

THE UNIVERSALITY WITH INTERNATIONAL DIFFERENTIATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES: THE IMPLICATION OF THE GLOBAL NORTH-SOUTH DIVISION IN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims to analyze the implications of the global division North-South in the sustainable development debate. The root of this division is reflected in the creation, nature and orientation of the International Environmental Law. Sustainable development coexists with the question of whether development and environmentalism could coexist due to the progressive increase in world production and consumption. In this sense, a reflection on the ecological agenda of the global North is presented in light of the need to reduce poverty through development for the protection of the environment in the global South. For this, the methodological procedure adopted was the bibliographic review of the subject and the use of documentary research, with access to research reports, official documents and international treaties.

KEYWORDS: North-South division; Sustainable development; International Environmental Law.

RESUME

Cet article vise à analyser les implications de la division mondiale Nord-Sud dans le débat sur le développement durable. La racine de cette division se reflète dans la création, la nature et l'orientation du droit international de l'environnement. Le développement durable coexiste

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avec la question de savoir si le développement et l'environnementisme pourraient coexister en raison de l'augmentation progressive de la production et de la consommation mondiales. Dans ce sens, une réflexion sur l'agenda écologique du Nord mondial est présentée à la lumière de la nécessité de réduire la pauvreté par le développement de la protection de l'environnement dans le Sud mondial. Pour cela, la procédure méthodologique adoptée était l'examen bibliographique du sujet et l'utilisation de la recherche documentaire, avec accès aux rapports de recherche, aux documents officiels et aux traités internationaux.

MOTS-CLES: division Nord-Sud; développement durable; droit international de l'environnement.

INTRODUCTION

The complex relationship between development ideas and environmental protection is ancient. The word “development” usually invokes goals of progress and advancement, especially in the economic field. In this sense, it is common to assume that nature will provide the unlimited resources to nourish this growth. However, that same “development” is seen as one of the main causes of current environmental problems, expressed in situations such as biodiversity loss and global climate change.

Thereby, every time the environmental issues are approached with depth, there is no way to disregard the broad domain of the development aspect. These two areas of knowledge have faced persistent encounters, disagreements and tensions for the last 50 years, in the international system, at least. Presently, debates have centered on environmental warnings about the constant claim to perpetual economic growth.

Although sustainable development has become a plural and diversified concept through several different approaches, its ability to consolidate a hybrid discipline between environment and development has been questioned (GUDYNAS, 2004).

Such disagreement between development and environmentalism is found notably in International Environmental Law from the division of global North-South interests. It is known that international relations are fraught with conflicts between these two groups. The root of this North-South division is reflected in the nature and orientation of International Environmental Law from its inception to the current juncture.

In a traditional division in International Relations (NOGUEIRA, MESSARI, 2005), the so-called “Northern States” – which are named with the cardinal point because they are

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predominantly located in the northern hemisphere – are commonly characterized as having explored its resources for industrialization and development for decades without any concern for environmental degradation.

On the other hand, the "Southern States", found mostly geographically in the southern hemisphere, are the countries with late industrialization and still have vast amounts of natural resources and biological diversity. However, the benefits of these ecological assets have been concentrated in the northern region, due to their superior scientific, technical, economic and investment capacities.

Just as the global shortage of natural resources increases progressively, so does the concern of the countries of the South to control their exploitation of resources for economic growth. The exploitation of natural resources for development and poverty reduction has become a key priority in many Southern States, which perceive environmentalism as a means of undermining their sovereignty, enabling Northern States to gain access to their unexplored resources.

Basing on the inseparable link between environmental protection and economic and social development, the Southern States emphasize the need to reduce poverty through development as the first critical step toward protecting the environment. An example of this situation can be seen through the debate on “green economy” and "eradication of poverty" recently incorporated on the occasion of Rio+20. The discussions revolved around the urgency of a commitment to promote economically, socially and environmentally sustainable development, in order to free the humanity of poverty and misery that devastate it.

Based on these perspectives, this article aims to analyze the implications of the global North-South division in the sustainable development debate. Therefore, the present study seeks to present the North-South division from the imbalances of power, the emergence of environmentalism, the attempt to reconcile development and protection of the environment, the prospects for sustainable development through Rio+20 towards the so-called "green economy", and, finally, the universality with international differentiation of environmental responsibilities.

In order to accomplish it, the methodological procedure adopted is, according to the criteria pointed out by Sylvia Costant Vergara (2005), regarding the means of investigation corresponds to the bibliographical research, consists essentially of scientific articles, books and doctoral thesis on the subject in question, and documentary research, with access to research reports, official documents, international treaties, among others.

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The descriptive method was used with the scope of describing the North-South debate, exposing its characteristics and establishing correlations with sustainable development, and the deductive method, with the purpose to develop and to clarify concepts and ideals related to the theme, providing criteria for understanding the phenomenon.

1 THE INTERNATIONAL ENVIRONMENT REGIME AND THE NORTH-SOUTH DIVISION

The process of universalization and internationalization of environmental discussion is a phenomenon that can be considered extremely recent in the history of law, with more visible delineations from the end of World War II. It was in this context that in 1945, with the end of World War II (1939-1945), the United Nations was created, materializing, after the failure of the League of Nations, the desire for a peaceful and just international community. Up to now, the UN appears on the international scene as the only organization with the legitimacy of a universal association of States, whose fields of action cover international security, economic and social development, protection of human rights and protection of the environment (TAYLOR and CURTIS, 2006).

However, it is the 1980s and 1990s that mark the peak of tension between development advocates and environmentalists, as divergences have arisen as the costs of implementing environmental protection measures (AMORIM, 2004). Indeed, the “polluter pays” principle contained in Agenda 21 – adopted at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio-92) – to determine liability for environmental damage, did not make it clear how these costs should be calculated and, consequently, internalized by the countries.

For development advocates, the international environmental regime generally deals with “economic irrationality”, and in many cases, there is no scientifically proven evidence. Meanwhile, environmentalists harbor suspicions about the environmental impact of certain aspects of trade liberalization. Higher environmental standards also entail higher costs, with potentially unfavorable results in terms of competitiveness for the companies that apply them.

This is a discussion that reproduces a North-South division, demonstrating the risk that the environmental norms defended by the developed countries can be transformed into non-tariff barriers, although the original objective, in theory, is not necessarily the protectionist nature (AMORIM, 2004).

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When the limits for growth thesis was presented in 1972, most environmentalists at that time took the report as an unavoidable reference. The study, conducted by Donella H. Meadows and colleagues at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), on behalf of an association of entrepreneurs (Club of Rome), assessed development trends as expressed in five key issues: “accelerated industrialization growth, rapid demographic growth, widespread malnutrition, depletion of nonrenewable resources, and environmental degradation” (MEADOWS, 2004, p. 37).

Appealing to models, it was found that if trends of economic growth for the next few years were consummated, the world would “reach the limits of its growth over the next hundred years” and the “most likely result would be a sudden and uncontrollable decline, both in the population and in industrial capacity” (MEADOWS, 2004, p.40). These propositions had a major impact at the time, drawing attention to the high environmental and social costs in the course of development.

Later, the *Our Common Future* report (Brundtland Report), prepared by the World Commission on Environment and Development, indicated that bringing the world to the standard of living enjoyed in industrialized countries would require an increase of 5% to 10% in industrial production (UN, 1987). The heart of the issue discussed is that development on such scale is seen as biophysically impossible since the standard of living of the industrialized countries would be unsustainable, even if limited to 20% of the world's population (SCHRECKER, 1998).

The Brundtland Report, nevertheless, does not question ecological lifestyles and ethos in both the North and South (RIST, 2004). Regarding both the needs of present and future generations, the *Our Common Future* report does not distinguish between the needs of the global North and South populations, particularly between the basic human needs of the South and the extreme consumer desires that are at the center of Northern ambitions (ELKINS, 1993).

Although acknowledging that “painful choices had to be made”, Rist (2004, p. 181) notes that the discussion was insufficient in regards processes for industrialized countries to make changes to their consumption patterns.

In 1992, at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, the Agenda 21, one of the main documents agreed between the States present, recognized the need for measures to remedy this state of affairs. An example of this is the item 4.5 of the aforementioned document, which has the following provision:

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4.5. Special attention should be paid to the demand for natural resources generated by unsustainable consumption and to the efficient use of those resources consistent with the goal of minimizing depletion and reducing pollution. Although consumption patterns are very high in certain parts of the world, the basic consumer needs of a large section of humanity are not being met. This results in excessive demands and unsustainable lifestyles among the richer segments, which place immense stress on the environment. The poorer segments, meanwhile, are unable to meet food, health care, shelter and educational needs. Changing consumption patterns will require a multipronged strategy focusing on demand, meeting the basic needs of the poor, and reducing wastage and the use of finite resources in the production process.

Actually, Rio/92 expresses a milestone in the global North-South division, as it is the first major environmental conference organized by the United Nations after the end of the Cold War and the East-West conflict. This is the teaching of Guido Fernando Silva Soares:

A ECO/92 pode ser considerada como o foro que, à semelhança de outros, tem dado seu reconhecimento ao deslocamento das tensões Leste/Oeste, nos dias correntes, para privilegiar considerações sobre o confronto Norte-Sul; haja vista, igualmente, o eufemismo de considerar os antigos países do bloco socialista, como incluídos numa relação de países que experimentam uma transição para uma economia de mercado, conforme a Convenção-Quadro sobre Mudança do Clima estipula em seu art. 4º, § 6º (SOARES, 2003, p. 73).

Similar calls were made at subsequent conferences in Johannesburg (2002) and again in Rio (2012). However, it has not yet been possible to change consumption levels, despite initiatives to raise awareness of the issue. A similar study in 2012 named *Back to Our Common Future: Sustainable Development in the 21st Century* concluded that Agenda 21 had little or no impact on unsustainable consumption (UN, 2012).

In this context, the analysis of the ecological footprint¹ indicates that the global North uses an unsustainable amount of global resources, which is responsible for much of the world's environmental degradation and its contemporary consumption patterns are profoundly unequal. Residents of the global North require an average of 5 to 10 hectares of productive land and water to support their lifestyle, while citizens of the southern countries of the world have ecological footprints measured in less than one hectare (MCLAREN, 2002).

The analysis of the ecological footprint, as seen, also makes it evident that the global economy has already surpassed the ecological limits of the planet. With an eco-footprint

¹ The ecological footprint of a population is the area of land and water needed to produce the resources that the population consumes and to absorb the waste generated.

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estimated at 2.8 hectares per capita, the current human population already has a total ecological footprint of nearly 17 billion hectares.

However, there are only about 12 billion productive hectares on Earth, which suggests that we are exceeding the long-term human capacity on our planet by up to 40%. It is the Northern States, which have about a fifth of the global population and which consumes more than 80 percent of global economic output. Therefore, the global North appropriates almost all of Earth's capacity.

The attempt to harmonize such apparent inconsistency between the possibility of production, consumption and development with environmental protection came through the concept of sustainable development and its dimensions and reflections in the international environmental regime will be analyzed in detail in the next topic.

2 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: THE RECONCILIATION BETWEEN DEVELOPMENT AND PROTECTION OF THE ENVIRONMENT

The formal adoption by the United Nations of the concept of sustainable development on the international environmental agenda is based on the creation in 1972 of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED). In 1987, that organization published, as already mentioned (topic 1), the report entitled *Our Common Future*, also known as the "Brundtland Report" in allusion to one of its idealizers, the Norwegian political leader Gro Harlem Brundtland.

The report brought an embryonic concept of sustainable development as "satisfying present needs without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" (UN, 1987). However, it was only at the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (Rio/92) that the notion of sustainable development was definitively incorporated into the vocabulary of international society.

That is why Rio/92 had an important role: consolidate sustainable development as the simultaneous and balanced promotion of environmental protection, social inclusion and economic growth, by relating it to three fundamental dimensions that must be integrated: environmental, social and economic.

At the same conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the Agenda 21 established, in summary, the importance of each country to commit itself to reflect, globally and locally, on

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how governments, companies, non-governmental organizations and all sectors could cooperate in the study of solutions to social and environmental problems.

The conceptual evolution brought by the term "sustainable development" lies in the attempt to reconcile development and environmentalism, two large areas that presented irreconcilable mismatches until the 1990s. Sustainable development meant the insertion of environmental considerations in the political and economic decision-making processes as a necessary condition (SOARES, 2003).

Such importance of the concept of sustainable development to advance the discussion in the international regimes of the environment can be clearly seen in the words of Ambassador Marcos Castrioto Azambuja, Secretary General of Foreign Policy of Brazil at the time of Rio/92:

O segundo ganho para nós importante foi que o conceito de desenvolvimento no seu uso internacional estava moribundo, se não morto. Era quase impossível, nos últimos anos, usar a palavra desenvolvimento em qualquer foro internacional sem que aquilo causasse um efeito de rejeição, ou de indiferença tão extremo que era quase que contraproducente suscitar o tema. A adição do conceito de sustentabilidade ao desenvolvimento lhe dá duas características novas, primeiro, pela primeira vez ela se universaliza, pois não há qualquer país que não seja sócio da ideia de desenvolvimento sustentável, mesmo e sobretudo os ricos. Em segundo lugar, de certa maneira esse casamento entre o desenvolvimento e o meio ambiente tirou do meio ambiente talvez o seu pecado mais terrível que é um ingrediente desumano que ele contém, a ideia de que o homem é apenas uma espécie entre milhares de outras espécies, que nós não temos na ordem da natureza nenhuma posição central que cabe ao ser humano [...]. O vínculo com o desenvolvimento resgata para a causa do meio ambiente o elemento que o humaniza e o universaliza (AZAMBUJA, 1992, p. 45).

The 21st century was characterized, in the environmental sphere of the international agenda on sustainable development, by the so-called Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), agreed by 191 UN member States since the United Nations Millennium Declaration. In this context, sustainable development has explicitly appeared in the MDGs in Goal 7², which proclaims the need to ensure environmental sustainability in the 21st century.

² To achieve Goal 7 ("ensure environmental sustainability"), countries have to achieve four objectives: two relating to the protection of environmental resources and biodiversity, and two related to access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation, and to improve the living conditions of the urban population in precarious settlements. According to the MDG Report 2013, part of target C was reached five years ahead of schedule, with the world's population without access to safe water rising from 24 percent to 11 percent between 1990 and 2010. More than 200 million people living in precarious settlements gained access drinking water and sewage, or live in houses built with durable or less compacted materials. In addition, the report also underscores the 98% reduction in ozone-depleting substances consumption, although worrying trends have also been recorded, such as the large exploitation of fish stocks.

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The experience of the Millennium Goals in the international system of States has shown that vertical and isolated approach adopted in relation to environmental issues has negatively impacted its implementation (BRAZIL, 2014). Thus, the need to achieve a more transversal format in regard to the environmental dimension arose. This new approach culminated in the decision to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process open to all, with the scope to elaborate the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The SDGs are inserted in the context of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, corresponding to a set of programs, actions and guidelines that will orient the work of the United Nations and its member countries toward sustainable development based on the “green economy”, which will be seen in detail in the next topic. Concluded in September 2015, the 2030 Agenda negotiations culminated in the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 corresponding objectives.

The Southern countries argue that the ongoing discussions on SDGs have placed too much emphasis on the production side, neglecting unsustainable patterns of consumption, an area that will require strong commitments from countries belonging to the global North (BRAZIL, 2014). In other words, it is imperative that developed States take the lead in adopting more sustainable standards, given their specific capacities and responsibilities, while developing countries will follow similar patterns respecting their needs and capacities, in particular, their right to development.

Despite the fact that the concept of sustainable development represented an advance in environmental negotiations in the international system marked by the global North-South division, it is important to note that there is still a lack of measures to harmonize it with the different interests of the States and the gross imbalances due to inequalities economic, social and power relations between countries.

3 PERSPECTIVES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT: RIO+20 TOWARDS THE “GREEN ECONOMY”

The green economy was introduced in the diplomatic discourse of the environment from Rio+20 and was one of the two main pillars of debate of the conference that took place in Rio de Janeiro in 2012 alongside the Sustainable Development Goals (explored in the previous topic). The green economy, despite its concept of meanings and implications being still controversial and related to the most comprehensive concept of sustainable development,

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it represents a set of productive processes and technologies that enable the creation of means linked to social and environmental sustainability.

This is the intelligence of Chapter III of the final Rio+20 report known as *The Future We Want*, in the following sense:

56. We affirm that there are different approaches, visions, models and tools available to each country, in accordance with its national circumstances and priorities, to achieve sustainable development in its three dimensions which is our overarching goal. In this regard, we consider green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication as one of the important tools available for achieving sustainable development and that it could provide options for policy making but should not be a rigid set of rules. We emphasize that it should contribute to eradicating poverty as well as sustained economic growth, enhancing social inclusion, improving human welfare and creating opportunities for employment and decent work for all, while maintaining the healthy functioning of the Earth's ecosystems.

57. We affirm that policies for green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication should be guided by and in accordance with all the Rio principles, Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation and contribute towards achieving relevant internationally agreed development goals including the MDGs.

David Pearce, Markandya Anil, Barbier Edward (1989) point out that the green economy would be one that has the capacity to replicate itself on a sustainable basis, marked essentially by three fundamental characteristics: the constriction of human greed, the decolonization of rates of change in economic production and the environmental assets used up to that process.

On other hand, Klauss Bosselmann, Peter Brown e Brendan Mackey (2012) signalize that the green economy agenda is an attempt to correct market failures that lead to perverse results for the environment and human well-being. In this sense, the mentioned authors state that:

[...] One must also consider that fundamental changes are needed if a green economy represents a new trajectory rather than business-as-usual. The objectives of neoclassical economics are usually expressed in terms of full employment, relative price stability, economic growth, and efficiency. However, the goals of humanity are both deeper and wider (BOSELDMANN; BROWN; MACKKEY; 2012, p. 04-05).

Therefore, the green economy means the materialization of the concept of sustainable development in an attempt to improve it to reconcile the environment with economic development and promote even greater growth than the current scenario indicates, but with

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much lower utilization of natural resources. The problem is that the prospect of constant economic growth tends to neutralize gains of energy efficiency and the use of raw materials.

In addition, there is no way to dissociate the green economy proposal with the global North-South division presented in topic 1. Although recognizing positive aspects in the formulation of the green economy, the criticisms made by the global South regarding its implementation can be observed through a report prepared in July 2011 by the South Centre³.

According to the report, the central political agreement in Rio/92 was the recognition that the ecological crisis needed to be resolved through an equitable path, with partnerships. In this sense, as far as the green economy is concerned, despite its broad formulation, there is a risk that it will be adopted in a unidimensional, purely environmental way, without considering the dimensions of development and social equality.

One of the central questions revolves around whether the use of market mechanisms for rich country firms to offset emissions of pollutants in other companies or countries would not entail maintaining an unjust international division of labor and wealth, keeping the South poor and as a supplier of “environmental services” (in addition to traditional raw materials and cheap labor), while the North would remain affluent and consuming-oriented.

It is precisely within these critiques that the concept of universality with differentiation is inserted, addressed in the next topic.

4 UNIVERSALITY WITH DIFFERENTIATION OF ENVIRONMENTAL RESPONSIBILITIES

From all that has been exposed in this article, the conception of universality with differentiation, consecrated by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, meets the transformative potential of SDGs and the green economy.

According to the mandate contained in the Rio+20 final document, SDGs should be of a global nature and universally applicable to all countries, taking into account different national realities, social dynamics, capacities and levels of development, respecting national policies and priorities (BRAZIL, 2014).

In this regard, it is important to observe what is provided in paragraph 247 of the report *The Future We Want* (mentioned in topic 3):

³ The South Centre is an intergovernmental organization of developing countries based in Geneva, Switzerland.

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247. We also underscore that SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. We also recognize that the goals should address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development, being guided by this outcome document. Governments should drive implementation with the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate.

In the same direction is the provision contained in Principle 7 of the Rio Declaration (1992) on common but differentiated responsibilities, which is the basis of the agreement to develop SDGs into a universal nature:

Principle 7. States shall cooperate in a spirit of global partnership to conserve, protect and restore the health and integrity of the Earth's ecosystem. In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.

The principles, in general, operate properly in the evolutionary dynamics of the international regulatory regime of the environment. In the absence of stricter obligations, the principles provide a degree of predictability about the parameters for States to address environmental demands. It is not different with the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities, as elucidated by Susana Pentinat Borràs:

El principio de responsabilidades comunes pero diferenciadas encuentra también su fundamentación en los diferentes principios y valores presentes en el ordenamiento jurídico internacional. Por una parte, su contenido jurídico se relaciona con el principio de desarrollo sostenible, de igualdad y el principio de cooperación. Y por otra, los valores en los que se inspira son: el de solidaridad, justicia, dignidad y universalidad en relación con el concepto de patrimonio común de la humanidad. (BORRÀS, 2004, p. 172).

The relationship between sustainable development and the principle under review is manifested in ensuring environmental protection, by claiming the common responsibility of States, both for deterioration and protection in addition of ensuring the right to development, which is demanded by developing States, through the recognition of different levels of responsibility for environmental protection (CAMPELLO, 2014).

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According to Campello (2014), the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities makes clear the notion of solidarity to developing countries, and the combination of two aspects is deduced from this principle:

[...] o primeiro faz referência à responsabilidade comum dos Estados pela proteção do meio ambiente no contexto local, regional ou global; já o segundo corresponde à relação entre, de um lado, a contribuição particular de cada Estado para a evolução de um determinado problema ambiental e, do outro, sua capacidade para prevenir, reduzir e controlar as ações sobre o meio ambiente (CAMPELLO, 2014, p. 263).

On the need to impose different obligations between developed and developing countries, Holger P. Hestermeyer comments that:

Differentiated obligations are not just a global justice imperative reminiscent of the "polluter pays", as developed countries have played a large role in causing global environmental problems. It also means that developing countries do not have the financial resources or technical know-how to carry out the same obligations as developed countries. Insisting on formally equal treatment would prevent developing countries from participating in environmental regimes. (HESTERMEYER, 2012, p. 52)

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities is operationalized based on the principle of cooperation, not restricted to cooperation between States, but also including non-State entities. This understanding is supported by all developing countries of the global South.

According to Stone (2004), the concept of common but differentiated responsibilities has received growing recognition in international law. "Common" suggests that certain risks affect and are affected by all countries in the world, which includes not only climate and the ozone layer, but all public goods affected by global risks (such as peace, health and terrorism). According to the author, countries should cooperate, in a spirit of global partnership, to reduce such risks.

"Differentiated", on the other hand, refers to unequal responsibilities to all countries, at the same intensity, as the differentiated responsibilities imposes on the richer countries greater responsibilities than those of the poorest countries. The meaning of the term "differentiated" is problematic, because, in some way, all agreements of intent are in themselves differentiated. Nonetheless, "differentiation" in the cited principle seems to be reserved for multilateral agreements, which differ in the way commitments are formally verbalized, and not in how they affect each of the parties.

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For the ideas proposed by the SDGs and the green economy concept to have repercussions on international environmental regimes, they should be able to respond to one of the strongest criticisms of the MDGs: they have been very effective in helping to bring about advances in aggregate numbers within countries, but did not provide tools to ensure that these advances reached vulnerable or marginalized social groups (BRAZIL, 2014).

With this concept in mind, it is up to the SDGs to have a clear and transversal focus on tackling the inequalities affecting various social groups and achieving equity through universality with differentiation of environmental responsibilities.

CONCLUSION

The view of sustainable development and its unfolding from the global North-South division shows that the Northern States are appropriating much more than their fair share of the planet's resources. Quantifying the ecological excesses of the North helps to demonstrate that much of the ecological damage to the global South is caused by export-oriented production aimed at meeting the global demands of the North instead of meeting the local consumption and needs of the South. The consumption of the global North responsible for most of the world's ecological destruction, and their distance and wealth tend to make these consequences invisible to its beneficiaries.

It is inferred from such premises that unsustainable development can be found in the northern hemisphere, which raises doubts whether both development and environmentalism could coexist in the face of these deep limits. It remains clear that the global South cannot follow the Northern path of excess of production and material consumption, at least if it does not have the appropriate and prevailing technologies.

If humanity cannot safely expand towards sustainability, it is imperative to pursue other ways to mitigate its impoverishment, beginning with the reduction of the disproportionate ecological footprint of the global North in order to enable the ecological space for the development of the global South.

The expression “green economy”, when placed at the center of the Rio+ 20 debates in 2012, came to be seen as a large umbrella, under which the sustainable development could shelter and articulate various proposals of more specific range. The question is to reverse unsustainable trends, either social ones, such as consumerism and increasing inequality.

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Therefore, as an element of sustainable development, the green economy must also be inclusive, respecting universality with differentiation and demanding the eradication of poverty, reduction of inequities and promotion of human and social rights. It should be able to imply the promotion of clean processes of production and consumption that do not aggravate the current trends of breaking the limits of the natural systems that guarantee the maintenance of our conditions of life on the planet.

The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities can only be effective if, at the stage of setting targets and indicators, parameters are set that can express commitments from both developed and developing countries. Otherwise, there is a risk that universality and differentiation will be restricted to the terms of the preamble, without any practical effect on the international community.

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