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Global Governance of Sustainable Development & Developing Countries: Legitimacy, Effectiveness and Implementation

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Abstract:

In recent years, scientific warnings have been accumulating that the human impacts on the environment are beginning to upset delicate natural cycles upon which all life on Planet Earth depends. Unprecedented growth in population, in consumption, and in use of land and other natural resources have had the unintended effect of bringing forth a new generation of environmental problems that are significantly different from those of the past. Thirty decades ago, governments, researchers, ecologists and medias were fully preoccupied with such essentially localized issues which are still relevant particularly in developing and less developed countries. Nowadays, the environmental challenges of which we have become more recently aware are quite different. These challenges represent a new kind of threat to national and international security because they are global in scope, crossing national boundaries and affecting all nations. On the other hand, the predicted effects are long term, often far into the future, and the potential damage to earth systems may be extremely difficult to mitigate, perhaps even irreversible, once they have become entrenched. The common factor that probably presents the most difficulties to policymaking process is the high degree of scientific uncertainty that characterized these complex problems.

Therefore, it has become evident that no nation or group of nations, however politically powerful or economically strong, can by themselves deal with these global challenges. This fact explains why the last two decades have witnessed an ongoing process of numerous multilateral negotiations implying different actors, institutions, and innovative mechanisms. Taken together, all of this can be viewed as a still-evolving system of global environmental governance that has emerged over the last half century.

In the beginning of this process, developing countries did not start off as the main actors. While these countries consider ecological issues as important challenges, they do not view these to be sufficient in and of themselves and many of them even saw the North's focus on ecological aspects of the above challenges as an effort to sabotage the South's developmental aspirations. In recent times, while they are still rather skeptical about this process, developing countries have come a long way from being the vigorous contestants that they were three decades ago. This transformation - although slow, halting, reluctant, and still incomplete - has been a fascinating evolution which has not only changed the views of developing countries but has also transformed the global environmental agenda, most significantly by turning what used to be global environmental politics into what is now the global politics of sustainable development. However, during the last multilateral negotiations, developing countries were relatively less concerned about whether there is a need for global environmental governance (i.e., legitimacy concerns) and more preoccupied by whether they would be able to meaningfully participate in this governance (i.e., effectiveness concerns). In addition, many studies recognized that developing countries remain a key but reluctant actor in global sustainable development governance even if their ability to influence the system has remained severely constrained by many factors such as its self-perception of marginalization, its

capacity-limitations, and the conceived level of effectiveness and legitimacy of this system. Moreover, as developing countries become more focused on questions of implementation, they are increasingly demanding that effectiveness of the global governance be measured not simply in terms of environmental variable but also in terms of the development and equity variables imbedded within the concept of sustainable development.

This paper's objective is to explore on the one hand the key challenges, characteristics and actors of the global governance of sustainable development, and on the other hand the adequacy of this evolving system to address developing countries' concerns related to sustainable development. The paper tries in addition to highlight the potential consequences of any failure to do so given the fact that effectiveness and legitimacy of this process is increasingly dependent on the interaction between developing and developed countries which remain two different worlds with divergent aspirations and concerns. The principal argument is that in an age where the global environmental governance has transformed itself into the global governance of sustainable development, a discourse of legitimacy and effectiveness that is centered only (or even primarily) around ecological concerns will not only be rejected by developing countries but is likely to breed a frustration within the South that cannot be good for the future of global governance. The paper concludes that unless a strengthened, more effective, and more coherent institutional and legal framework for global governance of sustainable development is established, and unless a political compromise about clear responsibilities and implementation effectiveness is achieved between the North and South, the achievement of global sustainable development will remain a utopian goal.

Keywords: Global governance - Sustainable development - Developing countries - Multilateral negotiations - Implementation