

Institutional Reform, ‘Quality’ Growth, May Help Sustain World’s Natural Resources

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Summary of the Seminar on global trends

Reforming international institutions, encouraging “quality” growth and giving local populations equitable rights to land could be decisive steps towards ensuring a more sustainable use of natural resources, including of forests, a seminar in Stockholm heard this month.

However, speakers warned the 80-strong audience at the Royal Academy of Agriculture and Forestry (KSLA), a well-respected Swedish think tank, action had to be swift and taken as part of efforts to address challenges on the level of the global system.

The 8 June event, entitled ‘Global trends – implications on the development and use of natural resources’, followed on the back of a meeting at Chatham House in London last month. There 20 experts outlined a series of global trends, or “megatrends”, expected to drive change in the next couple of decades. Its Swedish co-chair, KSLA fellow Sten Nilsson tried to put the trends and their implications into context for the international crowd assembled in Stockholm.

‘Unprecedented’ change

“We have never had so many human-induced transformations in history as we have today”, said the former director of the International Institute for Systems’ Analysis and current advisor to the Canadian government, adding that the speed with which these changes were occurring was “unprecedented”, and that “we are lacking a lot knowledge” on how they interact.

Launching into an exposé of scientific predictions Nilsson said that, by mid century, the world population was expected to increase by a third. This would include a doubling of people in the “middle class” in developing countries to six billion.

While oil and mineral reserves were already peaking, global energy production was set to triple by 2050. Then bio-based production—to which both agriculture and forestry supply raw materials—would be worth \$280 billion, having expanded at an annual rate of 12-15 per cent.

The developing countries would be the ones setting the global agenda, Nilsson affirmed. Already in 2013 the developing world would be good for all but half the world's collective gross domestic product, up from 37 percent of global GDP in the year 2000, he said.

If left to the devices of markets and business as usual under the current international regime, the rapid change seen could produce “unpleasant surprises”, said Nilsson, pausing to catch his breath.

To be sure, recent advice (from the United Nation's Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change) showed that global greenhouse gas emissions were at an “all-time high” and that, despite intense global negotiations, “not much progress have been achieved”.

Others would have added that, as yet, there was no new international regime in sight to replace the UN's 1997 Kyoto Protocol on Climate Change after its expiry in 2012. Indeed, Stockholm Environment Institute head Johan Rockström suggested to the seminar, to prevent global temperatures from rising more than two degrees above pre-industrial levels in 2050, which is a goal adhered to by the EU and UN, the world would need to rally around a treaty with the clout similar to that of the so-called Montreal Protocol, under which UN member countries have cut emissions of substances involved in the thinning of the Earth's atmospheric ozone layer. There could be such strong agreements for countering climate change and for arresting the loss of biodiversity, according to Rockström.

For his part, Nilsson went on to say that ecosystems and their services, and biodiversity, would be impacted by access to water resources, since 75 per cent of current use went into agricultural production which, in turn, would have to be stepped up to meet the demands for food of a world population edging towards nine billion.

“We have to produce more out of less”, said Nilsson, calling for a shift to “qualitative” growth and a “strong policy leadership”. This should not only create rules and guidelines, but also do away with excess administrative burdens, remarked Andy White from the international Rights and Resources Initiative (RRI), representing 120 companies advocating more equitable access to land and rights by indigenous and local peoples.

Indeed, “new forms of governance” by the public and private sectors where needed, Nilsson agreed: “We need to work with this larger systems' view in order to be able to handle the decisions”.

Role of developing countries

Nilsson, White and others described shifting power balances from the West and North of the planet, to its South and East.

China had already risen to be the largest exporter of goods, said KSLA Director Åke Barklund. India and Brazil were hot on its heels in terms of technological development, others said. The three countries had young populations that would be asking for jobs and an expanding middle class in search for material living standards similar to those of citizens in the western world. In fact, the former's economies in question had "already emerged" said Ujjwal Pradhan, Asia Regional Director of the World Agroforestry Centre in Indonesia.

As the RRI's Washington-based coordinator, White said that, especially in the developing world, "the contest for land will increase". This, he said, should be seen against a backdrop of forested land being largely controlled, not by local or indigenous people, but by governments. This was especially true of Africa. However, a conversation with Godwin Kowero, head of the African Forest Forum revealed, in several African countries local populations would welcome investments and capacity building by foreign investors to restore dried out land and to replant forests.

However that might be, White predicted that violent conflicts would arise as a result of governments and businesses pouring "hundreds of billions of dollars" into investments in natural resources in developing nations, because of "unmet expectations for justice", as in the case of land rights.

His contention, which appeared to gain backing in a panel discussions to round off the 'Global trends' seminar, was for the global community to "re-think" its institutions. When it came to applying a system's approach, or "seeing the whole picture", some global institutions created in the aftermath of World War II had not managed to move with the times, speakers on and off the panel suggested. If those organisations could be made to "think big", in the words of White, and assist local populations and emerging economies in their development, there could be opportunities for positive change.

"We need to get more aggressive" in trying to convince world leaders of the need for change, said White, who concluded his talk by calling for the establishment of a global fund to help finance sustainable governance and tenure of forested land.