Rio +20 or Silent Spring -50?
Towards Genuine Green Economies

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Next year's UN conference in Rio de Janeiro should mark the beginning of a new era of environmental and economic cooperation. Rio +20 is not only the 20th anniversary of the Earth Summit, it is also Stockholm+40 – marking the UN's first major environmental conference, and, somewhat ominously, it is also the 50th anniversary of the publication of Rachel Carson's groundbreaking Silent Spring. As we prepare for 2012, we have 50 years of environmental history to bear in mind.

We all welcome the recognition of the need to change directions toward sustainability. But, we must also recognize that, for most of modern history, we assumed we were living sustainably. Our doubt about that – as economists, ecologists, policy-makers or industrialists – has arisen only in the last few decades. It's come as quite a surprise that our energy system is unsustainable; that our food chain is breakable; that our environment is eroding and that our water is running out.

So, as we embrace the "old" concept that a "new," sustainable, and green economy is possible, we should also acknowledge our past failures, our current self-doubt and our realization that our future is not easy to predict.

There cannot be one new green economy. Rather we need new green economies – in the plural – that are local, diverse and participatory. Green economies must be built from the ground up, firmly rooted in our different cultures and contexts.

Recent history makes it clear that globally we are not good at predicting the needs of green economies:

Four years ago, almost all of our intergovernmental institutions failed to see the food price crisis on the horizon: the World Bank admitted that it had neglected agriculture for three decades; and the International Food Policy Research Institute was reduced to reading decade-old tea leaves for

data about farm numbers, size and productivity. As a consequence of our misunderstanding, 170 million people more than ever before went hungry.

Three years ago, most governments convinced themselves that agrofuels ("biofuels") wouldn't pit cars against people. The overwhelming consensus now is that – for most countries – agrofuels increase hunger and we're still being told that the new, more sustainable generations of these technologies are imminent. Those with cars can be patient; those without dinner cannot.

Two years ago, as we began talking about a new green economy, we found that sovereign wealth funds and speculators were buying up massive amounts of land – and the aquifers underneath – in Africa, Latin America and even in my country, Canada. In UN meetings, we were told that this was a "win-win" for everybody. Today, we know this is not true.

Earlier this year, some governments maintained nuclear energy was the clean answer to climate change. Today, the world's third and fourth largest economies are retreating from that assumption and the other major economies have new respect for precaution.

Today, we are being told that exciting new and sustainable technologies are near, which will let us convert our planet's biomass into food, fuel, pharmaceuticals and plastics. We are told that less than one quarter of annual terrestrial biomass has thus far been commodified, so that we have three-quarters of our biomass available for commercial use.

What if we are wrong? What if there is not enough biomass for all the uses that are being contemplated?

What if we need not new techno-fixes but structural changes and new social policies? Some examples of what sustainable green economies policies would look like:

- Water: The five largest food and beverage processing companies annually use enough freshwater to meet the personal needs of the entire world population. We need a more local, less wasteful food web.
- Water again: Every day, every UK consumer throws away food that requires 243 litres of freshwater to reach our tables. We need social policies to change destructive consumer habits.
- Food: Annually, OECD countries, per capita, waste between 95 and 115 kg of food, ten times more than sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia. OECD states need to eliminate this waste.
- More food: The old green economy has increased our vulnerability to climate change by focusing on seven crops and five livestock species. We need policies that would work with smallholder farmers to nurture the diversity of the 7000 existing cultivated crops and 40 livestock species that can help us survive climate chaos.

- Governments should also ask: who may try to own this new green economy? The world's biomass is rapidly coming under the control of a handful of global corporations and that concentration is not sustainable.

- In 1995 the world's top 10 seed companies controlled 37% of global commercial seed trade. Today, the top ten control 73%.

- Today, the world's top 10 agrochemical companies control more than 90% of global pesticide sales.

- The top 100 food processing companies control 77% of global packaged food sales. Ten companies control almost one-third of total sales.

- Three companies account for one-quarter of all industrial animal feeds and 10 companies account for more than 50%.

At the same time this massive concentration of corporate power has taken place, the UN has lost its capacity to track technologies and to monitor the multinationals who own them. Just after the first Rio Earth Summit, governments abandoned the UN Centre for Science and Technology for Development (UNCSTD), and with it the ability to advise on the cost, safety and utility of different technology options. Also, following Rio, governments surrendered the UN Centre on Transnational Corporations (UNCTC) so there was no intergovernmental capacity to identify trends among the world's largest private enterprises. In other words, on the eve of biotechnology and genomic revolutions – at the beginning of the Internet and nanotechnology – the international community gave itself a frontal lobotomy and entered the much-hyped Knowledge Economy with neither an "early warning" nor an "early listening" system.

Twenty years after Rio, our rhetoric races from the Knowledge Economy to the Green Economy and we look to a new set of technologies to solve our climate, food, energy and economic crises. The technologies proposed are both the smallest and the largest imaginable – certainly, the most powerful. At the small end we have nanotechnology and synthetic biology that propose to manipulate matter at the level of atoms and molecules to create entirely new life forms. At the macro scale, we have proposals to geo-engineer the planet – to transform ocean surfaces to absorb greenhouse gases and to adjust the stratosphere to block sunlight.

Fukushima reminds us what we have forgotten from Rio, namely, the Precautionary Principle. Governments agreed on the importance of establishing technology assessment mechanisms in Rio. This has not been done. As we now consider new green economies, we must first establish an intergovernmental technology evaluation capacity – that includes ownership and control – and which provides an opportunity for people to participate in decisions that will affect their lives. Rio could be the launching pad for negotiations of a new treaty: an International Convention for the Evaluation of New Technologies (ICENT).

Beyond the Precautionary Principle, we must ensure and enforce three other principles:
(1) The full and effective participation of those marginalized peoples who have the most to win and lose from major economic changes;
(2) The inculcation of diverse policies and practices that make it possible to monitor and, if necessary, recall damaging initiatives;
(3) The critical need to "ground proof" sustainable green economies at the local level building up from local knowledge and experience.

If we follow these three principles the result will be sustainable new green economies. If we fail, the year 2012 will be known not for Rio +20 but for being Silent Spring -50.