

GSP Civil Society Consultation Questions

Inputs by Josep Xercavins i Valls

*President of the NGO "World Democratic Governance project association – WDGpa"
Professor at the Technical University of Catalonia (UPC)*

1. Context: assessing progress towards global sustainability

- a) What is your objective assessment of progress (or regress) in the achievement of global sustainability over the past few decades?**
- b) Why have the three pillars of sustainable development (social, economic and environmental) not been better integrated into coherent policy making?**

On the one hand, it has been impossible for the economic and environmental pillars to integrate given that the current, and widespread, paradigm of economic growth has not been until today really questioned.

Widespread economic growth translates into more unsustainable production and consumption patterns, as more resources are used and, consequently, more waste is created (even when efficiency is maximized).

The current economic growth path which is principally based on the widespread use of fossil energy (in 2010, fossil energy represented more than 85% of the world energy consumption) is the key factor in the greenhouse effect and, thus, in global warming and climate change. As it follows, we cannot assume that the economic and environmental pillars of sustainability have integrated at all.

Taken historically, we must admit that economic growth (continuously or as scale change) has managed to move many countries (and people) out of poverty (i.e. the developed world, in the transition economies). However, this was not in all cases accompanied by a roll-out of widespread social welfare general situation.

In any case, whether one looks at the world in general or at those areas that have joined the dynamics of economic growth, it is clear that economic growth has not been integrated with the social pillar of sustainability. Inequity (inequalities) has skyrocketed. Economic wealth is not in the hand of society at large but of a privileged few. Less than 20% of the world population owns more than 80% of the economic wealth generated by the growth of world economy.

Up to now, economic growth resulting from wealth accumulation has not been able to work without creating such inequities. It appears, on the contrary, that inequity is inherent to this type of growth.

Last but not least, humanity has proved incapable of taking the necessary political and institutional steps to facilitate the integration of all three pillars of sustainability (they are in real integrated!), as they continue to receive (both at a normative and operational level) different treatments at such political and institutional levels. Indeed at the UN level, Monterrey and Johannesburg Conferences were, in 2002, so separated dynamics.

- c) What do key contemporaneous factors (e.g. growing inequalities, chronic mass unemployment and underemployment, the global economic, food and climate crises, new geopolitical realities) imply in terms of both risks and opportunities for a "quantum leap" towards policy and institutional reforms for global sustainability?**

Most probably, the climate crisis will trigger the deepest changes in the form of political and institutional reforms for global sustainability.

In any case, it is clear that the exponential growth slope of all causes of climate change is leading us to a decade which will witness the sudden and acute manifestation of negative consequences and impacts of climate change.

Sadly, we are out of time to avoid some of such important impacts.

Nevertheless, with these – earlier avoidable – sufferings in the immediate and mid-term future, the international community will finally react in an effective way and try to face this and many other interrelated *crisis*. (Here we are referring to the crisis of energy scarcity, crisis of food scarcity, other crisis due to environmental impacts, etc.).

2. Foundations for a new vision of sustainability

a) How would you define the new vision (or “paradigm shift”) required to transform economic development dynamics in a manner that simultaneously pursues the goals of poverty eradication, full and decent employment and reducing inequalities, while promoting social and environmental regeneration and sustainability?

The necessary paradigm change is not easy to generate and implement given the deep and widespread roots of the current dominant paradigm. It demands that the basic economic fact of distributing resources (always scarce) to satisfy human needs (which always tend to be unlimited for some!) was met without the classical economic growth, which is measured by GDP. We must initially manage to achieve this globally.

Classical economic growth will still be necessary for some time in some areas of the world where not even basic infrastructures for sustainable human development are in place (agricultural, educational, health, etc. infrastructures). Such growth will have to be compensated with clear complementary and redistributive de-growth in so-called rich countries.

The loop: more consumption leads to more demand which leads to more production and paid work, which feeds again into the loop. The problem is that this loop takes place in a finite world, with a growing population, thus inevitably leading to, as Meadows describes, a general surpass and collapse. This is already noticeable given the explosion of interrelated crisis facing us nowadays.

We are in need of a new social and green economy, socially distributive and environmentally compatible, where the real demand posed by human needs (instead of the often artificial and unnecessary supply) is the leading factor of the basic economic fact.

In the new approach a new “social and environmental contract” will redefine, in a broad sense, the role of human work (in all its spheres: productive, social, cultural, etc.) and ascribe to it a corresponding socio-economic compensation (in its complete sense, and not as the mere result of an artificial market equilibrium which is full of externalities).

Such a paradigm change will manage to address the two goals currently facing humanity in relation to the planet: to satisfy current needs (eradicating poverty worldwide, above all) without undermining the satisfaction of future needs (ending climate change, above all).

3. Better and more coherent policies and institutional mechanisms

g) What mechanisms should be put in place to ensure better policy dialogue and coherence among all stakeholders in meeting the goals of the new development paradigm and holding public institutions accountable? Should existing institutions be reformed and/or new ones be created? And if so why and how?

We are now arriving (in our opinion, we have already arrived!) to a situation where the UN Member States face more and more complex difficulties to reach agreements. Difficulties, not only ideological or based on particular legitimate interests, but mostly due to balancing their respective current and humanity's future interests. The inability of the Member States to reach agreements is aggravated especially when consensus is required by the current multilateral system, on the burning issues challenging the future of humanity in the planet (climate change, financial crisis, food

security, etc.).

The climate change negotiations are clearly an example of such incapacity. All Members States agree that the temperature on the surface of the planet cannot exceed 2⁰C. But they are unable to agree in reducing CO₂ emissions to the atmosphere to 50% (a 90% in the case of developed countries) below 1990 levels, by 2050.

The challenge “50-50-50” means that by 2050, world population will have increased by 50% above 1990 levels - and it will be necessary to satisfy their needs – and CO₂ emissions must then have decreased by 50% below 1990 levels. This challenge cannot be tackled nor managed in the current multilateral system, in one aspect: the fundamental and independent sovereignty of each of the Member States, both at the level of decision-making and of implementation.

It is thus necessary (in our opinion, it is the Trojan Horse of all necessary reforms!) that, in certain issues, Member States cede part of their sovereignties to a “superior institutional authority” which is in an position to, democratically, ponder the realities and needs of all Members States, but also of the humanity as a whole. And, consequently, make the necessary decisions - and force their implementation - in order to balance the response to all challenges with the proportionate consideration of the respective national interests.

The democratic legitimacy of such a “superior institutional authority” must reside on the Member States, but also on the participation (as developed by the participation of “Main Groups” in Rio 92, in the reformed multilateral system) of all stakeholders, which includes indigenous communities; peasants; labor unions; business associations; local, sub-national and regional authorities; and civil society in all its complexity: social, youth, women movements, NGOs, etc.

Twenty years after the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change, UNFCCC, in Rio 1992, in the upcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development 2012, Rio + 20, the international community must take a similar step – or even bigger given the urgency of the challenges – and, fundamentally, prove able to take a historical decision on issues of World Democratic Governance.

As we are currently experiencing a certain consensus on the “refoundation of the PNUMA-UNEP” as a new specialized agency, and simultaneously as an umbrella organization for the governance of various treaties, protocols, agreements (including MEAs), etc. generated by the path born in Stockholm 30 years ago, it is now the time to make agreements and transfer mandates. It is also the time to start, definitively, conferring all necessary means, tools and authorities to develop such mandates.