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DSDS 2012

Protecting The Global Commons: 20 Years Post Rio

Commons are those resources, which are not owned by anyone, but are shared by a community. This includes the earth's atmosphere, the ocean floor, Antarctica, and the outer space. The Rio Summit, at Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in June 1992 produced several conventions dealing with climate change, biodiversity, and forestry. The result was a list of sustainable development practices called "Agenda 21". However, the obvious discord between the "global north" and the "global south" persists and the consensus reached on sustainable development has not yet been realized fully. Thus, it is time to take an unbiased stock of the existing situation 20 years since Rio, and chart out a roadmap for the future. This is the intent of the next DSDS, which will be an important milestone in the context of global negotiations in the realm of sustainable development.

Summit sub-themes

DSDS 2012, under the broad rubric of "Protecting The Global Commons: 20 Years Post Rio", will take an unbiased stock of the existing situation; 20 years since Rio; and chart a roadmap for the preservation of our commons in the future. Beginning with this issue of the DSDS e-Newsletter, we propose to examine in detail each of our shared commons, which constitute the sub-themes at the upcoming Summit. We set the ball rolling with lifestyles and forests and wildlife.



Lifestyles

Dr Shilpi Kapur,
Associate Fellow, TERI

Global natural resource commons include global fossil fuel supplies; the global climate and ocean and the "services" they provide to humanity; and air and water quality at large geographical scales, which are being threatened with degradation as a result of collective human activity. Increased economic access and changing demographics, particularly the emergence of a new "middle class", which is the fastest growing segment of the population in the developing world, has resulted in distinctive lifestyles, consumption patterns, and social identity that is breaking down the boundaries in standards and aspirations and leaving a profound, and irreversible mark on the planet's shared resources—the global commons. The implications on the ozone layer, the oceans, the atmosphere, and rivers, which cross national boundaries are not confined to a single country and are part of the global commons.

Current generations are ignoring their responsibility towards its future generations and other species. Many examples are available of the consequences of their unsustainable lifestyles that are causing serious ecological damage, including those to the global commons, which will eventually undermine social and economic development. To give an example, the changing food consumption patterns and the underlying agricultural production processes are accounting, to a significant degree, for global environmental pressures, including land use

changes, water use, biodiversity loss, and even climate change through methane emissions. Further, the energy-intensive lifestyles are causing an increase in greenhouse gas emissions, which adversely affect the environment. There is a need for the global community to recognize the damage to the global commons that is resulting from the increase in resource use, and greenhouse gas emissions from the scale of the infrastructure needed for every aspect of their lifestyle choices—from energy, housing, and transport, to education and health care. However, any endeavor towards sustainable development will require this damage to be controlled and the lifestyles to change to ways that encourage informed and compassionate use of the global commons. From a sustainability perspective, damaging the global commons destroys not only the natural capital, but also affects the entire gamut of ecosystem services, and the interdependent web of life that constitutes the planet's ecological life support system. There is significant amount of research that has been done on the use and misuse of the commons, but the impact that the unsustainable lifestyles can have on the global commons needs to be examined and the average citizens need to be made aware of these impacts. No individual, organization, or nation-state has the “right” to damage these entities. Attention needs to be focussed on reducing the pressure on global commons that is being generated by unsustainable lifestyles and consumption patterns, combined with the goal of minimizing depletion and reducing pollution.



Forests and wildlife

Mr Soumitri Das,
Fellow, TERI

Twenty years since Rio, we are still working towards feasible management of the global commons. Forests were an inherent part of both the biodiversity and

climate change conventions adopted at Rio in 1992. Despite the failure to reach a specific forest convention, Rio did result in the Forest Principles—the “Non-legally binding authoritative statement of principles for a global consensus on the management, conservation, and sustainable development of all types of forests”. In any case, the Rio Declaration and the Forest Principles, in particular, led to the establishment of the United Nations Forum on Forests (UNFF) in 2000. The Forum adopted the landmark “Non-Legally Binding Instrument on All Types of Forests” on 28 April 2007. Recognizing that forests and sustainable forest management can contribute significantly to sustainable development, poverty eradication, and the achievement of internationally agreed development goals, including the Millennium Development Goals, the UN General Assembly declared 2011 as the International Year of Forests.

As important to protect the tropical forests as global commons for mitigating climate change (as deforestation and forest degradation represent a major source of greenhouse gas emissions) is to conserve them as wildlife habitat or, indeed, as biodiversity habitats. It was in the same vein the UN General Assembly had declared 2010 as the International Year of Biodiversity. It should be noted that while the Forest Principles at Rio were agreed upon, they were found to be weak on account of US refusal to go along with any binding commitments in the climate treaty. While the industrial nations set out wanting a binding forest convention, the developing nations resisted having the forests as the focus of carbon sequestration, rather than the limiting of carbon emissions by the North. Not to mention their fear of loss of national sovereignty; they were still prepared to sign away a part of the sovereignty (by setting aside part of their forests) in return for increased aid that was not forthcoming. Also, while the developing world demanded a greater share of the economic benefits arising from the use of resources within their boundaries, the developed world became increasingly apprehensive about the accelerating rate of biodiversity loss and its global consequence, for example, the climate change effect of tropical deforestation. While the situation 20 years on has improved in terms of UNFF and the Bali Action Plan, among others, the developing world would still need to be adequately compensated for their efforts at maintaining global ecosystem services of forests—an issue that needs urgent attention in light of their very legitimate development aspirations. Rio strongly added the development dimension to the environment and wildlife issues of Stockholm. Rio+20 would have to further add an economic angle to the debates.

Confirmed Speakers at DSDS 2012 (* as of 20 October, 2011)

H.E. Mr Jose Maria Figueres Olsen, Former President of Costa Rica Government

Noble Laureates

Nobel Laureate Dr Elinor Ostrom, Professor, Indiana University, USA

Nobel Laureate Prof Paul J. Crutzen, Director Emeritus, Max-Planck-Institute for Chemistry, Mainz, Germany

Multilateral/Bilateral/Institutions/Foundations

Mr Haruhiko Kuroda, President, Asian Development Bank, Philippines

Mr Michael Keating, Deputy Special Representative of the Secretary General, United Nations Assistance Mission in Afghanistan (UNAMA), Afghanistan

Dr David Molden, Director General Designate, International Centre for Integrated Mountain Development (ICIMOD), Kathmandu, Nepal

Prof Rajesh Chandra, Vice Chancellor and President, The University of the South Pacific, Fiji

Dr John Byrne, Distinguished Professor of Energy and Climate Policy, Center for Energy & Environmental Policy, University of Delaware, USA

Prof Johan Rockström, Executive Director, Stockholm Environment Institute, Sweden

Media

Mr Ian Katz, Deputy Editor, The Guardian, London