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Negotiating Sustainability

A new paradigm needed

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Over the past decade, numerous international meetings have focused on the global quest for sustainability. Although multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) pay homage to this concept, the resulting texts contain few operational details about how to achieve the goal. This lack of operational detail reflects a systemic failure, occurring in part because many negotiations are narrowly focused on a single issue or treaty. Negotiators are often unaware of the progress or implications of ongoing work on related MEAs and are unable to ensure coordinated progress on linked issues.

The compartmentalization of the negotiating process makes it difficult for MEA participants to recognize or capture potential synergies and to avoid decisions in one MEA that compound the difficulties of another. For example, negotiators focused narrowly on forests and biodiversity issues may make decisions about deforestation and afforestation that do not adequately address climate concerns. In many countries, a lack of interagency coordination limits the information available to negotiators. In addition, even if negotiators of one treaty make a conscientious effort to improve synergies with other MEAs (and, thus, to promote sustainability), they may lack access to the parallel negotiating processes, forestalling progress on linked issues.

Historically, many experts have argued that successful negotiations must be narrowly focused, and anything extraneous to the specific sectoral issue at hand should be deferred. As a consequence, traditional negotiations addressed sustainability only in terms of general principles, or within the preamble of a treaty, but with no operational significance. This approach will no longer suffice.

How can the international community address the challenge of negotiating sustainability? At venues from the UN Millennium Summit to the recently concluded Ministerial Session of the World Trade Organization, many have identified capacity building as critically important in the struggle to ensure sustainability. In the context of MEAs, capacity building for negotiators is a high priority, especially among developing countries. However, building the capacity of negotiators to design efficient, effective, and fair agreements is necessary, but not sufficient.

What else must negotiators do better? Should they seek more rapid consensus on these pressing global problems? Or should they concentrate on advancing traditional views of national interest through international environmental negotiations? The lesson from these negotiations since the 1992 Earth Summit is clear: a new paradigm is needed to guide the diplomacy of sustainability. This new paradigm identifies national interest with a shared vision of global sustainability that crosses traditional diplomatic and sectoral lines. For most negotiators, however, employing the new paradigm will require training to understand the linkages so critical to the diplomacy of sustainability.

A group at the UN University (Tokyo, Japan) is trying to advance the new paradigm of sustainability in international negotiations by exploring the synergies and highlighting the linkages among MEAs. The group will make specific recommendations to Rio +10, the September 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg, Republic of



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South Africa), on ways to implement this new paradigm. Recognizing that sustainability cannot be attained through negotiating on narrow issues or sectoral agreements, the group will propose a broader view: sustainability itself must become a central focus of international environmental negotiations and must be accompanied by a commitment to recognizing the linkages among international environmental and economic issues.