

Giulia Colombo – Working group number 2. Ensuring continuous and sustainable development.

**Subtopic:** “Sustainable development: a political regulation or the companies choice?”

The idea of sustainable development was first expressed in the report of the Brundtland Commission in 1987. It involved the key concept of steady and continuous development, also and firstly, of the poor countries, without compromising the ability of the environment to provide for the needs of our societies. The term was further employed and developed in the UN World Commission on Environment and Development and came to express the synthesis of economics, social equity and environmental safeguard.

Are the idea of sustainable development and the regulations that from it came into existence working as they should or, at least, as they were expected to?

It is somehow possible to say that now, thirty years later the term was coined, too much stress was laid on the economic aspect of development and too little on the environmental protection activities. That is to say that, in order not to hinder economic development, rules and regulations apt to prevent environmental consumption were circumvented or sometimes even infringed.

More than 200 treaties on environment have been ratified, the most of which in the last thirty years, but, somehow, the commitment of the signatory parties is still insufficient. The nevertheless noble concept of sustainable development has been transformed into “sustainable consumption”, that is to say that there is the hope that economy will pursue today’s growth rates and yet the environmental resources remain unchanged.

Currently, international organization programmes, such as the UN Agenda 21, or the reports of the WTO Doha Conferences express the will of the contributing nations that “business and industry, including transnational corporations, and their representative organizations should be full participants in the implementation and evaluation of activities related to”<sup>1</sup> the above mentioned programmes. Some leaders in business and industry are already taking voluntary initiatives ensuring that their activities have minimal impact on the environment.

For example, some transnational corporations, such as Heineken, Ikea or BP, are promoting economic and social development programmes in certain poor areas of the South of the World building pipelines in Turkey, Georgia and Azerbaijan, helping their staff members who have AIDS

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<sup>1</sup> “Agenda 21: Chapter 30. Strengthening the role of business and industry.”  
[http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/mgroups/about\\_mgroups/amg\\_business\\_main.htm](http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/mgroups/about_mgroups/amg_business_main.htm)

in Africa by paying their medical treatment, or working with international organizations like UNICEF to set up learning centres for children who were forced to work underage.<sup>2</sup>

It is nonetheless true that some of these socially responsible programmes have originated from the necessity to improve the corporations' image after it had been damaged by campaigns that unveiled their involvement in illegal labour hiring and/or in environment pollution. This is because of production outsourcing, a process that sometimes causes a division between production benefits and waste, the first returning to the rich countries and the latter remaining in the poorest countries.

However, not every outsourcing process damages the poorest countries, which can sometimes benefit from higher employment rates and better education programmes, etc.

What's more, there are other programmes, born under the aegis of international sustainable development, that are proving well-functioning. They are microeconomic interventions which allow a sensitive improvement of quality of life of the people who benefit from it. For example, improvement of access to drinking water, improvement of basic hygienic conditions (by establishing basilar sanitary care) and development of the productivity of native crop cultivation.

The present condition of the implementation of regulations apt to safeguard and to develop planetary resources does not give enough priority to the promotion of sustainable development in the Third and Fourth World. The actual regulation is excessively economics-oriented. There is a strong need that all countries involve themselves in first person, without postponing the problem any further, beginning from the economically most influential ones, such as the United States of America, the European Union, or even the fast-developing China and India.

It is not a matter of choosing between a political regulation or the companies' choice. It is rather a synergy between these two aspects. To be more precise, it would be hopeful the realization of local-scale projects that are at the same time compatible with global guidelines. Also for the case of transnational corporations.

To ensure that sustainable development is elevated as an overarching priority for all initiatives, it would be also hopeful that all processes of decision-making, implementation, monitoring and review are transparent, accountable and fully participatory. Furthermore, the entire process of decision making should be carried out in a true spirit of partnership among all nations.

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<sup>2</sup> Belot, Laura, "There's still a long road ahead for sustainable development", Guardian Weekly, Friday 18 June 2004  
<http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2004/jun/18/outlook.development>

Besides, it would be also hopeful that what is now judicially a mere recommendation becomes as soon as possible a binding agreement for national and local legislations. The example of the European Union is good starting point: if the European countries, historically competing nation states, were able to give up to a portion of the sovereignty to create an economic union, why can't the remaining countries of the world similarly unite to effectively implement the already existing regulation?