

FOURTH UNECE REGIONAL IMPLEMENTATION MEETING ON
SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
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Agenda item 10. Cross-cutting issues, interlinkages and implementation of CSD-17 decisions

Keynote address by the Northern Alliance for Sustainability¹

Professor Norman Myers, then at Oxford University was asked by United Nations University in 2001 to reflect on the nature of interlinkages in sustainable development. He summarised his reflections the following way:

“There has been little progress toward sustainable development since the Rio Earth Summit. In many respects, indeed, our economies are worse placed than before, and much the same applies to most governments, many international agencies, and virtually all businesses--also to our lifestyles, our social paradigms, even our value systems. Yet this is not entirely due to ignorance, myopia and other well known shortcomings. It is also due to deficiencies in our institutional structures that persuade governments, etc., also individual citizens, to behave in ways that run counter to sustainable development, unwittingly harmful though their practices may be. There is a need to expand our analytic purview beyond conventional problems of pollution, waste, over-exploitation of resources and the like. We need to address sources of problems by e.g. devising substitutes for GDP as indicators of economic wellbeing, engaging in full-cost pricing, shifting the tax burden, eliminating perverse subsidies, and eliminating other institutional roadblocks that stand in the way of the many eco-technologies that could go far to help us squeeze through the environmental bottlenecks ahead. These measures would lead to more productive economies as well as environmental safeguards, also to emphasis on quality of life as well as quantity of livelihood: a win-win outcome in an interlinked world.”

The five themes of this CSD cycle, mining, chemicals, waste management, transport and SCP are contextualized in an interlinked nature in the introductory chapter in the Discussion Paper prepared for the CSD Review Session by the global NGO community which to a large extent resembles what professor Myer wrote eight years ago. The NGO paper stresses however what UNEP has identified as one of the drivers causing environmental degradation and an unjust world – an overwhelming focus on economic growth. The NGO paper identifies economic practices as an interlinking element, and challenges CSD to think beyond GDP, and embrace as a point of departure for this thinking an economy based on sufficiency and de-growth.

What we all emphatically say today about the interconnected or interlinked nature of sustainable development is nothing new. The US marine biologist Rachel Carson said it in the 1960s, she was largely ignored; Barry Commoner, another US environmentalist said it in the 1970s as did UNEP in 1972; their messages went largely unheeded. The Brundtland Commission placed sustainable development firmly on the global agenda in 1987, and argued strongly for the interlinked nature of the world. UNCED in 1992 gave interlinkages a negotiated outcome with 27 principles and an

¹ The text is presented as received from the author.

agenda for this century. WSSD arrived at a plan to implement all this in 2002. Now is perhaps the time to translate the interlinked nature of sustainable development into real and implementable actions. Let us not squander this opportunity.

Life is at the centre of sustainable development – dealing with the CSD themes in isolated sections is detrimental to this understanding.

SCP – often a driver at every level to negate the basics of sustainable development, yet it holds the promise of solving many of the problems<vv related to sustainable development.

Waste and waste management, as a problem the end result of unbridled consumerism, if understood, its negative effects easily reduced;

Chemicals– if used uncontrolled, detrimental to sustainable development and its sisters and brothers in pesticides and pollutants, if understood and used in controlled manners, an agent to promote development;

Mining and resource extraction, unless executed in the context of sustainable development, it is ruinous to nature and today the extractive industries many places seem heedless of life, rights and corporate social responsibility. Mining based on the basic principles of sustainable development carries the potential of furnishing this world with resources to provide for a material well being for people

Transport – its very nature carries a huge potential to reduce emissions, help curb energy use, but today it is actually contributing to the opposite;

Universal standards of production, strengthening of social responsibility, corporate and individual, understandable labelling on products, application of life cycle approaches, understandable information on recycling, if all these elements were used in the production process of the above five issues, we would be on our way to a socially just and sustainable world.

Allow me to stray over to a related theme, answering the challenge that the co-chairs raised in their introductory remarks yesterday – using potential synergies with other UN related events.

More people than ever before are concerned about sustainable development, but they are only talking about climate change and global warming. Here we are today but a few days away from COP 15. We know today that no legally binding document will come from this conference.

The problems of climate issues are almost all seen in the context of energy use as a driver of global warming, its solution lies in efficiency and technological innovation. There is little talk of the interlinking nature of this huge complex of problems. Above all, the issues of SCP as we understands it seems to sorely missing as an issue at COP 15. Will we be able to provide the issue of climate change with a wider context, a context of interlinkages? CSD failed miserably in 2007, when it dealt with climate and energy, and produced the first inconclusive outcome ever. The issue of interlinkages was one that the delegations failed to understand and accept. Let us do better with interlinkages this time.

The very nature of sustainable development is interlinkages. The very nature of the present CSD themes, chemicals, mining, waste management, transport, and SCP is interlinkages. And the very nature of climate issue is also found in interlinkages.

UNDP in its 2007 report on Climate issues uses another word with the same context and talks about interdependence. A small quote:

“Climate change is different from other problems facing humanity – and it challenges us to think differently at many levels. Above all, it challenges us to think about what it means to live as part of an ecologically interdependent human community. Ecological interdependence is not an abstract concept”.

The world today is highly interdependent, but not interlinked in values, equity, thinking, policies, institutions, governance, and delivery mechanisms including business, lifestyles and education.

We are at a watershed in the history of humanity. We face dramatic choices concerning the well being of our planet and the choices we are about to make, may take us forward in a right or wrong direction.

Changing our life patterns and basing them totally on sustainable development in a just global society is no longer a question of lack of knowledge or not having enough resources or money or not knowing what to do.

It is a question of political will, and doing the right thing for all people.

People in general are capable of making the right choices to guarantee a future for humanity in a sustainable world. But frightening people into action, does not work. Merely giving them information is not enough.

Education for sustainable consumption is a prerequisite to understand the complexities and challenges to our lifestyles, to understand the nature of interlinkages and to see a way forward to solutions. Education for sustainable consumption in short holds the promise of helping us to learn to be more responsible. Education for sustainable consumption is about developing critical thinking and create solutions and awareness of the consequences of our actions. Education for sustainable consumption is as such both a cross cutting issue as well as an expression of the interlinked nature of sustainable development.

Ladies and gentlemen,

We are in a quandary.

We need quick actions but will see no quick results.

We need quick capital and massive finance to pay for these actions, with no promise of immediate and massive returns.

We need simple understanding of complex problems.

We need commitments to last for 30 years and more, but our fear and impatience, do not speak of maintaining a high level of commitments for as long as it takes.

Our growing anxieties of something gone irredeemably wrong and our tendencies to be pugnacious about issues that concern what are perceived as dramatic changes in our lifestyles may cause us to accept choices that should not be accepted.

A basic premise for solving this quandary, is recognizing the interlinked nature of sustainable development, and not isolate the substantive issues on the CSD agenda from each other. If we succeed in that, we may accomplish more than they will do at COP 15, and perhaps contribute to a successful outcome of COP 16 as well as the success of this present process which will end by CSD 19 in May 2011.

Though there are limits to growth, there are no limits to human creativity.

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