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Does “Houston, we’ve had a problem” apply to the Rio+20 Conference?

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The Current Column

of 11 June 2012

Does “Houston, we’ve had a problem” apply to the Rio+20 Conference?

Bonn, Berlin, 11 June 2012. Jim Lovell’s message to Houston after an explosion damaged the Service Module in the Apollo 13 lunar-landing mission in April 1970 may accurately portray the current predicament of the upcoming UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20, in short) to be held later this month in Rio de Janeiro. Its challenges stem from several characteristics that render Rio+20 unique, mostly referred to its *design, preparation* and expected *results*.

Firstly, in sharp contrast to the first ever UN Conference on the Environment in Stockholm in 1972 and the Earth Summit UNCED in 1992, the Rio+20 Conference has not been *designed* as a Summit, but rather as a Review Conference. This means to say that the presence of Heads of State and Government are not required, which explains the enormous effort made by the UN and Brazil’s President Dilma Rousseff to guarantee the presence of key international players in Rio. Whereas close to 180 Heads of State took part in Rio-92, barely half of that number have confirmed their presence for Rio+20. So far, the most noted *absences* are those of Germany’s Chancellor Angela Merkel and the European Parliament delegation, while US-President Barack Obama is not expected to be present either and the European Commission has drastically reduced its delegation.

Closely related to the previous aspect, no key decisions in the form of Conventions, Treaties or Multilateral Environmental Agreements in general are expected to be approved in Rio de Janeiro. Compared to the crucial outcomes at Rio-92, such as the Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity and Agenda 21, the UN General Assembly modestly indicates that “the objective of the (Rio+20) Conference will be to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assessing the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and addressing new and emerging challenges.” Rio+20 is

thus expected to focus not on decisions but on *discussions* around “green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication” and on “the institutional framework for sustainable development”. With the world undergoing the most profound economic crisis since the Great Depression of 1929, it is indeed hard to convince world leaders to go to Rio+20 to simply discuss these themes but with no decisions having been identified so far for their ratification.

Secondly, the *process* of the Conference seems to be exasperating to many Government and Non-Government representatives taking part in the preparations. According to press accounts, one of the Executive Coordinators of Rio+20 graphically expressed his disappointment in April by pointing to a diplomat sleeping in a couch at the UN Headquarters and saying: “See, this is the negotiation, it is very slow and frustrating”. In the Planet Under Pressure Conference in London in March 2012, even a Brazilian Government official complained that “much more was expected of these documents” and issues such as “climate and biodiversity have been left out of the conference”. Some Business leaders point also to the fact that not a single world leader so far has come forward and provided the leadership or a vision that the negotiation process is so much in need. Finally, according to a statement sent to the UN Secretary-General and endorsed by close to one 1,000 organizations (“Deleting our rights, bracketing our future,”), leading civil society groups voiced concern that Rio+20 seems to be set “to add almost nothing to global efforts to deliver sustainable development”, warning that “too many governments are using the negotiations to undermine established human rights and agreed principles such as ‘polluter pays’, ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’, ‘precautionary principle’ and equity.”

Thirdly, the most important *result* of Rio+20, the so-called Zero Draft of “The Future We Want”, still faces many challenges. From an initial 300-page

document, it has now been reduced to one-third in length, but still full of brackets (i.e., not yet approved items) to be decided upon. If we take into account, for instance, the United States proposal that the document should have no more than five pages in a generic tone to be accepted by all governments, the road is still far from reaching a sound destination. What is most worrying is that governments are not building on already agreed rights, such as on food, or those of women and indigenous peoples. This increases the risks of arriving in Rio without clear commitments to achieve sustainable development.

In effect, in view of the state of current preparations for and the expected outcomes of Rio+20, one is hard-pressed to ponder whether governments today are too concerned with restoring the health of their national finances, preserving their economies, and are thus not willing to negotiate their consumption patterns with a view to enhance the fate of the vast majority of the world's population living in poverty, unemployed and with increasing disparities of wealth, assets and access to natural resources, and in urgent need of empowerment. When similar alerts were voiced in the preparations to Rio-92, then US-President Bush Sr. hit back at his critics by declaring that "the American way of life is not up for negotiations. Period." Are world leaders today, particularly in the most rich and powerful countries, emulating the same vision of the future entrenched in the past?

The failure to promote sustainable development can only lead to the perpetuation of the current crossroads of poverty, inequality and environmental degradation. Sooner or later, everyone will have to pay the price for social and environmental irresponsibility. Resurgence of violence and terrorism represent just the visible tip of an iceberg threatening to wreck a globalization process that

has made so many positive inroads in social life worldwide. Fortunately, as Spanish Antonio Machado's poetry indicates, "wanderer, there is no road, the road is made by walking" and we still have a few weeks to change the current course of negotiations.

Even though time is indeed running out for Rio+20, future generations will not forgive us if we act like the orchestra on the Titanic in the final moments before it sank. It is no longer the time to debate the science, governance, the institutions or players involved in bringing about change. It is time to act. As a group of scholars stressed in an open statement called "Now is the Time! Why Rio+20 must succeed" under the leadership of the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE):

"Against this background it is not too much to ask of our governments to live up to their collective responsibility! We hence call upon our governments to prioritize the Rio+20 summit and its consensually agreed themes on their domestic agendas without further ado, to thus brace their societies for a transition to a green economy in the context of their respective country's particular situation, and to finally enable the United Nations to act as a global advocate for sustainable development particularly by strengthening its authority in the realm of international environmental governance. It is now or never also means that it is not too late – yet!"

Let us hope that similarly to Apollo 13 and against all odds, we may safely land in the Rio+20 Conference.

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