

Rio+20: the discursive change of the EU from a (non-existing) "sustainable development" towards "green economy"

By Gustavo Hernández - ALOP representative in Europe

In the run-up to the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development to be held in June 2012 (the Summit of the Earth or Rio+20), different international agendas are already put at stake. It is not a minor concern, if we consider a global conjuncture marked by, among others, a financial crisis. As has already been pointed out by the finance guru, George Soros, in a recent article, comparing the current crisis with the former collapse of existing socialisms, "something similar to the fall of the Soviet bloc is happening in the West...You have a financial crisis wherein the market has collapsed, but it has been kept alive artificially thanks to the authorities. People do not realize that the system has actually collapsed".

The Earth Summit will be held in Brazil twenty years after the United Nations Conference in Rio de Janeiro. UN Member States have agreed to develop two major themes: (i) a "green economy" in the context of sustainable development and the eradication of poverty; and (ii) the institutional framework for sustainable development. Not surprisingly, given the modest results in the last international negotiations on climate change, there is an air of pessimism about the Conference. As was stressed by a member of ALOP witnessing first-hand the Copenhagen Conference, "from the inside, the Copenhagen Conference was not intended as a scenario to generate the methodological, financial tools and actions needed to respond to climate change, but rather as a space to postpone the urgent political decisions and to freeze the demands on a just treatment of the climate crisis".

It is, however, common sense to accept that the concept of "sustainable development", widely publicized through the Rio Declaration, was the great achievement of the Summit twenty years ago. According to principle 1 of the Declaration, "human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature". The Rio Conference also witnessed the adoption of the Climate Change Convention, which affirms the need to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and has in turn led to the signing in 1997 of the Kyoto Protocol. The Declaration on Forests and the Convention on Biological Diversity, which limit the use of global genetic inheritance to a series of conditions, were also endorsed at the Summit. So what is the leading discourse from the EU in the next Rio Summit? If we depart from a psychoanalytic point of view, we could assert with Jacques Lacan that, apparently, the symbolic will prevail upon the real.¹

The official position of the EU: green economy

The executive branch of the EU issued on 20 June 2011 its proposal for the 2012 Earth Summit, explaining the 'what', 'how' and 'who' of the transition to a green economy. The European Commission (EC) also made a call for the adoption of a global road map to ensure the continued commitment of States regarding the conference itself. In the presentation made by the EU to the press, the European Commissioner for the Environment, Janez Potocnik, insisted that the Río+20

¹ The Symbolic creates the first set of rules that govern the behaviour and integrate each subject in the culture. It is the most evolved code, and that which characterizes the human being. The Real is that which cannot be expressed by the language. Lacan assimilates it to the category of the "impossible". The Real is ever-present although continuously mediated by the Imaginary and the Symbolic, which are the dimensions that, on the other hand, can be accessed.

Conference should be seen as a starting point, not as an end in itself. A few months later, in a panel organized in Brussels by the environmental international organization Friends of the Earth, the Commissioner pointed out the following: "Indeed, we are not on a sustainable path. What we need is a transformation, a big change."

The EC document "Rio+20: towards the green economy and better governance"² outlines the objectives and actions on the two interrelated themes of the Summit: the transition to a green economy and a better global governance for sustainable development. There are three fundamental notions in the proposal: (1) economic growth, (2) the expansion of the market by means of the incorporation (i.e. integration) of natural resources such as water, energy, land and forests; and finally (3) the implementation of a framework for governance based on the respect for property.³ In contrast to the position of the EU, a recent document of the United Nations⁴ depicts the vision of the UN to this respect: "the green economy is understood in opposition to a brown economy, which compartmentalizes, pollutes, excludes and destroys. A green economy is one that fosters human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities".

A meticulous reading of the European Commission's discourse reveals the real substrate of the green economy model. Although not directly expressed in language, the substrate can be read as a function of the more "evolved" code which characterizes culture at a specific time: the prevalent role of market mechanisms and the private sector. According to EC wording, "experience shows that market-based approaches such as emissions trading are not only cost effective tools to address environmental problems but are also a source for investment". Thus, the document from the European Commission concludes, "to achieve the transition to a green economy we need to address three interlinked policy dimensions: (1) Investing in the sustainable management of key resources and natural capital ('what'); (2) Establishing the right market and regulatory conditions ('how'); (3) Improving governance and private sector involvement ('who')".⁵

In the realm of the 'imaginary' or the area in which identity takes place in reference to the 'Other' (other systems, communities, countries, and even the alternative or "impossible"), it is important to stress not only the "free trade" notion (which apparently Brazil endorses) but also the apparent (i.e. assumed, suspected, imagined) complementarity between international trade and sustainable development. According to the proposal advanced by the EC, this notion includes the "maintenance of a multilateral non-discriminatory and open trading system". Some organs of the EU have nevertheless noted that "an emphasis on the green economy and private sector should not divert attention from the need to empower citizens and promote good environmental governance beyond institutional arrangements".⁶ The Council of the European Union⁷ has also taken up the same

² The document lays the basis for dialogue between the European Commission, the Council of the EU and Parliament, Member States, civil society and businesses in the run-up to Rio+20 and before a consolidated EU position is presented to the UN at the end of 2011.

³ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION TO THE EUROPEAN PARLIAMENT, THE COUNCIL, THE EUROPEAN ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COMMITTEE AND THE COMMITTEE OF THE REGIONS Rio+20: towards the green economy and better governance. Brussels, 20.6.2011 COM (2011) 363 final, p.5-6.

⁴ "Sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean 20 years on from the Earth Summit: progress, gaps and strategic guidelines". UNDP-ECLA, October 2011, p. 12.

⁵ COMMUNICATION FROM THE COMMISSION, Idem. p. 5-6.

⁶ European Parliament resolution of 29 September 2011 on developing a common EU position ahead of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20). B7-0522/2011.

⁷ COUNCIL OF THE EUROPEAN UNION. Rio+20: towards achieving sustainable development by greening the economy and improving governance. Council conclusions. 3118th ENVIRONMENT Council meeting Luxembourg, 10 October 2011.

message, calling for greater efforts to integrate the economic, social and environmental dimension in a more balanced manner.

In the view of some sectors of civil society, the green economy is not a significant break from the current macroeconomic model. Equity, as a fundamental (and intended) element of "sustainable development", is entirely absent in the sphere of the 'real'. If we analytically assume the unspeakable of the real and at the same time its persistent presence, it is however important to note a change with respect to the former sustainable development discourse of Rio 1992, that is, the inclusion of Nature under the cold calculation of instrumental reason (i.e. 'commoditization'). The model of the green economy therefore constitutes an expanded version (reloaded version) of a system that, according to George Soros, "has indeed collapsed".
