EDITORIAL

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Transforming livelihoods and lifestyles for the well-being of all: a Peoples’ Sustainability Treaty on Consumption and Production

One might be surprised that the outcome of the Rio+20 Summit this past summer still had the power to disappoint both civil society stakeholders and engaged policy makers. Despite all the knowledge and experience gathered since 1992—perhaps even since the publication of Limits to Growth two decades earlier—about the worsening state of the earth’s ecosystems and the increasing inequity within and between countries, the global political language and mindset remained resolutely committed to growth. While sustainable development was a shared hope at the 1992 Rio gathering, in June 2012 governments around the world focused on “sustained growth.”

Contrary to the general thrust of the conference, some civil society groups long involved in global policy processes began to cultivate an alternative effort prior to Rio+20 to articulate the measures and actions required for a movement toward a genuinely sustainable future. This process morphed into the Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties (2012).1 The objective of the treaties is to focus on post-Rio+20 processes, while building on many years of work already done globally. The questions around which the treaties are coalescing are: what needs to happen during the post-Rio period to initiate a global transition toward an authentically sustainable future? What would we, as civil society and acting collectively, like to see happen over the next few years, despite what governments and corporations may or may not do? Are there actions and commitments that we, collectively and individually, feel obliged to make regarding our own responsibilities toward the future? If, for whatever complex set of reasons, governments choose not to act, what should our own response be?

Among the fourteen treaties that have emerged to date is the Peoples’ Sustainability Treaty on Consumption and Production. For those engaged in the formulation process, the message is quite clear: economic growth, as a recipe to cure all the world’s ills, will certainly fail to deliver, given the macro-scale constraints on the system—the ecosphere. All the weak approaches discussed and implemented to date to encourage sustainable consumption and production—by focusing on consumers as active market actors, by encouraging the purchase of greener or more efficient products, and by promoting so-called win-win solutions—are far from sufficient. Efficiency and market-based strategies are surely useful principles for, as the treaty conveys in its subtitle, “transforming livelihoods and lifestyles for the well-being of all.” Nevertheless, the idea of efficiency, which is necessary but ultimately inadequate to meaningful action, must be subsumed within a set of more expansive principles that are often neglected:

- **Equitable Consumption:** Facilitating a fair but limited share of the planet’s resources for all people on earth.
- **Well-being:** Provisioning the conditions for fulfilling basic needs, which are necessary (but hardly sufficient) for a good life.
- **Sufficiency:** Engaging in life from a sense of personal wholeness, rather than an unthinking longing for material acquisition and the mindless accumulation of wealth.
- **Sustainable Societies:** Ensuring social equity and ecological balance by appreciating the well-being generated outside markets from household production and voluntary work.

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1 Fourteen Peoples’ Sustainability Treaties have emerged so far, focusing on the Rights of Mother Earth, Ethical and Spiritual Values for Sustainable Development, Radical Ecological Democracy, Equity, Rights for Sustainability, Consumption and Production, Sustainable Economies, Sustainable Development Goals, Sustainable Development Governance, Corporate Social Responsibility and Accountability, Transitioning to a Zero Fossil Fuels World, Environmental Education for Sustainable Societies and Global Responsibility, Higher Education Towards Sustainable Development, and Charter of Universal Responsibility (see http://www.sustainabilitytreaties.org).
• Decentralized Governance: Enabling sustainability to generate resilience at the community level. Governance should build on the principle of subsidiarity and recognize a real need for global, supranational, and even national action. However, it is important to emphasize that actions for sustainability should devolve to the lowest effective level of governance. Local efforts should take priority over global action, but it is important to recognize that all local action is predicated on the enablement of global action.

Based on these principles, the treaty calls for commitments by governments, business, international organizations, and the scientific community. The backbone of this call, however, are the commitments and the actions proposed by civil society organizations (CSOs) themselves. The underlying approach is to better mobilize civil society—instead of individual consumers—to claim their rights as citizens for re-structuring the world’s economies toward sustainability. This would be done through:

• Promoting sustainably localized lifestyles by setting examples, for instance in transportation, food supply, housing, leisure, and financial management.
• Campaigning for sustainable lifestyles while rejecting existing modes of advertising and media promotion of wasteful and materialistic living.
• Engaging actively in politics and policies at all levels of governance.
• Influencing businesses to behave more sustainably through buyers’ actions that support a sense of sufficiency, respect for ecological limits, and implementation of policies that promote restraint on consumption and wasteful production.

Countless people have fortunately already started on paths toward sustainable consumption and production by, for example, engaging in local food cooperatives or public gardening, provisioning services with explicit sustainable character, participating in neighborhood centers, and joining alternative currency schemes. These are among the social innovations building the foundation for strong sustainable consumption. They constitute the development projects out of which a sustainable global future will grow and inspire a new narrative where a feeling of contentment builds the mental and emotional models for experiencing a good life for everyone and where caring and responsibility, instead of individual self-interest and consumerism, are the underlying values. Signatories to the treaty commit to supporting the development of such initiatives powering an expeditious way forward. Depending upon the respective focus of each signatory organization, they commit to:

• Stop appealing to consumerist and materialistic values and conceptual frames (e.g., economic growth and nationalism) for short-term gain, knowing that these tactics create long-term harm by reinforcing a culture of materialistic consumerism. Instead, we commit to supporting local initiatives and to facilitate learning exchanges for the new economy.
• Develop internal capacity within all organizations for new economic thinking and integrate this knowledge into our own strategies and visions.
• Engage and provide opportunities for a wide participatory dialogue around a new narrative of sustainable consumption and production. This narrative has to be made concrete by millions of people empowered to develop shared leadership. Future civil society campaigns will gain from more participatory processes and the notion of shared leadership.
• Cooperate much more actively with successful change agents who can be found at all levels and who are developing the seeds of the emergent new economy. These individuals and organizations require support for their innovations to spread and to become institutionalized.

That the treaty is in a process of ongoing development became clear at the Peoples’ Summit held in Rio in parallel with the official United Nations Rio+20 Conference. While a separate treaty supporting the development of a set of “Millennium Consumption Goals” (MCGs) was originally planned by the supporting circles of the MCGs, attendees decided during one of the public meetings to integrate these goals within the broader framework of the Peoples’ Sustainability Treaty on Sustainable Consumption and Production.

But let us return to the treaty process more generally. The most surprising, as well as the most encouraging, aspect in this variety of activities is that all of the diverse communities approaching sustainability—from the “Rights of Mother Earth” to “Sustainability in Higher Education”—emphasize three basic elements:

• Equity and sustainability for all are the overarching demands from civil society and must be the foundation of any collective global response.
• Localizing our systems of economies, decentralizing governance, and advancing sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods become inte-
eral to the new social order of sustainable societies. Localism is the theme emerging across the board, which is linked to the principles of devolution of power, decentralization in action, and subsidiarity in governance. Turning localism into a global movement becomes the key to unpacking many of the complexities we face.

- **A global citizens movement** is the collective response toward transitioning to a sustainable world and to linking the local with the global. All sections of society must converge around their visions and convictions and find common ground for collective action that can bring about the transformation required to ensure the well-being of all on the planet—humans as well as nature—and the envisioning of a new global governance order.

We are delighted to report that these are the real messages to take away from Rio+20 and to build upon in future activities. And in this light, much that is good and strong emerged from the conference, over and above the official documents.

**About the Authors**

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