More to the point, more visioning, more inclusive

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I am grateful for the opportunity to report on the aspirations of civil society for the 2012 Summit on Sustainable Development. The German Council for Sustainable Development is a stakeholder body mandated and appointed by our Federal Chancellor. Its 15 eminent members have long-standing experience in dealing with both national and global issues, be it through their eminent roles in German civil society, the private sector, politics, or their role in German delegations to international gatherings for sustainable development. The Network of European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils is currently preparing a comprehensive statement on the 2012 Summit, drawing on what we collectively see as best practise on some of the key issues that will be addressed at the Summit.

More to the point

Convening a summit-level Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio in the summer of 2012 comes 20 years after the first Earth Summit in 1992. Therefore, it is frequently referred to as Rio-plus-20. I object.

- It is indeed necessary to take stock. Much of what was decided and could have been expected has not come to fruition. But the inventory reveals a mixed bag of results. There are also positive aspects which need to be carefully analysed. The notion of sustainability today is as strong as it ever has been. There are numerous good practices.
- But the Summit must look forwards, not back. This requires breaking new ground. This is why I suggest referring to the upcoming conference as Rio^{20plus}. The course for the near future needs to be set. And this can be done. There is more competence in real action than ever before. Positioning this growing competence in greening the economy as a driver would differ the upcoming meeting from what we had before. And it would help to overcome the summit fatigue.

For this reason, the Rio^{20plus} formula must become a signal and not simply an address for a political meeting. Civil society expects a clear political sign of change in sustainability policy.

I suggest considering Rio^{20plus} from the perspective of people and not just of institutions.

The preparations for Rio^{20plus} must be broad and publicly effective. Young people and decision-makers facing major decisions for the future should be encouraged and driven to take their own further initiatives just as institutions, associations and non-governmental organisations should.

The agenda developed by the UN bodies for the Rio Summit – reforming the global environmental governance and green economy stipulates two key points without question. Rio^{20plus} must elevate and enhance the status of UNEP. But sustainability policy must also be improved (principle of integration and cooperation, especially in the context of the time after the work of the UN-CSD expires (2017)).

It has to be clearly understood that the dominant mode of the economy is not the greening, but the "degreening". The "green part" is still the minor part. Currently we even seem to lose traction, politically. Europe must reclaim the strategic focus on SD established around climate and energy packages in 2007 to 2008. The loss of focus cultivates the old fragmentation of growth, energy and climate agendas. Elsewhere in the world, e.g. in China, economies have a strong trajectory towards greening the economy. The challenge for Europe is how to benefit from and support this green transition. I see the need for Europe to ensure strong domestic demand for low-carbon goods and services. Raising EU emissions-reduction targets to 30% by 2020 would be an appropriate move. Europe green economy agenda needs to invest strategically in key infrastructure assets such as recycling of resources, super and smart grids and clean-technologies.

More visioning

The green economy agenda must be taken serious. I suggest putting in concrete terms. Otherwise, it may fail to produce any atmosphere of change if it is exposed to the dangers of green washing and non-committal policy statements.

A green economy needs to be put into practice by defining sustainability goals. They must be measurable. They must be reportable, and verifiable (the MRV approach). This approach will bring about participation, transparency and progress momentum, and that is where the civil society comes in. A green economy must be geared to the trajectories of green economy models. One trajectory is the low-carbon economy. This trajectory is a good proxy for the wider green economy agenda.

A green economy needs benchmarks for competition on the markets. As suggested recently by the German Council for Sustainable Development, the German Sustainability Code is one such example. The instrument of roadmaps for Vision_2050 must find broad use. Technical standardisation for greening appliances, production, and consumption is another important feature. Failure to adopt such new, innovative instruments will mean that, instead of a green economy, we end up with a "green race", with the detrimental effects of the "race" dominating.

The German SD Council has proved that the Green Economy agenda is something we have to take serious. We have to conceive it as a process that needs to be fail-proofed against attempts to greenwashing and protectionism. The metrics of roadmaps and accountability of all responsible actors are important tools, as are dialogues and systemic thinking.

Therefore, we launched a Draft for a German Sustainability Code and successfully involve the private sector and civil society into the debate. Mainstream investors increasingly apply ESG-criteria (environment, social, governance) and business responds to long-term investments. This trend asks for broad disclosure of both financial and non-financial key performance indicators that are meaningful for the business case.

The seven tracks UNCSD speaks of are conventional approaches: green stimulus packages, eco-efficiency, greening markets and public procurement and finance, investments in sustainable infrastructure, restoration and upgrading of natural capital, getting prices right, and ecological tax reform. You might wish to add decent jobs, a culture of innovation and entrepreneurship, or social business. But still, we are lacking the point of view of the long term. My point here is: we have to encourage people to start looking at a vison_2050 world. A world that will be characterised by carbon constraints, a multi-polar power regime of what we (even) today still address as emergent economies, a demographic change, and a total different role resources play for consumption and production. If you start looking at the world with Vision_2050, the world today is already a different world.

The Green Economy is not just another pattern of mainstream economy that could be added to the economic business-as-usual model. It is more. To make the systemic transformation to a green economy, we need processes with clear leadership, out-of-the-box thinking, bottom-up options. For example:

- A green economy as a transformation built within the planetary boundaries of the man-earth system, and with long-term principles of economic sustainability as opposed to short-termism.
- Financial market stability and clearly defined sustainability objectives as a prerequisite for long-term investments
- Standardisation of “green economy norms” for products, appliances, infrastructure, services, removal of trade barriers to green economy products
- Corporate sustainability management of the business case
- Introduction of the instrument of roadmaps for the Vision_2050 green economy
- Fostering of competition and responsibility for sustainability solutions

More inclusive

Europe should strive to play a strong role in Rio^{20plus} and, to this end, should implement what I believe is a necessary review of the EU sustainability strategy. Europe must better prepare itself for the challenges ahead. I am suggesting making the EU SDS a key. That is why I think we need a revised and redesigned EU SDS that would cover Europe’s green economy agenda.

Basics of a green economy are long known, from pricing external effects and ecological services to trading schemes and implementation into procurement strategies. But today, the growing part green business and the impressive examples of enterprises that demonstrate the feasibility and the chances of u-turns towards sustainable business models allows (and requires) for more enabling action and smart strategies.

To refrain from regressing into a degreening mode national fiscal policies, reform programs and the EU 2020 needs a sustainability framing and qualifying. A revised EU SDS is needed. It would come in handy to address the doubts that the Green Economy might turn out as just pleasing jargon and a niche market phenomenon over-hyped by do-gooders.

We need to inform and advance the debate about Rio^{20plus}. Civil society in general and stakeholder bodies such as the Councils for sustainable development in particular, bear great responsibility. The transformation to a green economy is a long, drawn-out process, accompanied by resistance. A quick fix, a big bang, is not to be anticipated.

It is therefore all the more important to have soft policies which lend tangibility to the successes and enable people to make their own choices. Examples here include sustainability awards, rankings, and public stakeholder meetings.

Rio^{20plus} must elevate the status of non-voting conference members from civil society and the private sector in order to generate more effect and commitment. This also includes using Rio^{20plus} as a platform for new initiatives, the aim being to tackle pressing problems and to put mandates for work and negotiations into practice. For example, it should be worthwhile to look into the issues of e.g. geo-engineering, deep-sea drilling, global food, land and water resources, reducing food losses, recycling of reusable waste and conflict minerals.