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### A History on 25 Years of Sustainable Development

**F. Dodds, M. Strauss, M. Strong: Only One Earth: The Long Road via Rio to Sustainable Development. Abingdon, Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2012, 312 p., ISBN 978-0-415-54025-4/978-0-203-10743-0, € 49,47**

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#### 1 Background

It is not evident to organize a conference on sustainable development worldwide in times of economic crisis, which monopolizes the attention of the decision makers. Although this economic debacle is often called global, it is mainly a problem of the Western countries which dominated the world economy during the past century, while cumulating damage to the life-support systems, the biological resources and the climate. Moreover, the political will to act cooperatively on climate changes, one of the main treats to the human future, was never as low and as unconvincing during the past 20 years as it is today. This is remarkable as the roots of both the economic/financial and the environmental/climate crisis are the same: the inadequacies of the current system.

In this geo-political context, the United Nations organized the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, June 20-22<sup>nd</sup>, 2012). What came out was “The Future We Want”, a consensus document of 193 nations which was called “a firm foundation for social, economic and environmental well-being” by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon. Its content echoes to a large extent Rio’s Agenda 21 (1992), and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (2002). Both these documents and the meetings during which they were agreed upon, dovetail in the conclusions of the conferences of Stockholm (1972) and Nairobi (1982). This 40 years pathway shows that the implementation of

sustainable development is a laborious and long-term process. Nevertheless, the meetings provide an interesting record of the changing concept of the international policy aspects of sustainable development: from definitions and rudimentary examples in the Brundtland Report (WCED 1987), over the principles and the action plans provided at the Rio conference (UNCED 1992) (Johnson 1993), to the recalling and echoing conferences in Johannesburg (WSSD 2002), and the most recent RIO +20 conference again in Brazil (UN-SD 2012). Moreover, not only the concepts and the content changed during these 25 years, also the applications and the societal significance did. Today there is no societal stakeholder group anymore which does not face “sustainable development” and its consequences.

#### 2 The book

This book identifies, describes and analyses the long road to Rio+20. It is organized in two parts. Part I takes the reader from the preparations of the Stockholm conference to those of Rio+20. It pays ample attention to the UNCED Rio conference and the World Summit in 1992, the Rio+5 Forum, and the other intermediate assessments, the Millennium Declaration, the Johannesburg conference and the Earth Summit of 2002, and its follow-up. It is most interesting to read how environmental and sustainability policies changed during this period. Originally, environmental policy was seen as mainly driven by technology and education. Later on, the social and economic aspects of the issue were recognized. The match between environment, social aspects and economy is at the core of sustainable development. The original concept and its almost trivial areas of application were gradually expanded by more insight in driving factors, issues at stake, stakeholders and instruments allowing implementing a sustainable-development-policy. The over-all picture which emerges from the first part of the book is one of fragmentation, lack of structure and coherence in implementing the necessary sustainable development agenda.

Part II describes some of the block roads to implementing the agreements of Rio and Johannesburg. It starts with an analysis of the gov-

ernance gaps at international, regional and national level. This is followed by a summary, but nevertheless most interesting evaluation of the implementation of the 40 chapters of Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles, spanning the period from 1992 until today. What comes out is a picture characterized by few successes (e.g. on international institutional agreements and on the contribution by local authorities) and major challenges on most of the subjects. Other chapters describe the democracy and the economic gaps. The latter discusses basic aspects of a green economy, a basic concept in the Rio+20 document “The Future We Want”. The book concludes with 21 actions to save the planet. They range from adopting the Earth Charter and a new climate agreement, over establishing an International Court for the Environment, to setting up a Global Green Bond investment system.

### 3 Conclusions

As a whole, this book is a most influencing call to significantly modify the path of economic and social behaviour, to co-exist within the earth’s ecological limits. This publication is most timely as it provides the wider context that backs the Rio+20 conference. It is impressive as it spans 40 years of environmental diplomacy at the highest level. It is unique in doing so as the authors Felix Dodds, Michael Strauss and Maurice Strong were main actors, inspired multi-lateralists and first row audience participants of at least the last 20 years of the period which is described in the book.

The book is of particular interest for a science and technology audience for at least two reasons: Science and technology are among the most important drivers of environmental policy. The book provides insight in the way this relationship evolved. It explains how a policy that was mainly driven by a technocratic approach widened its scope towards societal and economic aspects. It describes why and how the scientific and technical aspects were complemented by managerial, economic and communication instruments. It provides a history on how the techno-scientific elements were widened towards a complete and full grown policy area.

The book put a series of international conventions in context: the Montreal Convention (and associated conventions) on CFCs, the Stockholm Convention on the POPs, and definitely the Rio Conventions on climate change, biodiversity and desertification. These international agreements have important practical impacts for all of us who want to understand and contribute more to environmental policy issues. The background to understanding why e.g. electricity generation, cement ovens and waste incinerators are affected by new pollution saving technologies is described in the book. The same holds for the wide range of interdisciplinary instruments for managing environmental quality in organizations and abroad which emerged during the last 25 years. And finally, the discussion throws light on why stakeholders and ethical considerations are of growing importance in the environmental policy debate and its societal acceptance.

The publication is compulsory reading not only for engineers and environmental scientists, but for all those who like to get insight in the logic and the difficulties in implementing a broad policy based on equity, which takes into account the planetary boundaries. This book, which puts contemporary international environmental policy in its context, really deserves the broadest possible readership.

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