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Stockholm+50: from regenerative economy to sufficiency, the emergence of new doctrines

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On June 2-3, the United Nations conference "Stockholm+50: A Healthy Planet for Global Prosperity - Our Responsibility, Our Opportunity" celebrated the 50th anniversary of the first multilateral environmental summit, the 1972 Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment, which led to the creation of the United Nations Environment Programme and launched the series of Earth Summits held in Rio in 1992 and 2012 and in Johannesburg in 2002. Taking stock of 50 years of environmental multilateralism and 7 years of implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, this conference highlighted the fact that only one tenth of the hundreds of global goals agreed upon since 1972 have been achieved, pointing to a major implementation deficit. Despite the presence of the Secretary General of the United Nations and several heads of state and ministers, this conference was not politically decisive. But it marked a key moment in the evolution of concepts and doctrines in the field of international cooperation for the environment and

sustainable development.

The return of a North-South divide?

Carefully prepared as a joint endeavour between Kenya and Sweden, this year of celebration is above all a moment to take stock of 50 years of debate on the environment and sustainable development. If Rio 1992 and Rio 2012 can be considered as key moments of synthesis between environment and development, leading to the key agreements of 2015 (2030 Agenda and its financing, Paris Climate Agreement), the return to Stockholm was symbolically important, but risked underlining the strategic divergences between North and South in relation to 2015. Indeed, the succession of crises (pandemic, Russian war in Ukraine) does not give respite to the least developed countries and even middle-income countries, whose economic trajectory suffers from their lack of resources to finance the recovery, when developed countries or China are able to mobilize internally unprecedented amounts. If we add the asymmetry of access to vaccines, we are on the verge of a breach of trust.

The North-South agreement on sustainable development that was patiently built between 1972 and 2015 is therefore extremely fragile, as is multilateralism itself, which the UN Secretary General is calling for to be revived with a Summit of the Future in 2023.

By reaffirming that all countries must face together the three crises of climate, biodiversity and pollution, the joint declaration co-signed by the two organizing countries, Sweden and Kenya, at least saves appearances. It mentions that all countries must act to implement the commitments made universally in 2015. But while some negotiations such as the global framework on biodiversity (in preparation for the CBD COP15, whose deadline risks slipping another year) are lacking a strong political impetus, the balance found in this North-South declaration barely mentions it, in a last paragraph.

In addition, in the final remarks of the co-chairs, as well as in the message from the French President, there is very little mention of rights-based approaches, which would have been appropriate at a key moment of reflection on the implementation of environmental commitments, and no reference to the proposed Global Pact for the Environment, which France had put forward as a possible outcome of this conference in 2019-2020. Some countries, notably Russia and China, regularly oppose any connection between human rights and democracy on the one hand, and environmental issues on the other, which they suggest should be considered purely technical and not political. The co-chairs' text at least makes reference to the right to a healthy and sustainable environment, a reference that points to the proposals of the UN Commission on Human Rights; the rights-based approach thus remains open, albeit with pitfalls ahead.

In contrast, an entire paragraph is dedicated to the need to rebuild trust in the promises of solidarity between North and South, which begins with the need to fulfill the commitment of \$100 billion per year in public and private financial flows from the North to the South in the area of climate finance, which was supposed to be achieved by 2020 and may only be achieved by 2023. Climate COP27 in Egypt at the end of the year will be a key step in this regard.

Faced with the planet's limits, the necessary lifestyle transitions

In addition to governments, Stockholm+50 brought together a diversity of actors from the private sector, civil society and scientists, albeit in a much smaller proportion than the Rio summits. But it provided a clear picture of the evolution of concepts and doctrines of action in the international environmental community. Three major dialogues were formally organized: on the health of the planet as a basis for prosperity for all, on sustainable and inclusive

recovery, and on accelerating the implementation of the environmental dimension of the SDGs. As highlighted in the report [Stockholm+50: Unlocking a Better Future](#) by the Swedish think tank SEI and the Asian policy research institute CEEW, Stockholm+50 marks several important shifts in approaches to the environment and sustainable development.

First, the proposal to change our relationship to nature from an extractive approach to a "care" approach, which can be heard in the recurrence of the term "regenerative economy", borrowed from the reconstitution of the ecological capital of the soil in the concept of regenerative agriculture. In both cases, however, the use of the adjective "regenerative" is not stabilized in a very clear definition or requirement in terms of protecting biodiversity or the environmental commons.

Another central issue is the emphasis placed on the necessary changes in our lifestyles. 50 years after the [Meadows Report](#) on the limits to growth, the recognition of the planet's limits makes it necessary to conceive of profound changes in production and consumption patterns. While a UN process has been trying in vain for decades to take into account changes not only in production technologies but also in demand and uses, Stockholm+50 has largely highlighted the need for lifestyle transitions in order to stay within the limits of the planet and at the same time reduce inequalities in access to prosperity. Indeed, changes in lifestyles seem inevitable today, especially those that have an aspirational dimension. The word "sufficiency" was present in many discussions, even if it does not formally appear in official documents, because it would have constituted a new bone of contention between poor countries and countries that have achieved a high level of material comfort.

We are certainly still far from translating these concepts into concrete action, but we will note with attention the request formulated by the private sector for a global protocol on circularity, echoing the ongoing negotiation of a new treaty on plastics: it will be necessary to analyze in detail what could result concretely from such a request, as it is not certain that it will really lead to reductions in pollution or in the use of resources at the source, with eco-design, or to the transition from an economy of material goods to an economy of functionality.

A fairer globalization, to make it more sustainable

The third key conceptual shift is the need to reconfigure global value chains to make them sustainable and equitable, and the shift from a notion of technology transfer to one of technology co-development. While the issue of sustainability in value chains is not new, it seems that a change of era is at work in globalization, which is disrupting all value chains and the distribution of jobs, value, but also power, between the different countries that make up these chains. Some trends are not controlled, such as digitization and robotization, which are strongly reducing the demand for unskilled labor. Others are intentional, such as the transition to a low-carbon economy, which is unavoidable as it is linked to the rapid decline in the cost of renewable energies, despite the very significant fluctuations in fossil fuels, which are far from having said their last word, and to the reference framework provided by the Paris Climate Agreement. Finally, others appear to be declarative, but could begin to influence key investment choices, such as de-globalization, which was strikingly discussed at [Davos](#) itself, or at least the decoupling of major economic blocs to ensure greater economic sovereignty and resilience. How can we prevent this new phase of globalization from once again relegating developing countries to the role of extractive economies, exporting raw materials, and ensure that they can capture value, jobs, and decision-making power in these new reconfigured value chains?

It is not certain that these developments will be governed by trade policies, except perhaps by investment agreements. Rather, it is the concrete arrangements between operators that will be decisive: considering the countries of the South as actors in innovation (rather than as recipients of technologies made elsewhere), particularly in view of the fact that innovation resides more in the organizational, social and financial contextualization, and in terms of uses, of technologies, rather than in a logic of diffusion. The [Europe-Africa Summit](#) last February was very

illustrative of this issue: African economic actors are waiting for proof that European public and private operators will be able to see that it would be counterproductive, even absurd, to relocate Europe industrial jobs that could be located in Africa to capture more added value. On the contrary, ensuring the conditions for innovation and value creation in the countries of the South is both a winning calculation from an economic point of view and from a strategic point of view for Europeans, in order to finally create the conditions for a true partnership between equals.

All in all, Stockholm+50 was a conference of environment ministries, and this is perhaps its main limitation, to be able to identify the keys to accelerating the implementation and regulation of this new globalization: what if the main issue at stake in regulating the reconfiguring value chains was not so much a question of the environment as a question of social rights, which was widely emphasized by civil society during the Stockholm+50 Summit? What if the planet's limits and the changes in lifestyles they imply actually make it necessary to negotiate a new social contract, to ensure the conditions of social protection and redistribution without which the ecological transition will induce too many losers? Despite the blows against multilateralism, negotiations on a minimum global tax system are underway, so why not on social matters? Although politically unrealistic in a world that has become more conflictual than cooperative, we must nevertheless consider that the issue of social rights could be a central node for action on the environment ([IDDRI, 2021](#)).

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