

The Green Economy vs. the Greed Economy. Moving beyond the Corporate Vision of Sustainability

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In light of ongoing global negotiations on pressing environmental issues, it's time for efforts to curtail the excessive influence of multinational corporations over public policy to be strengthened and scaled up at all levels - especially at the United Nations.

The corporate capture of policymaking has dire implications for how we achieve sustainable development in the 21st century, and it must be strongly opposed in the coming years as deliberations on climate change and sustainable development reach important conclusions. Private sector influence over politics at the national level is already [widely recognised](#), but the extent to which powerful industries are able to influence global negotiations on some of the world's most pressing problems is far less reported by the media or discussed in the public sphere.

A prominent example of this was the Rio+20 Earth Summit in 2012, which was dominated by the presence of multinational corporations whose 'green economy' proposals starkly clashed with the more urgent and radical perspectives from indigenous communities, civil society organisations and environmental groups. The outcome was [a watered-down vision](#) for sustainable development, and the conference was widely condemned by civil society as a failure. Nonetheless, the pro-market approach to resolving the global environmental crisis has shaped the mainstream discourse on the green economy ever since, even at the United Nations (UN).

After Rio+20, many civil society organisations published reports denouncing the corporate push for a green economy and the excessive influence of big business during the event. Most people agree that the UN is by far [the most appropriate organisation](#) for facilitating a conference addressing critical global issues, as it is more inclusive and representative than any other global forum, such as the G8, G20 or the World Bank. But ever since the inauguration of the [Global Compact](#) by Kofi Annan and the head of Nestle in 2000, civil society groups have been dismayed at the continual rise of corporate influence over the UN and its processes.

According to Friends of the Earth International (FOEI), there are [various ways that big business exerts influence](#) at UN negotiations. They directly influence the position of national governments; they dominate some UN bodies as well as certain discussion spaces within the UN; they are often given a privileged advisory role in negotiations; UN officials have a 'revolving door' relationship with the private sector; and UN agencies are increasingly financially dependent on the private sector for their funding. FOEI state that one of the most worrying consequences of this is "the emergence of an ideology among some UN agencies and staff that what is good for business is good for society".

The green economy vs. the greed economy

Invariably, the big business lobby advocates for market-based solutions to environmental problems and the 'greening' of economic growth, and essentially works to safeguard opportunities for private sector investment and shareholder profit. But environmentalists and civil society organisations have long argued that there is something deeply misguided about putting corporate profits and market-based solutions at the forefront of our response to climate change and the wider environmental crisis. Indeed, it is widely accepted that the endless pursuit of profit and consumer-driven growth, the deregulation of corporate activity, and the privatisation of natural resources are [some of the key drivers](#) of ecological degradation.

Most market-based solutions necessitate putting a monetary value on nature, which plays into the paradigm of commercialisation: the value of the natural world is reduced to its potential for generating financial returns. Such solutions adhere to the logic of a neoliberal economic model that continues to dominate mainstream policy discourse even despite its role in [precipitating the global financial crisis](#) in 2008. But endless growth is a [primary driver](#) of resource consumption and environmental degradation, and GDP is now [widely regarded](#) as an inappropriate measure for human progress. On the question of whether economic growth can ever be sufficiently green, [the evidence suggests](#) that we cannot decarbonise economic activity fast enough to meet pressing climate targets.

In her latest book '[Making Peace with the Earth](#)', Dr Vandana Shiva reflects on the environmental impacts of a world order built on limitless growth, corporate greed and the commodification of nature. She concludes that "Green economics needs to be an authentic green, it cannot be the brown of desertification and deforestation. It cannot be the red of violence against nature and people, or the unnecessary conflicts over natural resources".

There is clearly a huge gulf between corporate proposals for a green economy and the '[deep green](#)' alternatives of environmentalists who call for extensive reforms at the national and global level. At the heart of the more progressive proposals is [a vision of a new economic paradigm](#) that is not dependent on producing and consuming ever-greater quantities of material goods for its continued success. Instead, it recognises that if we want to safeguard planet earth and survive as a species, governments need to find new ways of cooperating internationally and sharing the world's resources sustainably. [Economic sharing on a global scale](#) means respecting planetary limits and ensuring equitable access to natural resources for present and future generations, wherever they might live.

Reclaiming a democratic future

Of course, the political barriers to implementing a paradigm shift of this magnitude are immense. As mentioned above, however, as long as policy decisions face undue influence from the corporate sector, international attempts to mitigate climate change and reverse decades of environmental abuse are likely to remain dangerously insufficient.

In the first instance, overcoming the [illegitimate power of corporations](#) requires that citizens of all nations reclaim their democratic right to a 'government of the people, by the people, for the people'. This may not be perceptible in many countries as yet, but across the world [ordinary people are rising up](#) en-mass to voice their opinion on the future direction of public policy. From the anti-war protests in 2003 to the Arab Spring, the Occupy movement,

the recent protests in Turkey, Brazil, Ukraine, Thailand and elsewhere, people are demanding that political power is shared fairly throughout society.

But the demand for public policy to closely represent the needs of people must also extend beyond national borders to encompass global governance institutions, such as the UN. The next two years will see stakeholders finalise the Sustainable Development Goals, while climate change negotiations will continue in Peru and Paris to formalise a successor to Kyoto in 2015. It is therefore essential that decisions affecting the future sustainability of life on earth are made democratically in the interests of all people, and are not unduly influenced by the immense lobbying power of the private sector. In light of these ongoing international negotiations, it is worth revisiting FOEI's post Rio+20 [civil society statement](#), which was supported by hundreds of organisations and spells out a roadmap for ending corporate capture at the UN:

“Steps to be taken include limiting the privileged status that business currently has in official UN negotiations and policy-making and increased transparency around corporate lobbying at the UN; disclosure of existing relations between the UN with the private sector; a review of existing UN-business partnerships, and a halt to entering into any new such partnerships; a code of conduct for UN officials; and the establishment of a legally binding framework to hold companies accountable to environmental, human rights and labor rights law.”

The fierce debates around what constitutes a green economy are symptomatic of a more fundamental issue that cuts to the heart of what [so many in the global justice movement](#) are calling for: democratic representation at the local, national and global level. Until policymaking is wrestled free from corporate influence, it is impossible that international negotiations on climate change and sustainable development can lead to the transformative reforms that the environmental crisis urgently demands. In order to [shift away from an unsustainable and outdated paradigm](#) based on the relentless pursuit of corporate profit, millions more people around the world need to recognise what is at stake and bolster civil society efforts to get big business out of politics.

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