

Book Review

Felix Dodds and Michael Strauss with Maurice Strong, *Only One Earth: The Long Road via Rio to Sustainable Development*, Routledge: London and New York, 2012.

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The existential environmental risks we face are by definition global: sea level rise, biodiversity loss, and the poisoning of the air and the oceans. Yet for many of Earth's 7 billion citizens, the daily weight of poverty, hunger, disease, and insecurity overshadow these longer-term risks. The well-travelled road for the lucky few who have emerged from poverty to affluence has been resource-intensive polluting industrial capitalism, creating what often seems like an insurmountable tension between true ecosystem sustainability on the one hand, and human needs and aspirations on the other.

The UN is where the rich global North meets the rapidly developing South to square this thorny circle. And thus was born the holy grail of "sustainable development," the now 40-year-old effort to imagine a socio-economic system that meets both the earth's requirements and humanity's needs. This review summarizes international sustainable development initiatives as documented in the recently published *Only One Earth*, and offers a few reflections on the book itself.

The catalyst for global sustainable development was the modern environmental movement, including Rachel Carson's early warnings about the synthetic pesticide DDT, increasing concerns about unchecked population growth, and criticism of crass materialism in the post-war period of American consumerism. From a starting point of 1.61 billion persons at the beginning of the 20th century, the earth's population had more than doubled to 3.5 billion by 1968. In that year, the Swedish government introduced a resolution in the UN General Assembly to convene the first world conference on the environment, which led to the 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm.

In advance of the Stockholm Conference, the UN commissioned a report entitled *Only One Earth*, which became the rallying cry of the conference as well as this book's title. The authors witnessed and participated in UN sustainable development initiatives from the beginning. Their work continued over the subsequent 40 years, with Maurice Strong serving as Secretary-General of the UN conferences both in Stockholm and, 20 years later, at the iconic Earth Summit in Rio. This on-the-ground experience gives the authors deep first-hand knowledge of the events described, as well as perspective on the achievements and challenges of transitioning from metastasized industrial capitalism to a truly sustainable economy.

Identifying solutions to thorny problems can be much less challenging than implementing them. The 27 principles of the 1972 Stockholm Declaration and the 109 recommendations in the action plan covered much of the current sustainability agenda, from "climate modification" to marine pollution. They also identified the core tension in sustainability vs. development, as there was language to ensure that

environmental standards did not become pretexts to limit trade or impose barriers against imports from the developing world. The Stockholm recommendations also included studying the additional costs to developing countries arising from environmental considerations.

The authors note that the Stockholm conference was in many ways “the birth of the environment movement worldwide, whether it’s Greenpeace, Friends of the Earth, Earth Day, UNEP, US EPA and other EPAs, the creation of environment ministers in government, and environmental journalism; it all started around the same time as the conference” (p. 14).

The founding of the United Nations Environmental Program, or UNEP, was a case study in the concerns of the developed world that environmentalism would impede trade and commerce:

The organizational capacity of the new programme was kept weak. A group of countries which supported its establishment, including Britain, the US, Germany, Italy, Belgium, the Netherlands and France, had agreed secretly to ensure that it would not have the support required. The group was concerned that any new environmental regulations would have an impact on trade. They also wanted to ensure that UNEP did not have a large budget as it would then be restricted on what it could do (p. 16).

For political reasons, UNEP was established in Kenya, which limited the program’s ability to integrate with other UN agencies. Nevertheless, over the subsequent 20 years a number of multilateral agreements were struck in six thematic clusters: oceans and regional seas, freshwater, biodiversity, atmosphere, land, and chemicals and hazardous wastes, often leading to distinct programs dispersed around the world. This fractured environmental governance system further limited the ability of UNEP to be at the hub of the world’s efforts to develop sustainably.

In 1982 the Canadian government called for a special commission to look at “long-term environmental strategies for achieving sustainable development to the year 2000 and beyond.” This led the UN General Assembly to establish the World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by former Norwegian Prime Minister Brundtland. The Commission’s ground-breaking 1987 “Brundtland” report “would provide the conceptual and political framework for integrating a vast panoply of ecological, social, economic, participation, governance, and even lifestyle issues – and for changing the way governments and average individuals looked at their planet and its possibilities for its future development” (p. 24).

That is quite a mandate. The Brundtland report’s definition of sustainable development, though not explicit in terms of our environmental imperatives, has remained popular over the ensuing 25 years:

Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.

The Commission’s greatest legacy was to call for an international convention on environmental protection and sustainable development, what would come to be known as the “Earth Summit,” in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The Rio organizers (with Maurice Strong at the helm) understood that sustainable systems require full democratic participation, and consequently Rio became one of the most diverse gatherings of global stakeholders that the world has ever seen. In the year leading up to the conference, multiple global stakeholder networks convened to provide input to and prepare for Rio. One of the key

organizers of the Conference, Chip Linder, stressed the importance of consensus-building through broad participation:

We have to find a way to move from confrontation through dialogue to cooperation; and we have to get all the players at the table. It is no longer good enough to be critical. Each of us has to accept a share of the responsibility to do something. And we all have to have the humility to recognize that our solutions are not necessarily the only ones or ultimately the right ones. The world works inter-relatedly and we have to work inter-relatedly (p. 31).

The breadth of attendees at Rio was unprecedented, gathered inside a vast aircraft hangar that became known as “RioCentro.” Of the 178 nations attending, 108 sent their heads of state or government—the largest number ever to attend a UN conference or summit. Official attendees included 2,400 representatives of NGOs and roughly 10,000 journalists from around the world. A highly organized concurrent “Global Forum” in Flamenco Park attracted somewhere between 35,000 and 50,000 stakeholders. This Forum amounted to a 10-day “international environmental graduate seminar and cultural festival” which, along with the thousands of articles and broadcasts from Rio, put sustainable development on the global stage like never before.

Out of this vast convening, came the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development as well as Agenda 21, a 40-chapter blueprint for action in the 21st century. The UN Commission on Sustainable Development, the Convention on Biological Diversity, the Framework Convention on Climate Change, and the Forest Principles were all born at Rio.

Agenda 21 represents a near-complete blueprint for a sustainable future, reflecting what the authors’ call “a global consensus and political commitment at the highest level of government on development and environmental cooperation” (p. 36). But the nature of that commitment is not at all clear, as these are not treaty agreements but “soft laws” that carry the legal weight of a global group hug.

In virtually all countries other than the United States, at least when a head of government commits to something, they generally have the power to turn that commitment into law. But in ways that are often not well understood globally, the U.S. president as head of state does not truly speak for his or her country: Congress has the final say. And it has become rare for the president to have effective control of both houses of Congress, including the 60 votes necessary in the Senate to overcome a filibuster. This impedes the ability of U.S. leaders to fulfill soft commitments like Rio, even under sustainable development-friendly presidents such as Bill Clinton and Barack Obama (who might disagree with former president Bush senior that “the American way of life is non-negotiable”).

Global environmental crises are a product of the industrial age, and thus were not part of “Agenda 1787,” otherwise known as the U.S. Constitution. The framers were interested in limiting national power in the service of individual citizens and smaller U.S. states, not to benefit the community of nations. The rise of the political right over the last three decades and today’s gridlocked politics keep the United States from reaching any kind of national environmental consensus that resonates with the rest of the world, so the task of integrating into a progressive global program like Agenda 21 seems all the more daunting.

We have seen some limited progress in the 20 years since Rio. The total global population continues to expand by more than 80 million persons per year, but world fertility rates have declined from around

4.5 births per woman at the time of the 1972 Stockholm conference, to 3.1 at the time of Rio, to less than 2.5 births today.

The UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), created during the economically flush period leading up to the turn of this century, attempted to catalyze action around specific sustainable development targets over the subsequent two decades. This year's UN report on progress towards the goals highlights improvements in human conditions: United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2012*. However, social and economic achievements have outpaced environmental progress, as our global development model seems less environmentally sustainable with each year:

The target of reducing extreme poverty by half has been reached five years ahead of the 2015 deadline, as has the target of halving the proportion of people who lack dependable access to improved sources of drinking water. Conditions for more than 200 million people living in slums have been ameliorated—double the 2020 target. Primary school enrollment of girls equaled that of boys, and we have seen accelerating progress in reducing child and maternal mortality . . . biodiversity loss continues apace, and greenhouse gas emissions continue to pose a major threat to people and ecosystems. (UN, *MDG Report 2012*, 3)

The goals of environmental sustainability identified in the MDG are to “Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources... [and achieve] a significant reduction in the rate of [biodiversity] loss.” The report on progress is sobering in our inability to develop sustainably in the first decade of the new century: loss of global forest area (though slowed a bit from the prior decade) and a 39% increase in global CO₂ emissions. And while there has been an increase in the number of environmentally protected areas,

A substantial proportion of species in all taxonomic groups examined to date are threatened with extinction, ranging from 13 per cent in birds to 63 per cent in cycads, a group of rare plants that have remained unchanged for millions of years. Worse still, in those groups for which trends in extinction risk can be quantified, many more species are deteriorating in status than are improving. (UN, *MDG Report 2012*, 52)

The authors summarize a status review commissioned by the UN on the implementation of the Rio Declaration and the detailed Agenda 21. Perhaps the greatest single success has been the management of toxic chemicals, including the EU REACH legislation—“hard law” that is forcing real change in the chemicals industry. A related major achievement has been the near-elimination of ozone-depleting emissions, first in the developed and now in the developing world. In most other areas covered by Agenda 21, there has been some limited progress but we remain far from the lofty targets identified at the Earth Summit 20 years ago.

Beyond this “implementation gap,” the authors document critical needs for reform in governance, economics, financial markets, and democratic participation. They conclude with a 21-point “survival agenda” to help save the planet. One of the most promising reforms advocated is the creation of an overarching World Environmental Organization, which would be in part modeled on and serve as a counterweight to the powerful World Trade Organization. Though the analysis is clear, the lack of an implementation strategy speaks to the limits of coordinated global environmental action that the book documents so well.

The recently completed “Rio+20” Conference modernized the rhetoric of sustainable development by focusing on the green economy. The authors see benefits in this evolution:

While use of the phrase ‘sustainable development’ (and ‘sustainable production and consumption’) has been hindered by accusations from some rigidly pro-business advocates and the political right that it will intentionally limit growth . . . the phrase ‘green economy’ evokes an open, environment-friendly, people-friendly and business-friendly reaction (p. 252).

In practice, however, the “green economy” program articulated by the authors is identical in kind to the agendas of Stockholm, Rio, and the Millennium Development Goals: transitioning to a form of development that is environmentally sustainable. Certainly citizen and consumer environmental awareness has improved significantly in the 40 years since Stockholm. It is encouraging that many corporations are now analyzing the risks and opportunities laden in their strategies toward the environment, society, and their own governance (so-called “ESG” issues). Institutional investors are increasingly aware of the materiality of these issues for the long-term performance of their portfolios. Yet environmental degradation continues as the ever-expanding population of global consumers remains tethered to the sclerotic model of extractive industrial capitalism, unable to embrace a full-scale evolution to a truly sustainable human footprint.

Only One Earth provides valuable documentation of the global effort to achieve sustainable development, from Stockholm all the way to the preparations for the 2012 Rio+20 conference. An important reference document, this is no summer beach read: the list of over 160 abbreviations runs from ACC (the Administrative Committee on Coordination) to ZPG (Zero Population Growth). The UN remains one of the most complex bureaucracies on the planet and progress can only be measured in decades, not years. The work of global environmental governance, while incredibly challenging, is also vitally important. This useful, meticulously detailed compendium contains the wisdom of 40 years of first-hand experience, documenting where we have come from and what is still required to achieve a globally cooperative and environmentally viable prosperity.