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What international environmental negotiations reveal about the state of the world

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Last February and March saw a highly anticipated 6-week marathon of multilateral environmental negotiations: United Nations Environment Assembly (February 28-March 2), future treaty on the protection of biodiversity in the high seas (March 7-18), global post-2020 framework for biodiversity (March 14-29). At the same time, on February 24, the Russian army invaded Ukraine; a war condemned by the majority of countries represented at the UN, and a unilateral act constituting a major challenge to the international order. A few months before the commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the United Nations Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, how can we interpret the paradox of the holding of these slow and arduous negotiations, which bring both new commitments to cooperation and new blockages, at a time when the rivalry between great powers is translated into military confrontation?

New environmental negotiations: pretense or real commitment?

The 5th session of the United Nations Environment Assembly saw two key proposals for new negotiations, supported in particular by the European Union, not only validated but also supported in an accelerated timetable: a new international treaty on plastics and an equivalent of the IPCC for chemicals, pollution and waste, should be negotiated before 2024. These deadlines seem too short, given the characteristic slowness of negotiations on, for example, biodiversity in the high seas (more than 10 years of preparatory discussions before the official launch of negotiations, which have now lasted for more than 5 years) or to set up the IPBES (7 years between the first proposals and the decision to set it up) The work on biodiversity in the high seas and the preparation of CBD's COP15 have also revealed that countries are currently mainly eager to reaffirm their positions, after two years of online discussions, without using the benefit of these virtual discussions to get to the heart of their disagreements.

The commitment to new negotiations signals at least two major facts:

- The recognition, by all countries, as a third crisis related to climate and biodiversity, of the pollution crisis, directly damaging human health and ecosystems. This should be emphasized again at Stockholm+50 in early June, and is also at the heart of the objectives of the European Green Deal. The issue of chemical pollution could become one of the fronts of progress to be closely monitored in the coming years, given the difficulty of agreeing, within the negotiations on biodiversity, on quantitative targets for pollution, particularly plant protection products, which the IPBES recognizes as one of the major causes of biodiversity degradation.
- A large number of economic actors support these new negotiations, in particular the draft treaty on plastics, which is consistent with a certain number of voluntary initiatives already underway, but whose center of gravity has yet to shift from end-of-pipe treatment to a reduction in the production of plastics at source and in the eco-design phase. As with the zero-carbon economy, these key economic players are asking governments to give a clear horizon of predictability to the modernization of the economy through the ecological transition.

However, public opinion and civil society are increasingly skeptical that international commitments will translate into real transformations of economic sectors and their impacts on the environment. Increasing the number of international environmental negotiations must therefore be accompanied by tangible evidence of their concrete effects to remain credible. 2023 will be a key moment of assessment for both the Paris Climate Agreement (Global Stocktake) and the Sustainable Development Goals (2015-2030), which are mid-way through their implementation period. Showing areas of progress as well as gaps in the achievement of objectives will therefore be an essential scientific and political exercise between now and then.

Is the environment a technical or political issue?

The preparation of Stockholm+50 has precisely been an opportunity to take stock of the progress and limitations concerning the environmental objectives of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, 50 years after the beginning of environmental multilateralism. These objectives will not be achieved without profound transformations of our lifestyles towards more sobriety (sufficiency); and this evolution is inseparable from technological improvements in the efficiency of resource use (efficiency). Generally translated by the formula "sustainable consumption and production methods", this issue has fallen short in terms of concretization. But private and public actors seem to agree today on the need to work on it: Stockholm+50 could help take a step forward in this area, 50 years after the publication of the Meadows Report on the limits to economic growth.

This is the ambiguity of these negotiations on the environment: while for all countries, these seem to be common goods requiring urgent political cooperation, some see them as a purely technical issue, the solution to which can be found through forms of technological substitution in defined sectors, made possible by forms of compensation for the economic actors who lose out most in this substitution. This is the sectoral club model inspired by the Montreal Protocol (1985), a logic that prevailed in the announcement of agreements such as the one on methane at COP26 in Glasgow in late 2021. However, the implementation of ambitious climate and biodiversity policies clearly shows that the resistance encountered is systemic: the social challenges of the climate transition cannot be reduced to a relatively simple technical-financial deal model, and involve projects for the profound conversion of the economy of entire regions, and equally profound changes in consumption patterns, which will greatly affect the purchasing power of the most vulnerable populations and even the middle classes.

Various initiatives are underway to make international commitments concrete and effective, and to give them the necessary political scope, beyond or in addition to the technical dimensions: litigation cases brought to courts in order to ensure that commitments and actions on the ground are consistent; partnership on the "just energy transition" between South Africa and a number of Western countries, which is based above all on a national political agreement between the political, social and economic forces in favor of this transition, which funding from multilateral and bilateral donors has supported; the Escazu Agreement in Latin America on information, public participation, access to justice and the environmental rights of indigenous communities, which is one of the recent examples of progress in environmental law.

The preparation of Stockholm+50 revealed a very clear division on this subject of the political or purely technical dimension of global environmental governance. Costa Rica, along with some European countries, referred to the resolution adopted by the Human Rights Council recognizing the human right to the environment and indicated that it would submit a draft resolution to the UNGA endorsing this principle. But large countries such as Russia, China and India have already rejected the integration of political rights issues into environmental discussions, maintaining that these must remain purely technical.

North-South: recreating mutual trust

The last element that emerges very strongly from the recent international sequence on the environment is that the financial demands of the countries of the South with regard to biodiversity are in line with those already expressed in Glasgow with regard to climate finance or loss and damage. They express a loss of confidence in the agreement reached in 2015, by which the poorest countries committed themselves to a "bottom-up" approach in which everyone undertakes to act for the common good as well as for their own benefit, but also on condition that the financial resources are accessible to implement the necessary transformations. The 2023 mid-term stocktake and review (on climate and on the Sustainable Development Goals) will be a culmination of these demands, which are made on three parallel levels:

- Encourage countries in the North to be more accountable so that they can effectively meet their commitments, such as the \$100 billion per year for climate finance, half of which is for adaptation;
- Beyond this funding, the countries of the South (India and Gabon, for example) indicate that their real needs are much greater. Even if these evaluations are debatable, they underline the very strong asymmetry between the amounts mobilized by the richest countries for the recovery of their own economy following the pandemic, and the small amounts that the poorest countries can access;
- More broadly still, actors and experts from the South have indicated, particularly in the run-up to the African Union (AU)-European Union (EU) summit, that North-South financial transfers were fundamental, but that they should not conceal another discussion, which in their view is imperative, on what makes the global economic system

structurally unequal, In particular, the perpetuation of value chains governed from already rich countries (including China), which are therefore able to capture not only the value but also many of the key jobs, at a time when the stakes of economic sovereignty are leading large regions such as Europe to develop strategies for relocating jobs.

These issues of structural inequality obviously go beyond the sphere of environmental negotiations, which could suffer the collateral damage of a lack of agreement on the reallocation of the IMF's special drawing rights in favor of the poorest countries, or of continued blockages at the WTO. However, the implementation of a zero-carbon or zero-pollution economy also necessarily leads to concrete forms of investment in value chains involving already emerging countries (China and its photovoltaic technologies), developed countries (Europe is now focusing on hydrogen) and developing countries (where some European players would like to see the production of green hydrogen develop to meet European energy needs). It is also in these very concrete forms that the global economic system of tomorrow, that of the ecological transition, is being built. Beyond discussions on financial or technology transfers, which have no political visibility, it is urgent that developed countries, like Europe, succeed in demonstrating, without being naïve about their own economic interests, how they intend to include economic actors from developing countries as true partners in innovation, capable of generating and capturing value and jobs. Stockholm+50 could also succeed in producing conceptual advances ("co-development of technologies" rather than "transfer") that are essential for recreating trust between the South and the North.

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