

# BLINDSPOT THINK TANK

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whole system change is not hard to do just hard to see

Rio+20 UNCS2012.org consultation submission

Date submitted: 31 Oct 2011

Stakeholder type: Major Group

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Web link to submission (now broken, consultation info has been removed from the UN site):

<http://uncsd2012.org/rio20//index.php?page=view&nr=112&type=510&menu=20>

Consultation question a)

a) What are the expectations for the outcome of Rio+20, and what are the concrete proposals in this regard, including views on a possible structure of the Outcome document?

According to its current trajectory Rio+20 cannot be expected to work better than the first Stockholm conference in 1972 or any others since. Sorry but these conferences are set up to 'just keep looking forward' and consequently don't seem to learn from past experiences of ineffective international action. Consequently many critical problems get worse.

My proposal is to adopt a new trajectory which may be achieved simply by looking both ways; 1. looking forward by continuing established problem-solving approaches, and 2. looking afresh by creating space in every dialogue to consider 'what it is that we may be missing'. This may seem simple or obvious (?) but it hasn't been a notable feature of international initiatives over the past 40 years.

This 'look both ways' trajectory would provide the essential missing reflectiveness in international discussions. We could not only think about what to do but also think about our thinking. We could not only divide up issues into manageable pieces but also reconnect conventionally separate issues to provide new management options. We could not only consider action on the symptoms of urgent global problems but also action on the underlying systemic causes. We could not only seek incremental improvements but also radical transformative change.

It's not necessary to give up familiar ways of thinking and acting in order to think and act in new ways. In fact there is a powerful synergy between the two ways of looking - enough to propel Rio+20 beyond the deadening gravity of summits-as-usual.

Ref: article "Look both ways..."

[http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/08/07/1004133/-48-for-East-Africa:-Look-both-ways-before-you-cross?via=blog\\_585712](http://www.dailykos.com/story/2011/08/07/1004133/-48-for-East-Africa:-Look-both-ways-before-you-cross?via=blog_585712)

Rio+20 is using the same thinking as the first Stockholm conference in 1972 and cannot be expected to have greater effect unless restructured. This restructuring would recognise that 40 years of international efforts haven't worked and ask why. Had this question been asked over the years then the international problem-solving effort would now be working and the problems would be solved or close to solved.

Why hasn't it worked? We instinctively define the problems and our responses in ways that fit our thinking and our institutions. This is the 'Einstein' test, "Are we trying to solve today's problems with the same kind of thinking that causes them?" Society has been failing this test for 40 years. However we will not continue to fail it. Either we now pass the test or society will itself fail as the end-point of unsustainability is reached.

Concrete proposal: We use Rio+20 to pass the Einstein test by allowing space, in the dialogue and in the outcome document, for thinking and policies designed specifically to create change at the necessary scale and speed. Thus Rio+20 would be divided into two parts; 1, what was going to happen anyway, and 2, an 'out of paradigm space' (OOPS) to define a fast global response with new thinking and new policies.

How to think differently? How can anyone know when they are really thinking differently in ways that overcome previous self-imposed obstacles? How to be sure we're not collectively just pursuing a different delusion? I propose a 'Kuhn test', "Will the outcome change the paradigm as a whole?" This test avoids perpetuating the fundamental mistake in global problem-solving - trying to manage the large complex whole-system in smaller less-complex pieces. Climate change for example cannot be managed with climate policies, but only with policies that shift the paradigms (or operating system or dna) of civilisation.

In the next section I offer an outline of a process for Rio+20 and society as a whole to pass the 'Kuhn test' and actually solve the previously unsolved critical problems.

Reference 1: Op\_Ed for International Environmental Governance Project.

<http://www.ieg.earthsystemgovernance.org/news/2011-08-19/international-environmental-governance-paradigm-governance>

Reference 2. Proposed 'Fix the system' climate policy in MIT project.

<http://climatecolab.org/web/guest/plans/-/plans/contestId/4/planId/15101>

Consultation question b)

b) What are the comments, if any, on existing proposals: e.g., a green economy roadmap, framework for action, sustainable development goals, a revitalized global partnership for sustainable development, or others?

Existing proposals are well suited to existing thinking and institutional structures but they cannot have the intended effect. They continue the established trajectory of international problem-solving and do not answer the 3 questions that would be asked if we were starting today (rather than 40 years ago).

### 1. How to frame society's response to global problems?

The language of 'green economy' with improvements in 'green sectors' is admirable but insufficient since it frames 'green' as a sub-part. 'Green economy' language builds consensus among those already in favour but undermines consensus in the wider group who see 'green' as a lobby rather than a vision. 'Sustainable' and 'sustainable development' have been co-opted and diluted in meaning and are no longer viable as descriptions of a vision. Sustainable development is also typically framed within a zero-sum game that 'balances' (trades-off) sustainability against continuing unsustainability.

Concrete proposal: Part 2 of Rio+20 should provide a vision, roadmap and action for wholes not parts, with an 'economy roadmap' and 'development goals'. The term 'global security' should replace 'sustainable development' as the overarching shared societal goal. Global security includes financial security, national security, human security and climate security (etc) which provides an ideal framework for defining societal responses that create synergy between goals.

### 2. How to calibrate society's response?

Forty years of relentless unsustainability has had an odd effect on society's ability to be ambitious with global problems. The lack of progress makes the problems appear hard to solve, leading to lower ambitions, which blocks progress (so repeating the cycle). Solutions that aim low, offering gradual change toward incremental targets for selected indicators or sectors, are irrelevant to global problems arising from deep systemic errors. With climate change for example, the impacts from existing GHG concentrations are already intolerable so aiming only to cut emissions is planning to fail.

Concrete proposal: Part 2 of Rio+20 must do what it takes to briskly turn civilisation around, from accelerating toward collapse, to accelerating away from collapse. This means aiming to reverse all major problems as a complete set (not just conventional 'green' issues). For example the 'green economy' must look beyond 'less of this and more of that' to a radically new growth pathway, where the price signals of every transaction add up to a surge in economic activity that brings net-positive impacts - such as human well-being rising, ecosystems expanding and phasing out waste accumulation.

### 3. How to focus society's response?

The question of what to actually do has been fudged over the decades by widening the gap between the wishful rhetoric of what we say will be achieved and the humble potential of what can actually be achieved with issue-focussed incremental 'make this bit a bit better' ambition. Different symptoms of the same underlying systemic errors (for example climate, resource depletion, waste, economic stagnation, disaster recover) ended up competing for attention, with the policy space for each divided up until little can be done about any of them.

Concrete proposal: Part 2 of Rio+20 should set out to fix the system not the symptoms. All global problems may be seen as symptoms of a single indivisible problem that the patterns of ideas and activities happening worldwide are causing systematic loss of value - economic, material, ecological and human value. The necessary paradigm change to be triggered by Rio+20 is to reverse this so the task is to manage the paradigm shift not all the individual issues directly. This is achievable by focussing change at whole system leverage points that combine switches in faulty world-views with policy interventions to make it happen.

The framework for action would be a plan to discuss, define and implement these leverage points. The global partnership would be the international collaboration across nations and institutions to do this.

Reference. My research published by NATO, Seven policy switches for global security. <http://bit.ly/7switches>

Consultation question c)

c) What are the views on implementation and on how to close the implementation gap, which relevant actors are envisaged as being involved (Governments, specific Major Groups, UN system, IFIs, etc.);

The proposed seven policy switches would close the implementation gap (the gulf in speed and scale between what is being done and what must be done). The policy switches are set out in my paper available academically, directly from me (James Greyson - twitter @blindspotting) or at <http://bit.ly/7switches> They would work in combination as a set with each switch being needed to address any specific problem such as climate - even though individual switches have greater effect on particular problems. Hence if any switch was considered to be too hard or 'not a green issue' then success would be unlikely.

Various actors may opt to become ambassadors for particular policy switches though it would help ensure sufficient co-operation if no actor became the 'owner' of a switch. Switch ambassadors need not be the obvious candidates, for example IFIs

may not all be well-suited to promoting a change in the way money is supplied into economies even though the change would even benefit the banking system.

Concrete proposal for a set of high-leverage policies to close the implementation gap (policy switches):

#1. The strategy of aiming to reduce problems can be switched to reversing them with 'positive development'. Less bad is not good enough. (This policy redefines 'development' and recalibrates ambition to match the scale of the problems.)

#2. Education can inspire a culture of joined-up thinking and engagement by switching from predetermined to curiosity-led learning. (This policy replaces self-reinforcing herd thinking with creative win-win whole system thinking, learning and innovation.)

#3. Economic growth can be switched from consuming the basis for further growth to building it by correcting markets with 'precycling premiums'. (This is a market-based tool to efficiently account for externalities by incentivising preventive actions.)

#4. Rapid global disarmament can be launched by switching from Gross Domestic Product to 'Gross Peaceful Product', that omits weapons-related transactions. (This policy makes national security affordable and achievable by incentivising mutually-assured non-destruction.)

#5. Exploitive commodification of the Earth's surface can be switched to guardianship by international treaty that interprets ownership in terms of responsibility to future generations. (This policy enables the reversal of loss of nature by inverting our understanding of belonging - we belong to nature.)

#6. Surplus accumulations of financial wealth, which would be wiped out by the planet crunch, can be switched by the wealthy into investments that secure all forms of wealth. (This creates a missing feedback loop so hoarded wealth can be used productively (solving problems, meeting needs) rather than destructively (slowing economies, accelerating speculation).)

#7. Global financial stability can be regained by switching money creation from the private sector to central public authorities and local currencies. (This provides for an immediate end to the era of austerity without adding to debt.)

Consultation question d)

d) What specific cooperation mechanisms, partnership arrangements or other implementation tools are envisaged and what is the relevant time frame for the proposed decisions to be reached and actions to be implemented?

Awareness of the risks of positive (runaway) feedbacks between different parts of the climate systems makes solutions for climate more critically urgent. Awareness of

the risks of positive (runaway) feedbacks between different problem dynamics (of which climate is one of many) makes comprehensive systemic solutions more critically urgent. So time is shorter than we think. The relevant time frame is to implement effective global paradigm changes many years ago - but failing that we must hope that decision-makers read and act upon these opportunities asap.

The first reference above (copied below) offers another leverage point relevant for Rio+20. The 'hardware' of existing national and international institutions are products of existing paradigms and are unable either to invent new institutions for whole system change or to organise effective dialogue for whole system change. Every dialogue is set in a paradigm to which it is driven to reinforce, irrespective of the intentions of participants. Hence a special design of dialogue is needed to foster paradigm change.

Concrete proposal for an implementation tool: Part 2 of Rio+20 should provide a virtual and face-to-face 'Out of Paradigm Space', or OOPS, in recognition of society's resounding failure to achieve meaningful solutions and with awareness that effective dialogue requires a deliberate switch of focus from 'solutions-as-usual' topics to shared exploration by making paradigm assumptions explicit. Participants are 'positioned' by thought experiment in the new paradigm and hypothetically freed from old paradigms. This simple technique allows sufficient creative energy to enable radical new making of plans and decisions.

Reference 1: Op\_Ed for International Environmental Governance Project.  
<http://www.ieg.earthsystemgovernance.org/news/2011-08-19/international-environmental-governance-paradigm-governance>