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STOCKHOLM +50 DECLARATION: Harmonious coexistence and Rights of Nature must be the new focus for SDGs

The International Rights of Nature Tribunal Judges and the Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature (GARN) call for a change in the main aspiration of contemporary societies from maximizing economic growth and/or achieving "sustainable development" to seeking the harmonious coexistence of Humanity within Nature. Achieving this aspiration will require recognizing in law that all the beings within the Earth community have rights which humans have a legal duty to respect and uphold.

The Stockholm +50 Conference, 3-5 June 2022, offers a timely moment to re-evaluate the rationale and efficacy of the universal adoption of "sustainable development" as the desired trajectory for humanity, for the future generations of all species, and the sustainable life of our planet.

The 1972 United Nations Conference on the Human Environment (the Stockholm Conference), the first global conference on environmental issues, defined 26 principles and an action plan to guide "the preservation and enhancement of the human environment".¹ These were largely absorbed into the concept of "sustainable development", as defined in the 1987 Brundtland Report and promoted by successive United Nations Conferences on Environment and Development commencing with the 1992 Rio Earth Summit and its emergent Agenda 21. By 2015, "A blueprint to achieve a better and more sustainable future for all people and the world by 2030"² was articulated around 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

50 years on, the veneer of "sustainable development" as a pathway to a better future for all people and the world has worn away and limited progress has been made towards many of the goals]. While the sustainable development approach has helped to ensure that national development plans and foreign aid strategies, as well as local planning, policy-making and decision-making processes may consider environmental impacts, there has been an astounding failure to stop or reverse global ecological destruction, the climate crisis and its impacts on humanity and Nature as the consequence of the increasing destructive accumulation of capital. Prioritizing economic growth has caused and continues to drive massive ecological degradation, which directly or indirectly threatens all of humanity.

The prevalent techno-economic and anthropocentric approach of "sustainable development" perpetuates the misconception that ongoing ecological degradation can

¹ Cite.

² Mission statement, UN SDGs

be rectified without adopting fundamental changes to the dominant legal, economic and political systems, to education, and all areas of human activity. The transformational changes to contemporary consumerist societies that are necessary to address the key challenges of this time in human history (social inequity, and avoiding exceeding the nine planetary boundaries) cannot be achieved through the instrumental rationality promoted by the geopolitics of “sustainable development”, but rather must be grounded in the rights of existence of life: the common rights of peoples and the rights of Nature.

Since the first Stockholm Conference 50 years ago, the drivers of ecological destruction remain untouched. Planning, policy-making, and decision-making in both the public and private sectors are oriented towards, or heavily influenced by, prioritizing economic growth rather than more important goals such as the preservation of life and life-sustaining ecological systems. Learning to live under the conditions of life on Earth in harmony within Nature is the present challenge of humanity. We believe it must become an agenda for transformation. Further, the promotion of a “harmonious coexistence within Nature”, as a universal goal of societies, must be prioritized above economic growth.³

Stockholm +50 demands a critical look at how “sustainable development” has focused on sustaining economic growth rather than on sustaining healthy ecosystems. The biggest challenge for humanity is how to transition from a relationship of exploitation of the planet to a respectful human-Earth relationship. It is necessary to promote the overarching goal of harmonious coexistence within Nature and with other beings, instead of focusing on how to exploit them (whether sustainably or unsustainably). This is not a new way of thinking. For most of human history, human societies across our planet have seen life from an Earth-centred, rather than a human-centered, perspective. However, the cultures that embodied their respect for Mother Earth in their practices were displaced by the rational colonization of Capital.

“For a “blink of an eye in history”, humankind thought that there were no limits, or boundaries as to what rationality and reason could produce: this was the myth of progress... We thought that the power of human logic would be the dominating force of the universe... We are at the end of this road. We have to rethink the principles upon which we base the development of our economy, technology, and governance.” (Bo Ekman, Johan Rockström, Anders Wijkman, *Grasping the Climate Crisis*, 2008.)⁴

It is time to work on systemic alternatives within the framework of harmonious coexistence within Nature, a generic term for holistic visions such as the “living-well” expressed by different indigenous languages (*Sumak Kawsay*, *Kametsa Asaike*, *Swaraj*, among others⁵).

³ “Harmonious coexistence within Nature” is proposed as a generic term for the many culturally-specific versions of this understanding. It can facilitate the development and global application of the concept of living in harmony with Nature. “Harmonious coexistence” means a state in which humans relate to other aspects of Nature in ways that are either beneficial to, or do not harm, the integrity and health of ecosystems and the functioning of the natural processes that sustain life and maintain climate stability. The word “co-existence” emphasises that human existence is possible because of myriads of diverse relationships, and the words “within Nature” emphasise the shift to an ecocentric or Nature-centred perspective which understands humans as part of a larger subject or being.

⁴ *Grasping the Climate Crisis*, A Provocation from the Tällberg Foundation.

⁵ See: <https://globaltapestryofalternatives.org/endorsements/index>

Ecological economics and of course, the Rights of Nature are important means of achieving harmonious coexistence since they take into consideration the intrinsic value of Nature and its right to exist, flourish and thrive. A transformative change is urgently needed, not only from an ecological perspective, but also from a social, economical and political standpoint, taking in consideration what communities are envisioning, designing, creating and living many reframing processes across the world.

Hence, we need to liberate hearts and minds from the dominant, industrial mode of thinking and behavior. It is time to embrace both the reality that we are all part of one living Earth, and our diversity – be it differences from ‘other’ human communities or ‘other’ species – and act in solidarity with all beings. It is time to “transition from a period of human devastation of the Earth to a period when humans [will] be present to the planet in a mutually beneficial manner.”⁶

There must be nothing less than a conscious and radical transformation of our relationship with our living planet, our Mother Earth, and all beings that form the web of life - a relationship in which the inherent value and rights of each member of the Earth community are respected, in which the rights of Nature and the common rights of the different human cultures are recognized.

The challenge from Stockholm+50 is to define what is required to achieve this aspiration and to pioneer effective and practical means of re-orienting societies to promote harmonious coexistence of Humanity within Nature.

Global Alliance for the Rights of Nature
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⁶ Thomas Berry, “The Great Work” p.3.