Tuesday, March 26, 2013

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Jeffrey D. Sachs

Jeffrey D. Sachs, Professor of Sustainable Development, Professor of Health Policy and Management, and Director of the Earth Institute at Columbia University, is also Special Adviser to the United …
NEW YORK – One of the world’s pre-eminent scientific publications, *Nature*, has just issued a scathing report card in advance of next week’s Rio+20 summit on sustainable development. The grades for implementation of the three great treaties signed at the first Rio Earth Summit in 1992 were as follows: Climate Change – F; Biological Diversity – F; and Combating Desertification – F. Can humanity still avoid getting itself expelled?

We have known for at least a generation that the world needs a course correction. Instead of powering the world economy with fossil fuels, we need to mobilize much greater use of low-carbon alternatives such as wind, solar, and geothermal power. Instead of hunting, fishing, and clearing land without regard for the impact on other species, we need to pace our agricultural production, fishing, and logging in line with the environment’s carrying capacity. Instead of leaving the world’s most vulnerable people without access to family planning, education, and basic health care, we need to end extreme poverty and reduce the soaring fertility rates that persist in the poorest parts of the world.

In short, we need to recognize that with seven billion people today, and nine billion by mid-century, all inter-connected in a high-tech, energy-intensive global economy, our collective capacity to destroy the planet’s life-support systems is unprecedented. Yet the consequences of our individual actions are typically so far removed from our daily awareness that we can go right over the cliff without even knowing it.

When we power our computers and lights, we are unaware of the carbon emissions that result. When we eat our meals, we are unaware of the deforestation that has resulted from
unsustainable farming. And when billions of our actions combine to create famines and floods halfway around the world, afflicting the poorest people in drought-prone Mali and Kenya, few of us are even dimly aware of the dangerous snares of global interconnectedness.

Twenty years ago, the world tried to address these realities through treaties and international law. The agreements that emerged in 1992 at the first Rio summit were good ones: thoughtful, far-sighted, public-spirited, and focused on global priorities. Yet they have not saved us.

Those treaties lived in the shadow of our daily politics, imaginations, and media cycles. Diplomats trudged off to conferences year after year to implement them, but the main results were neglect, delay, and bickering over legalities. Twenty years on, we have only three failing grades to show for our efforts.

Is there a different way? The path through international law engages lawyers and diplomats, but not the engineers, scientists, and community leaders on the front lines of sustainable development. It is littered with technical arcana about monitoring, binding obligations, annex-I and non-annex-I countries, and thousands of other legalisms, but has failed to give humanity the language to discuss our own survival.

We have thousands of documents but a failure to speak plainly to one other. Do we want to save ourselves and our children? Why didn’t we say so?

At Rio+20 we will have to say so, clearly, decisively, and in a way that leads to problem-solving and action, not to bickering and defensiveness. Since politicians follow public opinion rather than lead it, it must be the public itself that demands its own survival, not elected officials who are somehow supposed to save us despite ourselves. There are few heroes in politics; waiting for the politicians would be to wait too long.

The most important outcome in Rio, therefore, will not be a new treaty, binding clause, or political commitment. It will be a global call to action. Around the world, the cry is rising to put sustainable development at the center of global thinking and action, especially to help young people to solve the triple-bottom-line challenge – economic well-being, environmental sustainability, and social inclusion – that will define their era. Rio+20 can help them to do it.

Rather than a new treaty, let us adopt at Rio+20 a set of Sustainable Development Goals, or SDGs, that will inspire a generation to act. Just as the Millennium Development Goals opened our eyes to extreme poverty and promoted unprecedented global action to fight AIDS, tuberculosis, and malaria, the SDGs can open the eyes of today’s youth to climate change, biodiversity loss, and the disasters of desertification. We can still make good on the three Rio treaties, by putting people at the forefront of the effort.

SDGs to end extreme poverty; decarbonize the energy system; slow population growth; promote sustainable food supplies; protect the oceans, forests, and drylands; and redress the inequalities of our time can galvanize a generation’s worth of problem-solving. Engineers and technology wizards from Silicon Valley to São Paolo to Bangalore to Shanghai have world-saving ideas up their sleeves.

Universities around the world are home to legions of students and faculty intent on solving practical problems in their communities and countries. Businesses, at least the good ones, know that they can’t flourish and motivate their workers and consumers unless they are part of the solution.

The world is poised to act. Rio+20 can help to unleash a generation of action. There is still time, just barely, to turn the F’s to A’s, and to pass humanity’s ultimate test.
Having groped my way into the triple-bottom line world in the last 10 years, I find that, to the economic, environmental and social pillars, a spiritual one should be added. It comes with the currencies of goodwill, appreciation and inner peace so necessary to harmonizing the other 3 pillars. Working in the slums and among the poor in Nairobi, the feeling has been the need to first engender trust and a sense of responsibility to the larger community, say, Africa. Thus, discourse invariably commences on an ideological plane, inherently spiritual.

The bank yonder is misty, the river is wide, silent...let’s make the leaps of faith, from one stepping stone to another.
I sense that the important point to take from this is the idea of technology at the forefront of responding to climate change. Politicians from both developed and developing countries have worked tirelessly to implement treaties, policies and other forms of motivation but the reality is that we have not done enough. The role of politics should now be to provide real economic incentives for investment in change, given the way our society functions, genuine economic reform trumps a motivational speech every time.

jallo jallo 24 June 2012

The reality is that anything that would resemble sustainable development is not going to be called for public opinion either, and thisis where Prof. Sachs expectations are doomed to be unfulfilled. And why is that? Because achieving anything that would remotely resemble sustainable development would imply making hard choices, and giving up things that most people in the West value, (or they think that they value) namely individualism and freedom of choice (as consumers), materialism and opulent lifestyles, environmentally insensitive technologies that make our life easier, high expectations of comfort, etc. Anything different to these would be greenwashing. What we need to make people understand is that these privileges have been achieved as a result of centuries of unsustainable economic growth and they will disappear anyway as ecological limits to growth

james durante 20 June 2012

There are two fundamental barriers to the kind of "course correction" Sachs is talking about: capitalism and the nation state. Look at almost all the articles on this site: the mantra is growth. It is difficult to imagine that in the real political world there will be any real aspirations for the goals Sachs mentions. Each one is contradicted by individual and national interests, at least in the broad context of the twin pillars of modernity. Consider the current presidential election in the US. As far as I can tell neither candidate will have any interest or motivation in discussing Sachs' worthy goals.

The precipice is here. Look over the edge.

Frank O'Callaghan 19 June 2012

Professor Sachs is a breath of fresh air. He does not deny the problems or lessen their daunting scale. Yet he suggests that Humanity can deal with the threat of global climate change. I am not sure that I agree with him. We can certainly influence the rate of change and perhaps the nature of that change, e.g. in anti-desertification and reforestation schemes.

I hope that he is right. It is probably right to hope. It may even have an effect on the outcomes by improving motivations of the actors. My fear is that we have passed a tipping point and that the juggernaut of climate change is in irresistible motion.
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