community – a mechanism for disseminating those solutions is needed and the idea of a ‘sustainable learning community’ emerged.

It was noted that there is a challenge in finding operational frameworks that can apply with equal relevance to both developing and developed countries, and further, that while there is a great deal of practical innovation happening in all sectors, integrating all this activity and drawing out general principles and guidelines for particular contexts remains a challenge. Nonetheless, from the participants’ discussions, the following elements of a strategic framework emerged.

Discussions about advancing sustainable development practice at Rio+20 generated some compelling ideas. Consistent support was given to the idea that multiple, compatible frameworks may be superior to a singular all-encompassing framework operating across the vast range of different aspirations, needs and circumstances of countries. The idea of multiple frameworks was not intended to imply an abandonment of multilateral approaches to sustainable development. Rather, the need is to provide platforms that (i) are consistent with agreed goals, targets, norms and principles of sustainability but (ii) to which all countries – and, importantly, regional groupings of countries – find relevant and empowering.

A focus on regional frameworks - linked to global goals and targets, norms, and principles - would change the dynamics and to some degree the expectations of an international sustainability conference such as Rio+20. More attention could be given to sharing the lessons of national strategies on sustainable development, identifying shared regional problems and opportunities, and establishing domestic and regional targets towards globally agreed goals. The issue of monitoring and reporting on sustainability pledges could also be considered in the context of regional frameworks. Countries facing similar challenges or with similar aspirations can link up with ‘playing partners’ where lessons can be transferred. Such an approach reflects growing recognition for complementary ‘bottom-up’ approaches to global environmental negotiations.

Through devolving a degree of responsibility back to regional groupings, this approach would allow for internationally-agreed actions to be better aligned with national interests, priorities, responsibilities and capacities. One necessary precondition for enacting regional frameworks would be stronger review mechanisms within international fora to ensure that domestic and regional responses are harmonised with, and contribute to, the global scale of the sustainability challenge. Trust and confidence would need to be earned within such a regional framework, of course, but could be expected to increase with time as countries and country groupings begin to deliver results.

Forum participants discussed the need for a mechanism to harmonise existing multi-lateral environment agreements relating to land and water (including biodiversity, forests, desertification, wetlands, and soil) as part of the Rio+20 theme on institutional reform. Associated with this point is the need to improve the coherence of international environmental governance processes. In this context, the question was raised as to how Rio+20 and subsequent meetings can help address this need. Similarly, Rio+20 and related processes must be integrated with climate change negotiations and responses.

Participants also supported the need for a new platform that would provide a space for constructive dialogue between sectors – public, private, civil society - focused on long-term, strategic sustainable development issues. In particular, such a platform would facilitate the role of the private sector in sustainable development as they are central to both innovation and implementation. It was emphasised that ‘the private sector’ - and more generally ‘the market’ – should be viewed not as an independent realm but rather as a potential strategic partner with which governments and civil society can constructively engage, cooperate and guide.

Practical approaches within the strategic framework

Turning to discussions of practical approaches, Forum participants agreed first and foremost that more feedback loops are needed to better couple ‘policy’ and ‘practice’ consistent with an ‘adaptive management’ approach. Participants considered that regional initiatives – especially those with support at the highest level of government – should be showcased at the Rio+20 conference and emulated elsewhere. The Coral Triangle Initiative is a prime example of a geographically well-defined area, of strategic priority to Australia, that encompasses multiple issues crucial to the future of many Asia-Pacific nations, and which is attracting strong support from players in all sectors.

Crucial questions were raised by participants over how progress on sustainable development can be measured. Participants heard that the Australian Government is already working both domestically and with other countries to develop sustainability indicators. Participants proposed that these indicators need to be both reliable and accessible for all sectors, at the national and community level. As the limitations of Gross Domestic Product (GDP) as a sustainability measure are now widely appreciated, participants considered several complementary concepts to conventional economic growth, including ‘wellbeing’ and ‘population health’, and generally supported the compilation of a range of social, environmental and economic indicators. For example, participants heard that the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) is now requiring member countries to report on the resource implications of their economic growth, and considered whether this approach could be extended to form part of international commitments at Rio+20 and beyond. The work showcased at the Forum by the Australian Bureau of Statistics on sustainability indicators was considered by participants to be ‘cutting edge’ with enormous potential for extrapolation to the international community writ-large. Participants also noted Colombia’s proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs additional but complementary to the Millennium Development Goals) and endorsed the notion that SDGs should be developed and should feed into the next generation of MDGs. There are outstanding questions over how precise these SDGs would need to be and for which situations and issues they might be critical, and conversely, peripheral.

Forum participants considered that Rio+20 could usefully reinforce the idea that sustainable development strategies and responses must often connect multiple relevant issues, for instance through a holistic 'systems analysis' of human wellbeing, health and livelihoods. 'Energy, water and food' is another example of a 'nexus' of interwoven issues where advances in any single area could generate unintended outcomes in another, jeopardising resource security and stability. Frameworks for responding to such 'nexus challenges' could include cross-sectoral information provision, use of appropriate technologies, cross-sectoral market participation and regulatory provisions.

One particularly innovative mechanism discussed at the Forum aimed at achieving greater economic resilience in small island states. It was proposed that a long-term financing mechanism (initiated by strategic debt relief, but potentially also by an aid grant) could allow small island states to establish a trust which is charged with providing economic security over the medium to long-term. Such mechanisms have already been successfully practiced in the western Pacific, but there is potential for Australia's aid and diplomatic communities to further embrace these innovative initiatives.

Focus on Australia

Attention turned to what role Australia could play in creating elements of the strategic framework outlined above (see Strategic framework for Rio+20), and in turn what implications such a framework might have for Australian sustainability policy and practice.

With the expectation of continued economic growth, as espoused by developing and developed countries alike, there must be a renewed focus in public policy on environmentally responsible and radically resource-efficient production. This should be coupled with greater experimentation in encouraging 'green' behaviour and actions (targeted according to possible benefits) in the private sector. In an age of 'planetary boundaries', participants noted that high income countries (and households) will need to reduce their ecological footprint in absolute terms to create 'ecological space' for necessary growth in developing countries.

For developed countries such as Australia, participants agreed that analysing patterns of consumption and production are ways of promoting understanding of what constitutes 'un-sustainability'. In this context two key questions are (i) how much can be achieved through market-based mechanisms and voluntary arrangements and (ii) what kinds of regulatory frameworks are needed? A major challenge is to find the right mix of regulation, markets and volunteerism.

Focusing on the environmental implications of consumption suggests that it is not just developed countries, but consumerist classes of all countries for which common responsibilities must be recognised. Demand management - through pricing and education policy - is a critical yet undervalued approach to ameliorating the environmental pressures of consumption, but it remains contingent on a broader ethic of responsibility (at individual, business, national levels) in a finite world with planetary boundaries. Common responsibilities should be emphasised amongst commensurate social demographics across countries, given the existence of poverty within developed countries and the emergence of wealthy elites and middle classes within developing countries.

Forum participants proposed that a new compact could be formed between science, society and decision-makers in order to create a rapid sustainability learning community. Issues raised within this discussion included the need to strengthen links between science, policy, and innovation. It was also recognised that progressive policy and outcomes require a broad and strong base of societal support.

Concluding remarks

Forum participants supported an ambitious sustainability agenda for Australia at Rio+20 and beyond. Participants noted that the relatively low expectations to date of the Rio+20 conference are on the one hand disappointing but on the other may provide opportunities for more constructive dialogue and fresh thinking. For example, the Forum's suggestion for a regional framework approach could help refresh the somewhat stagnated state of international sustainable development discussions.

Overall, the Forum's participants endorsed Australia's submission to the Rio+20 Compilation Document. Participants identified a number of important insights which could be developed over the coming period within the Australian Government and with like-minded partners. Perhaps most salient of all the insights was the recognition by Forum participants that sustainable development is a long term, iterative process and thus all initiatives must be pursued with a view to making progress before, during and after conferences such as Rio+20 in June 2012. With that in mind, and particularly in relation to the planning for a second HC Coombs Policy Forum, it would therefore be appropriate to focus on one or two of the key insights that have been identified in this document and aim to develop them (at least in part) with appropriate partners from our region prior to the Rio+20 conference.