UNRISD United Nations Research Institute for Social Development

CONFERENCE NEWS

Green Economy and Sustainable Development: Bringing Back the Social Dimension

Report of the UNRISD Conference
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Overview

In the lead up to the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), and 20 years after sustainable development was popularized at the first UN Earth Summit in 1992, the concept of green economy has taken centre stage in international development circles. It emphasizes the need to shift from high to low carbon systems and transform patterns of investment, technological innovation, production and consumption, at a time when multiple global crises—food, fuel and finance—have revealed the limits and contradictions of current development models based on the exploitation of finite natural resources.

Strategies to promote a green economy, and the concept itself, are highly contested. There are widely varying assessments of the opportunities, costs and benefits of green economy transition for different social groups, countries and regions. Opinions also diverge about the feasibility and implications of different approaches for achieving the social, environmental and economic objectives inherent in the concept of sustainable development.

The months leading up to Rio+20 are crucial for the global community to make progress on these issues. By explicitly coupling green economy with the goals of sustainable development and poverty eradication, the Rio+20 process has called attention to the importance of social dimensions of development. But there is considerable lack of clarity—indeed, even confusion—about what the social dimensions of green economy entail.

In response to these challenges, UNRISD held the conference, *Green Economy and Sustainable Development: Bringing Back the Social Dimension,* in Geneva on 10-11 October 2011. Attended by some 250 participants, the event brought together academic researchers, United Nations policy makers, government officials, civil society actors and activists from around the world; 24 papers were presented by 32 researchers, identified through a call for papers that attracted over 300 submissions. Speakers included representatives of CICERO, Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC), Focus on the Global South, Friends of the Earth International, International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), International Labour Organization (ILO), Oxfam International, South Centre, United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD), United Nations Environment Fund (UNEP), United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), United Nations University-World Institute for Development Economics Research (UNU-WIDER), World Health Organization (WHO) and the World Bank.

The focus on social dimensions aimed to direct attention to key issues that are often ignored: how green economy initiatives and strategies impact different social groups and patterns of inequality; whose values, priorities and interests are shaping the concept and policies of green economy; and what alternative visions and processes exist at local, national and global scales.

The following questions framed the six thematic sessions of the conference.

- *Competing Paradigms:* How is the notion of green economy itself, and the consideration of social dimensions, being framed, and with what effects in terms of influencing policy agendas and shaping development models?*
- *The Challenge of Policy Coherence: What role can social policy, in association with economic and environmental policy, play in minimizing costs, maximizing benefits and building resilience, especially for vulnerable groups?*
- *Agency, Interests and Coalitions: What forms of participation, contestation, coalitions, alliances and compromises are emerging—or might need to emerge—to promote green economy approaches that contribute to sustainable development and poverty eradication?*
- *Community Values, Institutions and Dynamics: How is green economy perceived and interpreted locally? How do local level contexts and dynamics affect—and how are they affected by—external interventions?*
- *The Social Construction of Markets: How do societal norms and pressures, as well as public and private regulation and governance, shape market relations and business behaviour associated with green economy and sustainable development?*
- *Agriculture and Rural Development: What are the consequences of the restructuring of food production, finance, energy and consumption patterns associated with green economy for employment, livelihood security and ecological sustainability in rural areas?*

The social dimensions of development are essential for responding to these questions, and for understanding the connections between green economy, sustainable development and poverty eradication. In critiquing market-centred approaches to green economy, some of the speakers questioned whether the logic of capitalism, dependent as it is on growth as a driver, can be consistent with these broader objectives. The commodification of nature poses serious risks, not least in reinforcing existing patterns of inequality. Technocratic approaches often prevail at the expense of more effective forms of participatory governance, and fail to recognize the effectiveness and legitimacy of different value and livelihood systems. Others identified problems at the stage of implementation, at the micro or community level, in addressing the specific needs of disadvantaged or marginalized groups, or in compensating those who lose out (as a result of both environmental change and of a green economy transition itself). The interconnections between local, national and global policy levels, as well as between sectoral restructuring and social co-benefits, were recurring themes.

Much of the research and analysis presented at the conference highlighted many positive lessons. For green economy to also become green society, policy around sustainable development must be defined, not only in terms of *outcomes*, but also by the *processes* that shape, enable and constrain its potential as an alternative vision. Several presentations made explicit the importance of unpacking and reconfiguring power relations in participation and decision-making processes, and for opening up spaces for contestation and negotiation in the design and implementation of policies. This will require discursive struggle between different worldviews; contestation (over policies and solutions); challenges to power structures; recognition of alternative forms of knowledge; and the participation and inclusion of a wider range of actors. A fair and equitable green economy transition extends beyond addressing consequences of environmental or economic change, to enabling the *transformation* of social structures, institutions and power relations that underpin vulnerability, inequality and poverty.

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For UNRISD, these insights have pointed to the need to further develop both a research agenda and a conceptual and policy framework positioning social dimensions at the centre of green economy and sustainable development debates, which can inform the Rio+20 preparatory process and subsequent policy discussions.

Opening

In her opening remarks, **Sarah Cook** asserted that the current global environmental challenge requires a major transformation: involving fundamental changes in structures of production and consumption, in patterns of resource use and investment, in technologies and how we use them, and in human behaviour and public policies from the local to the global levels. There are various interpretations of the nature of the transformation that is needed (or indeed, possible), and widespread debate over whether countries that have not yet transformed their economies along the high carbon development path can develop along an alternative path. Questions remain as to how, or at what stage, social dimensions are incorporated into the analysis and solutions, or even whether goals of equity, poverty reduction and inclusivity are compatible with the proposed transition paths.

> ***Will a green economy transition centre on technological fixes and business as usual or will it, conversely, be seized as an opportunity to enhance well being and transform the social structures, institutions and power relations that underpin various forms of vulnerability and inequality?***

Cook highlighted a number of key tensions facing green economy policy makers and development actors today. Will a green economy transition centre on technological fixes and "business as usual" or will it, conversely, be seized as an opportunity to enhance well being and transform the social structures, institutions and power relations that underpin various forms of vulnerability and inequality? Can it address underlying causes of poverty or redress historical development imbalances? Will it lead to new forms of conditionality and protectionism, or reinforce policy approaches that have increased inequalities in recent decades?

In his opening remarks, **Kåre Stormark** emphasized that green economy should primarily be a means and a strategy to promote social justice. Referring to the debates and government policy in Norway—the main funder of the conference—he noted that climate change and green economy occupy an increasingly central role in policy discussions, and in particular, in shaping priorities for development assistance. This translates into a need for increased funds for combating deforestation and for investing in green energy and green jobs. In response, Norway is actively working to establish the Green Climate Fund. This question of where funding for social dimensions of green economy would ultimately come from was to recur throughout the conference.

Session 1—Competing Paradigms

The first session, chaired by **Bina Agarwal** set the scene for critical analysis of the concept, definitions, and approaches being put forth under the rubric of green economy, by placing its emergence in the broader contexts of the global triple crisis, limits and contradictions of market-based development, contrasting economic perspectives and broader development trajectories around green growth.

According to **Bob Jessop**, while the triple crises of food, fuel and global finance undermine development for present and future generations, they are also open to interpretation. Crises may be "accidental", that is, due to natural or "external" forces (such as invasion, tsunami, crop failure, earthquake); or they may be generated by specific social arrangements (capitalism, for example). How crises are defined in turn determines how they can be solved, by whom, and who should bear the costs and benefits. The challenge lies in identifying whether the current triple crisis is a normal and solvable crisis "in" the global system, in which case, the solution lies in crisis management routines or innovations that restore business as usual. By contrast, if we are seeing a crisis "of" the global system—that is, an inability to "go on" in the old way—this ought to result in a potentially radical break. Jessop argued that because the green economy concept is vague, it can be captured by powerful forces and filled with meaning in line with ideas preferential to them. Green growth and the Global Green New Deal, much like sustainable development, are "…narrated as capitalism's best hope to create jobs, restore growth, and limit climate change [but] also pose a risk because of its potential incoherence and/or vulnerability to capture by the most powerful economic and political forces".

Kathleen McAfee presented a critique of the green economy concept based on its aim to increasingly put a dollar value on nature. Doing so may not only have negative consequences for environmental protection, but may also be contradictory to the practices and priorities of many of the people most negatively affected by climate change and climate mitigation policies. The main concern is that, while nature can become a source of tradable commodities (resources such as timber and water, as well as ecosystem services such as carbon sequestration), people are also likely to respond to short-term self-interest (payment or profit), and it is often private actors who decide what gets produced, where and how. The costs and benefits of conservation differ between regions, and particularly between North and South. According to McAfee, "the market can allocate for efficiency by directing conservation spending toward those people and places where it can be done most cheaply; carbon sinks in the tropics are a conservation bargain!"

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Using the example of Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), McAfee also argued that market mechanisms for incentivizing carbon storage both require and reinforce increased inequalities (as well as rarely resulting in carbon staying in the ground). Thus, when focusing on such instruments, it is important to go beyond the scope of environmental economics to more comprehensively address the social repercussions of carbon trading schemes and other "green" economic policies.

Pascal van Griethuysen added to these debates through a review of different economic perspectives and their socio-environmental implications. Although the use of carbon trading as a policy instrument certainly reflects a conventional economic rationale (efficiency and internalizing externalities, for example), the field of economics is more pluralistic in its potential approaches to green economy than initially suggested. While neoclassical environmental economics reinforces the market as a cost-effective environmental policy instrument, other sub-disciplines can better account for interactions between ecology and economy (ecological economics), the social embeddedness of the market (institutional economics), or the links between property rights, capital and finance (property economics). His presentation also resonated with Jessop's argument that green economy is a concept that is "up for grabs", even within the discipline of economics.

Referring to India, **Payal Banerjee** and **Atul Sood** explored some of the contradictions that arise when the objectives of green growth and sustainable development are pursued in the context of rapid economic liberalization. The government's high-growth objectives have privileged a privatized approach to development and problem solving while often ignoring and aggravating social inequalities. Drawing on research carried out in the state of Sikkim, they highlighted the contradiction between the promotion and adoption of a range of green policies, and the implementation of development projects that create severe environmental and socio-cultural problems for marginalized and displaced peoples. High-growth strategies have not been accompanied by improvements in the participation or rights of those affected adversely. The examples also illustrate the importance of bottom-up movements around legislative reforms: while social movements have some space to exert influence, the state does not facilitate their involvement, thus compounding ineffective policy implementation. Green economy, while good in theory, must also be implemented in ways that reduce inequality and social

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conflict. For Banerjee and Sood, "legislative changes, along with new principles of governance like decentralized decision making, public-private partnership and stakeholder consultations for the Indian state, together provide a defense for growth."

The discussion was initiated by **Robin Mearns**, who first pointed out that, while there is a tendency to set up dichotomies of state versus market, it should be recognized that both play important roles. Growth is important for poverty reduction and social development, but the market needs to be regulated. One way to harness the power of the private sector is by promoting socially responsible consumption, such as strengthening CSR and labelling schemes for organic and fair trade products. These are powerful tools for behavioural change that need to be reinforced, as they can increase the bargaining power of small producers in the global market.

Second, there are inflated expectations of what carbon trading can deliver. REDD is not going to finance climate action as a whole: it will only constitute a small part of a much larger agenda. The real problem is that there are no effective limits on emissions. There need to be mechanisms in place that set caps on emissions at the global level for a carbon trading system to be effective.

Countries also need to explore other alternatives such as public regulation, carbon taxes and incentives (rather than compensation only). Mearns also stressed the need to focus on strengthening forest communities' ownership rights, as this leads to better conservation practices, a point reiterated throughout the conference.

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Greater policy coherence, for example through reinforcing REDD systems with social protection policies, is also necessary. Still, the dominance of monetary metrics as a way of capturing the value of forests is problematic, and "the elephant in the room is still the global politics of whether countries can agree on hard limits on emissions".

These discussions over market-led development highlighted a key point of contention that set the scene for the rest of the conference. While the role of markets was acknowledged, Jessop and McAfee argued that the conventional discourse of the market disguises its inequalities. In line with Polanyi, creating markets based on "fictitious commodities", such as labour, nature, money and knowledge, said Jessop, is the "road to ruin". Markets are not black or white; instead, we need to ask what is being commodified; find a balance between market, hierarchy, networks and solidarity; and better incorporate both macro- and micro-level perspectives. Diversity of institutions is always a reality; the challenge is to ensure that markets (especially for carbon) do not exclude the rights, interests and worldviews of diverse groups.

Given the current "crisis of the system", these debates pointed clearly to a need to find space for institutional change and alternative solutions. As Mearns and Cook suggested, the dominant policy approach is to compensate the people or groups that lose from the transition process. Another approach is for policies to focus on complementarities and how to reinforce the green economy through incentives.

> ***There is enough for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed.***

A third approach would address the structural drivers of inequality and social change. Common assumptions—such as green growth automatically being socially equitable growth—need to be empirically tested, and meaningful cross-country comparisons of environmental, social and economic performance undertaken. For example, research by the World Bank shows that gender equality is robustly correlated with environmental performance, but that such data is not commonly considered or measured. In conclusion, Agarwal remarked that we can no longer rely only on grand economic theories of markets to solve problems and promote a fair transition to green economy. Today, practice on the ground—the work of households, communities, etc.—is leading theory, as the wealth of practical, local, cooperative solutions in community forestry has shown. Green economy is therefore fundamentally about addressing inequality and social justice. Referring to a quote from Gandhi, Agarwal reminded us that "there is enough for everybody's need, but not enough for anybody's greed."

Session 2—The Challenge of Policy Coherence

Policy coherence is a recurrent theme in green economy debates, although exactly what this means and how to achieve it need clarification. The presentations in this session, chaired by **Lucas Assunção**, UNCTAD, discussed the relationship between different types of policy, the scope for achieving co-benefits, and the role of social policy in addressing winners and losers in a transition to green economy. Speakers considered issues of policy coherence related to welfare states, green jobs, eco-social policy, and environmental stewardship in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America. The distributional consequences of various policy approaches on different actors, levels and sectors emerged as a key theme.

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Drawing on the experience of the United Kingdom, **Ian Gough** questioned whether ambitious policies to "de-carbonize" the economy pose new challenges to the institutions of the welfare state. Fuel poverty and distributional injustice are rising, alongside significant political backlash. While carbon allocation schemes may be progressive overall, research shows that there will be many low-income losers: large families in rural, hard-to-heat houses; empty-nesters in large houses and houses without gas central heating; and retired under-occupied urban households. This is double injustice, where those least responsible for emissions related to climate change are also those that pay the highest costs. The common policy response is to use targeted social programmes to compensate such groups. However, the heterogeneity of households and dwellings makes it difficult to compensate rising energy costs through social benefits. Policy coherence, in this instance, implies a stronger role for the state and a return to redistributive policies. Gough called for radical policy integration to connect income, time and carbon consumption. He argued that "the need for further policy integration is at least part of a green growth strategy, let alone a beyond-growth strategy."

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Laura Rival presented three projects to illustrate how coordinated, cooperative and integrated policy design around carbon markets works in practice:

- Bolsa Floresta (State of Amazonas, Brazil): A REDD (Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation) scheme to avoid deforestation by making sure that trees are worth more alive than dead.
- The Yasuní-ITT Initiative (Amazon region of Ecuador): A PES (Payments for Ecosystem Services) scheme to avoid CO_2 emissions and make sure petroleum is worth more under the ground than above it.
- Araçuai Sustentâvel (State of Minas Gerais, Brazil): A regional scheme to avoid migration, build social capital and food security, and ensure a good life for inhabitants of small towns and rural surroundings.

> *Is it possible to replace older trade-offs between development and conservation with new hopes of 'developing while conserving' in the Latin American context?*

Using different combinations of market mechanisms, incentives and local community resources, each project represents efforts of social actors seeking to create innovative sustainability-enhancing institutions in order to achieve environmental and social policy integration. These examples revealed some of the challenges of integrating conservation and social development, including building community trust in the national government and in the market, and creating support at the policy level for community initiatives. Rival further explained the value of the innovative approach used in Ecuador, a country trying to move beyond an oil-led development path, having realized that the present development path had not produced the positive outcomes initially expected. She stressed that policy makers need to accept that local green economy initiatives have a big role to play in national development, and asked, "is it possible to replace older trade-offs between development and conservation with new hopes of 'developing while conserving' in the Latin American context?"

Amalia Palma and **Claudia Robles** elaborated on the potential for green economy in Latin America where a shortage of household assets limits the potential of green economy policies to improve the livelihoods of the poor. They argued that policies to increase productivity, create new sectors and improve technology transfer and training need to be accompanied by other interventions, such as social protection or social transfers, long term investment policies and labour regulation. In the absence of such policies, it is likely that greening the economy will not automatically lead to improvements in the living conditions of the poor, but green economy can also be seen as an opportunity to rethink development in Latin America.

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Samuel Awoniyi discussed the difficult situation faced by the Nigerian government to ensure consistency of policies in relation to food security and deforestation. Evidence shows that areas with low poverty profiles exhibit lower rates of deforestation, suggesting that improved rural social welfare programmes could reduce both poverty and ecosystem degradation. Age, marital status, household size, gender, and farming are important aspects of rural demographics that policy should address. However, a lack of good governance, the legacy of structural adjustment programmes and long political terms are key barriers affecting Nigeria's capacity to strengthen policy in these areas. He stressed that there is a clear need for more community-driven programmes and for more financial assistance from the international community.

Based on research in Bangladesh, **Kathrin Bimesdörfer**, **Carola Kantz** and J.R. Siegal (absent) argued that, while green jobs in the rural electrification market have resulted in numerous co-benefits (such as increased power supply for households, employment opportunities in green industries, and a net gain on the job market), there is a striking gap in knowledge with regard to employment and labour within the rural off-grid electricity market. Referring to a large project in which one million households had received off-grid solar home systems, they noted that the metrics for gauging success currently focus on evaluating the reach of energy infrastructure and energy output. However the social dimensions of the jobs created—such as the total number of jobs, the types and quality of jobs, wages, gender impacts, skills development, labour conditions and working hours—are not well understood. The social impacts of the shift from public to private solutions are also unclear. Green jobs policies therefore need to be complemented by research monitoring social indicators. While there are many existing studies on labour policies in other sectors, there are very few in relation to renewable energy. In light of these findings, concerns were raised about the appropriateness of the technologies themselves; for example, are solar panels an appropriate energy source to introduce in poor communities lacking the necessary technical knowledge? In the case of Bangladesh, the solar home systems were simple to use and low cost. The main challenge was not technological suitability per se, but rather measuring and evaluating the social dimensions of green technologies.

Lucas Assunção closed the session by stating that the transition towards a green economy is well under way, but remains fragmented. There are many initiatives across diverse sectors, but few coherent links between them. For green economy to be successful, an active state with developmental objectives is needed, as the transition will not happen by default. In this transition, greater policy coherence will be needed to tackle distributional and other social aspects.

Session 3—Agency, Interests and Coalitions

This session, chaired by **Lucia Schild Ortiz,** Friends of the Earth Brazil, debated the role of social movements, and the relationship between states, businesses, social movements and other organized interest groups, in shaping and contesting green economy concepts and policy approaches. Speakers discussed the influence of these actors in terms of different patterns of resource allocation and access, political and institutional structures, and power at national and global levels. The importance of building alliances, and thus analysis of these alliances, *now*—as green economy is already happening—emerged as a key factor in better understanding the power and participation of different actors in the transition to a green economy.

Rocío Hiraldo used the example of the global political economy of REDD+ to analyse how different environmental worldviews impact the emerging green economy debate. REDD includes programmes that financially compensate countries for reducing CO_2 emissions from deforestation. In REDD+, strategies must go beyond deforestation and forest degradation to include the role of conservation, sustainable management of forests and enhancement of forest carbon stocks in reducing emissions. However, she argued that REDD+ remains mostly focused on growth and governance with the underlying assumption that economic growth is compatible with significant reductions in carbon emissions. Social issues such as poverty reduction and social justice are not well integrated, as the emphasis is on efficiency rather than equity.

> *What is needed is increased institutional support and policy space for currently less powerful*

considered as key aspects of the future global climate change regime.

Hiraldo argued that in order to make social aspects more visible, national regulations and institutional architecture that recognize and engage local communities at different levels need to be established, enabling benefits to reach those who need them most. But challenges also remain—namely around incorporating diverse groups as beneficiaries. For example, a participant from the floor criticized the World Bank (which plays a key role in financing REDD/REDD+ around the world) for using problems of poor governance and state failure as a justification for further strengthening market initiatives, privatization and commodification schemes, in turn further marginalizing local forest communities from the potential benefits of REDD/REDD+.

Nicola Bullard and **Tadzio Müller**—speaking from their experiences with civil society activism—discussed the climate justice movement's (CJM) weakness in relation to forces and interests favouring market-centred green economy approaches. They argued that green economy and the climate justice movement can be considered as two competing paradigms. Referring to Jessop's distinction between fundamentally different types of crisis, the conventional green economy approach speaks to a crisis *in* the system, whereas the CJM assumes that there is a crisis *of* the system. Having emerged in 2007 without an overarching strategy, the CJM comprises the old anti-globalization movement, environmental NGOs and new climate change negotiation followers. But today, the general lack of

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