By SHA ZUKANG

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro in June 1992, also known as the Earth Summit, was a landmark event. It adopted the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, otherwise known as the Rio Principles, and Agenda 21, a programme of action for sustainable development worldwide, and it led to legally binding instruments on climate change and biodiversity. A number of other important agreements and plans of action emerged from the Rio follow-up process, including those relating to combating drought and desertification, and advancing the sustainable development of small island developing States. The Summit left participants filled with great hopes for the future.

Two decades later, the world has seen tremendous change. Within a generation, we’ve added nearly one and a half billion people to the planet—around a billion in our cities—and brought hundreds of millions of people out of the worst kinds of poverty. Many people are living longer and healthier lives; child mortality rates have declined substantially; more children are attending and completing school; and there has been considerable progress in empowering women and other disadvantaged groups.

Yet, the economic growth that has driven these massive global transformations has also come at a high ecological price. From climate change to loss of biodiversity, and from worsening land degradation to increasing scarcity of fresh water, many of the same challenges faced by world leaders in 1992 have only been aggravated. Moreover, the benefits of globalization have not been shared equally, and income and wealth inequalities have been widening. While our growing prosperity has made it possible for countries to address some environmental problems, many environmental challenges are now of a magnitude and scale that they require urgent international cooperation and action.

While it’s important to acknowledge the progress that has been made, the last twenty years have also been characterized by a lack of implementation and missed opportunities. We need to reinvigorate Agenda 21’s global partnership for sustainable development and significantly scale-up our achievements to date. We have no time to waste.

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In June of this year, world leaders will gather for Rio+20 with the objective of securing renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assessing progress and remaining gaps in implementation, and addressing new and emerging challenges. The emphasis will be firmly on integration of the three pillars of sustainable development (economic...
development, social development, and environmental protection), accelerated implementation, and improved coherence among all actors, including different parts of the UN system. The two themes for the Conference are a “green economy” in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development.

In the last months and weeks leading up to Rio+20 we have entered an intensive period of negotiations and the pressure is now on to deliver an action-oriented outcome in line with the magnitude of today’s multiple, inter-linked challenges in social, economic, and environmental areas.
The recent emergence of these global crises has stimulated a great deal of reflection and debate on our current economic model. While it is widely recognized that broad-based economic growth has been and continues to be the most effective contributor to poverty eradication, it is also increasingly acknowledged that growth in the twenty-first century will need to be “smarter” than in the twentieth century. In particular, unsustainable consumption must change, and there needs to be far less intensive energy and resource use, as well as less pollution.

An inclusive green economy is seen as providing a possible alternative growth model. Successfully implemented, a green economy that takes into account national circumstances would sustain progress with poverty eradication and improvements in human well-being, while limiting, repairing, and even reversing damage to the earth’s ecosystems. By leveraging actions across a broad spectrum of sectors, the green economy can build momentum for a socially inclusive and environmentally sound economic transformation. What we need to make this happen includes more intelligent product design, greater resource efficiency, lower inputs of natural resources, lower emissions, and less waste and pollution. Most importantly, all this needs to be achieved in ways that include poor and vulnerable groups centrally in the new, green, economic opportunities.

Ongoing discussions during recent years on the concept of a green economy have revealed that green economies can take many forms and will vary depending on the context of each country, its level of development, its governance arrangements, and its geographic location. A green economy may be facilitated by a broad range of policy instruments, where approaches based on market mechanisms will need to be effectively and holistically combined with appropriate regulatory frameworks, public infrastructure investments, and measures to stimulate research and innovation.

Nevertheless, some common characteristics of a green economy are emerging that could form the basis for agreement at the Rio+20 Conference. These common elements reinforce many of the principles agreed to in Rio in 1992. For example, a green economy should be:

- a means for achieving sustainable development and integrating its three pillars, not a substitute;
- adapted to national circumstances and priorities on a voluntary basis;
- aligned with national sovereignty and common but differentiated responsibilities;
- underpinned by resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production patterns;
- people-centred, promote inclusive growth, and lead to greater equity in the distribution of benefits and enhanced social protection.

The opportunities of a green economy will, of course, vary among countries. Developing countries will need to overcome a number of hurdles—financial, technological, and institutional—to make the most of the opportunities that a green economy might offer. Increased support from the international community in terms of capacity building, technology transfer, funding, and technical support will be required.

A key focus for Rio+20 will be how to better organize expertise within the UN system and the international community to deliver coordinated and coherent policy advice, technical assistance, finance, and capacity building to Governments in order to assist them with the design and implementation of green economy policies and strategies. Rio+20 provides an opportunity to strengthen the institutional framework for effective coordination and support to Member States.

Momentum is building for agreement at Rio+20 to define sustainable development goals (SDGs) that mobilize the international community, as well as focus the energies of national Governments and other stakeholders. The positive experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) has inspired this thinking, and sustainable development goals will need to complement and reinforce the MDGs, which have been instrumental in advancing poverty eradication and social development. A key feature of SDGs is that they would be universally applicable to developed and developing countries, and enhance partnerships in shared efforts to tackle sustainable development challenges. Many developing countries will continue to need financial and technological support in their efforts to align development and environment.

I have also heard a strong call for putting in place a strengthened institutional framework to advance integration, implementation, and coherence of sustainable development. The support from a number of Governments and from civil society for a Sustainable Development Council is encouraging. We need a high profile body to move sustainable development higher up on the international policy agenda and to attract a high level of participation and engagement from government and other decision makers.

There is broad agreement on the need to strengthen the environmental pillar of sustainable development and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), in particular, as its focal organization.

Rio+20 must be first and foremost an implementation conference. It provides a once-in-a-generation opportunity for world leaders, supported by all stakeholders and peoples of the world, to take bold decisions that will provide a strong framework for action to achieve a sustainable future. This will only happen if we actively and vigorously pursue the three ultimate goals of sustainable development: economic development, universal social well-being, and a healthy environment for present and future generations. It is my sincere hope that the outcome is equal to the challenge.

SHA ZUKANG • OBJECTIVES AND VISION FOR RIO+20