

Part two

Future prospects

Chapter VIII

The region's role in a global alliance

Although Latin America and the Caribbean enthusiastically adopted the agreements reached at the Earth Summit in 1992, the drive to implement them faded as the decade wore on. Domestic structural constraints, compounded by distortions in the interpretation and application of the accords, the biases introduced by various international negotiations and global asymmetries, among other factors, have steadily eroded the sustainable development agenda.

Although the region has made clear institutional and regulatory changes, it has failed to harness the reforming and mobilizing potential of the sustainability agenda. The foundations for this have been laid, but Latin America and the Caribbean are still in the preliminary stages of a transition to sustainable development.

A. Recognizing the progress made

Environmental protection has become increasingly important in the countries of the region, and even though it is not yet an "integral" part of either the policies or processes of development, in the full sense of that word, the progress that has been made constitutes a better institutional and social platform than was available 10 years ago. The new generation of national institutions, laws and management tools, and international and regional agreements, renewed and extended processes of social intervention, public awareness and communication, and the tidal wave of technological change, information and capacity-building have all helped

pave the way for a more decisive effort to achieve sustainable development.

The region's more consolidated democratic systems can also help to move the process in this direction, as can the increasing acceptance of development concepts that take a broader gender perspective, are more inclusive of minorities and more respectful of ethnic and cultural diversity, the existing cooperation and integration mechanisms between subregions, and today's more advanced international cooperation agreements. The social perception of problems has also changed. Nowadays there is a greater awareness of the seriousness of unsustainable trends and a stronger commitment to protect the environment.

B. A disturbing assessment

An assessment of the economic, social and environmental situation, together with a review of the efforts made, reveals a disturbing situation. Development has failed to attain the pace and direction needed to assure people a better and more productive life that is more in harmony with nature.

The post-Rio decade has witnessed intensive economic change in the region, which is now more integrated into global currents and subject to tensions that generate new and heightened uncertainty and instability. At the same time, the benefits of recent global processes have not yet reached the vast majority of Latin American and Caribbean people, and progress towards the goals of equity has stagnated.

Economic performance has been insufficient to overcome the deficits that were already affecting the region at the time of the Earth Summit, and more progress has been made in improving macroeconomic variables than in enhancing social well-being. Levels of inequality and inequity have failed to improve in most countries and have actually worsened in comparison to the developed world. Relative poverty has decreased very little, and the number of people unable to cover even a minimum of basic expenditures has grown. As a result, the region is no more socially or economically sustainable than it was 10 years ago.

The environmental situation is not showing any clear signs of progress towards sustainability either. Environmental degradation continues at alarming rates, although there are clear differences between individual processes in this regard. Ecosystems continue to feel the impact of unsustainable production, consumption and urbanization patterns. The natural resource base continues to be subject to increasing

human pressure, and environmental services are now absorbing a greater burden of pollution. On the other hand, some advances are beginning to take root in the area of environmental protection and sustainable resource use, thanks to the efforts of those economic organizations that have risen to the challenge of producing in a sustainable manner.

Over the last decade the region has exhibited a marked degree of vulnerability to a series of more intense and frequent natural phenomena that are impacting on increasingly fragile ecological and social systems. This has resulted in greater human, environmental and economic insecurity, further undermining sustainability and generating heightened uncertainty, especially for island States.

Poverty and exclusion deprive over 200 million Latin American and Caribbean people of their right to share equitably in the fruits of development. Poverty continues to be associated with environmental deterioration in rural and urban sectors alike. The rapid pace of environmental degradation is preventing the generations of today from enjoying a healthy environment and from safeguarding the environmental rights of future generations. The most significant conclusion to be drawn from an assessment of the situation one decade one year after the 1992 Earth Summit is therefore that widespread progress towards sustainable development has not been made, although there are many concrete cases which demonstrate that sustainability is possible.

C. The main challenges

The steps taken along the road to sustainable development need to be appreciated and recognized, but the disturbing situation being faced today by Latin America and the Caribbean must be confronted as a major challenge for the region. Between the Rio and Johannesburg summits, 80 million people will have been added to the region's population, and when that population eventually stabilizes (sometime after the middle of the twenty-first century), Latin America and the Caribbean will have 300 million additional inhabitants. These new generations, like our own, are fully entitled to a decent, healthy and long life, to a healthy environment, to the creation and ownership of knowledge, culture and information, and to the ability to participate in public affairs.

Latin America and the Caribbean need to define a vision for the future and a vision of the viability of the development process that is both needed and desired for the region and the countries comprising it. Diversity in the biological, cultural, knowledge and information domains

may be crucial to sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean during the twenty-first century.

Given the present situation and current trends, sustainability is coming to be seen not simply as a desirable future, but as an essential requirement for human survival and social coexistence at the national, regional and global levels. Recognizing and adopting this premise, and assuming it as a commitment, entails reviving regional and national commitments to sustainable development, mobilizing a common effort and sustaining it as a governing priority in public affairs. Thus, as the region moves towards the 2002 summit, a central task is to motivate governments, sectors of civil society, business organizations, parliaments, local governments and others to reconsider and renew their commitments towards this goal.

D. Constraints in national and global agendas

The obstacles that will have to be resolved if the region is to move decisively towards sustainable development also need to be identified. These are the main constraints that are delaying the effort to achieve sustainable development or limiting its scope, both in the national domain and in the global framework. The assimilation, creation and dissemination of technical progress continues to act as a key constraint on wealth creation and market expansion, and the lags existing in these areas continue to act as structural limitations of the development process. Sustainability is also restrained by cultural inertia, compounded by vested interests in the unequal distributional structure, the absence or insufficiency of general and applied knowledge, the severity of cumulative processes of environmental deterioration and the high cost of reversing them, and a variety of institutional shortcomings. The experience gained over the last decade reaffirms the fact that, while national societies and the region as a whole need to take responsibility for their own affairs, global problems must be tackled in a spirit of worldwide solidarity based on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Latin America and the Caribbean must take responsibility for their own tasks and must make a determined effort to promote common actions, and the 2002 Summit offers new opportunities in both areas.

The road to the upcoming summit offers an opportunity to renew and relaunch the region's own agenda—in its various dimensions and expressions—and to refine and consolidate the global agenda to promote the common interests of Latin America and the Caribbean more forcefully in international forums. The distinction between “own” and “global”

agenda is not artificial, but the two are gradually converging as global environmental processes increasingly require local actions, since real possibilities for sustainable development are more and more conditioned—economically, socially and politically—by the globalization boom that has gathered momentum since 1992.

E. The uniqueness of the region

The uniqueness of Latin America and the Caribbean stems not only from its natural resource wealth and the global importance of the environmental services it generates, but also from the global hazards inherent in the region's rapid environmental deterioration. Projecting this uniqueness, consolidating the regional effort to protect ecosystems and obtaining worldwide support for this, represent the starting point for a platform of action for the new summit. This has the objective of redoubling regional efforts to safeguard the stability of the most important ecosystems of importance for global diversity. This is a basis upon which a common regional agenda could be shaped, and it is what could persuade the developed world to stand shoulder to shoulder with the region on environmental protection. Other priorities need to be reinforced at the same time, for example those relating to the urban and industrial environment, or the oceans.

Given the divided opinions that exist on environmental processes and policies, strengthening and implementing approaches that involve conservation and sustainable use of biological and cultural resources is crucial for the region. At the start of the twenty-first century, this integrating view of human development and environmental protection is increasingly relevant, not only because it has proved impossible to slow down the alarming pace of environmental deterioration, but because of the higher goal of overcoming poverty in the region.

Thus arises a very broad agenda, and given the large number of existing deficits, priorities need to be defined to address common interests in protecting the stability of critical ecosystems and avoiding dispersion of effort. Such priorities will need to be monitored, and a small number of indicators chosen as the basis for a precise appraisal and comprehensive measurement of progress made towards sustainable development.

F. Domesticating globalization for sustainable development

The region's involvement in globalization processes has failed to generate better conditions for sustainable development. Controlling the risks of globalization and exploiting its advantages for sustainability requires collective negotiation of better conditions for participating in the world economy, fairer and more stable rules of market access for exportable goods, greater security and stability in financial flows, more realistic conditions for external debt service and specific mechanisms for funding key sustainability projects.

All this does not obviate the need to reassert the commitment to raise official development assistance by industrialized nations to 0.7% of GDP, particularly targeting the poorest and most vulnerable countries, such as the island developing States of the Caribbean. Under the principle of shared but differentiated responsibility, one should also not forget developed-world recognition of previously accumulated environmental damage as an ecological cost in developing countries. This environmental debt needs to be assumed to the benefit of sustainability in the region.

The external debt problem has worsened and is obstructing developing countries' efforts to achieve sustainable development. The forthcoming summit should urge financial organizations and other relevant bodies to put mechanisms in place to ease the external debt burden and free resources to tackle the sustainable development agenda.

At the same time, environmental cooperation mechanisms associated with open regionalism need to be strengthened both within countries and regionally, and an appropriate environmental outlook needs to be incorporated into agreements currently being negotiated. A special priority for the next few years will be to address the issue of sustainability in negotiations for the Free Trade Agreement of the Americas (FTAA).

G. Synergy between agreements and more efficient environmental institutions

Based on the understanding that protection of biological diversity and soils, sustainable resource use and disaster prevention are all inextricably linked, it is increasingly important for the region that global conventions come together with actions to protect high-priority ecosystems, while at the same time addressing other environmental problems and critical regions. What has prevailed until now is an

uncoordinated set of actions with no common vision. The same is true of conventions on pollution and the urban environment.

Convergent action to protect the stability of priority ecosystems in Latin America and the Caribbean requires closer coordination between convention secretariats, additional earmarked financial resources per agreement, a strengthening of global environmental institutions to ensure such conventions are implemented more efficiently, and political strengthening in the leading environmental bodies of the United Nations system, so as to avoid dispersion. The international management of sustainable development also needs to be rationalized, given the proliferation and geographic dispersion of the forums and secretariats of multilateral environmental conventions and inter-governmental organizations, and the diversity of corresponding information requirements. At the Johannesburg summit, a recommendation could be made for a gradual evolution towards the harmonization of processes dealing with similar issues and objectives. Convergence of trade and environmental agreements and the reconciliation of their provisions are also needed.

H. Convergence between global agreements and the regional position

Until now the main obstacles to sustainable development in Latin America and the Caribbean have included a lack of global co-responsibility, growing inequality in the world economic system, and inefficiency in adopting and applying global environmental agreements. It will be impossible to improve the global environment for sustainable development, or even for environmental protection, through environmental agreements and institutions alone; convergent action is required between reforms to the financial, trade and technology systems, and worldwide environment agreements, institutions and governance. This reality has crystallized particularly in the years following the Rio accords, giving rise to two prongs of the overall Latin American and Caribbean agenda: one aimed at the world economic system and the other at the global and regional environmental system.

I. Knowledge and technology for sustainable development

The obstacles to the achievement of a more favourable integration into the international market, with production arrangements based on modern processes of scientific and technological innovation, have shown very eloquently that education, research, development, technology transfer and adaptation, and access to information are going to play an increasingly decisive role in sustainability.

In addition, in the face of increasing natural, technological and social hazards, evidence of growing human and ecological fragility stemming from cumulative environmental damage on a variety of scales continues to accumulate. The precautionary principle has gained renewed and more urgent significance for Latin America and the Caribbean. Protection efforts are no longer sufficient, as now there are increasing needs for adaptation and mitigation, along with the corresponding costs.

Today, more than ever, the region needs to make progress in science, technology, innovation and adaptability in order to deepen knowledge of its natural resources, undertake research that addresses its own priorities, restore appropriate technologies and promote the sustainable use of biotic resources based on appropriate risk assessment using a precautionary approach. Mechanisms for protecting intellectual property—in terms of both formal and informal knowledge—relating to biodiversity are becoming especially important. In this respect there is an ongoing demand for international financial agencies and the mechanisms of the United Nations system to support the development of scientific and technological capacities in the region, in compliance with principle 9 of the Rio Declaration.

J. Towards a new stage of policy integration

Current achievements in institutional, legal, regulatory and instrumental development can be projected towards new forms of management that support policy integration. In addition to strengthening current management tools, a new generation of more effective preventive instruments now needs to be developed, aimed at economic-environmental integration. These should be associated with voluntary compliance and be more widespread and more accessible for small and medium-sized producers and firms, and be supported by other economic and financial measures to stimulate their development.

K. Public participation

Given new capacities developed for public participation and intervention, it will be possible to move towards more advanced forms of collaboration between State and society. This will involve strengthening public intervention processes by institutionalizing participation mechanisms nationally and locally and consolidating national sustainable development councils, while also expanding other schemes of participation and direct intervention.