



Rio +20, 'national' footprints and state-run greenwashing **By Luiz Fernando do Amaral**

With Rio+20 approaching, global debate on sustainable development and green economies will gradually move to center stage. Although developing countries are in the epicenter of pressure for improvements, the debate is bound to spread and also include developed countries. In an effort to steer away from "greenwashing," this article discusses the importance of all countries committing at Rio+20 to the idea of reporting on their impacts on the environment.

In July of 2012, the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development will take place in Rio de Janeiro. It is being called Rio+20 because of the important advances in terms of including sustainable development on the international agenda achieved 20 years ago, at the Eco-92 meetings, also held in Rio.

Major achievements at the 1992 gathering include the launch of several United Nations agreements to address sustainability. The event led to the so-called "Rio Conventions," on biodiversity, desertification and climate change. In addition, it was Eco-92 that coined the concept of the three pillars of sustainable development: economic growth, social development and environmental protection.

Rio+20 is designed to take stock of advances and setbacks, as well as examine future plans for the international community in the context of sustainable development. This time, discussions will center on two main themes: the new international system of governance on sustainability and the green economy.

In any debate on the environment and sustainability, developing countries tend to be the "flavor of the month." Poverty, social inequality, illiteracy and uncontrolled deforestation are always high on the agenda. In fact, they are all disturbing issues that all countries, developed or developing, should attack. There is no excuse to avoid them. All of us – governments, private sector, civil society and individuals – have an obligation to act diligently to solve them. Rio+20 will provide an opportunity to generate incentives that move us toward correcting these situations.

However, it is also important to consider that these challenges are commonly raised in trade discussions, particularly by developed countries. Not that this is by definition a problem: some demands – as long as they are feasible, transparent and contextualized – are positive and can lead to improvements. But we know that interests that define such policies are often diffuse. There is nothing noble about "green protectionism."

In this debate, there are no good or bad guys. It is no secret that developed nations are the main cause of global warming. It is no secret that in these countries, preserved areas with native vegetation are very scarce. It is no secret that there are numerous cases in which dangerous or even toxic waste is "exported" to other countries. It is no secret that consumption and waste levels in these countries outpace the rest. It is no secret that the energy matrixes in these countries are amongst the dirtiest on the planet. All these challenges are equally important for developing or developed nations and should be tackled with equal weight and similar



commitments.

In the context of these discussions, the word “greenwashing” is used to describe something along the lines of false or misleading advertising. Indeed, several countries promote a green image when their actions in fact run counter to the image they hope to promote.

European legislation for biofuels, for example, states that the imported product must meet certain sustainability criteria, such as the absence of deforestation in its production process. Germany is the most vocal defender of that strategy. At the same time, in discussions on reforming the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) of the European Union (EU), there is a proposal that European farmers meet certain sustainability criteria in order to be eligible for financial subsidies at levels they are accustomed to. Germany, one of the largest agricultural producers in Europe, has expressed strong opposition to this proposal.

All these challenges are seldom approached with the much needed transparency they require. So mechanisms that expose such situations with clarity must be developed, to in effect generate pressure that leads to corrections, as so often happens with developing countries. In this respect, Rio+20 would provide an opportunity for countries to commit to reporting on their policies and impacts on the environment in order to expose their true level of commitment to sustainable development. In other words, countries would have to declare their sustainability “footprint” within rules that allow comparisons to be made.

This is already common practice when dealing with climate change, with countries required to report their emissions. At Rio+20, a proposal introduced by Colombia, if adopted, would move in the same direction by suggesting the creation of sustainable development indicators. The proposal, however, does not establish that national reports on sustainability would be mandatory.

Along with the levels of inequality, rates of deforestation and other extremely important aspects, some new indicators should be considered. The percentage of land covered with native vegetation, the per capita consumption of fossil energy and domestic garbage production are all examples of what should be officially reported by countries.

Most of this information is known, as reports, studies and surveys with this type of data already exist. The problem is that the data is not available in organized and consolidated fashion. If all countries declared their own situations in a harmonized manner, the world would become aware of their “national footprints,” leading to pressure from the international community. That might just be the type of “fuel” needed to promote real change towards a more sustainable future – not only here, but there as well.

In an increasingly integrated world, where demand for transparency is an essential part of the relationship between businesses, nothing seems more appropriate and fair than to demand the same from governments. This would be a decisive step to protect everyone from misleading government propaganda, or what one might describe as “state-run greenwashing.”



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