Towards a Social Contract for the 21st Century
Text prepared for the V Ministerial Forum for Development 29th-31st May 2012

1. The UNCSD, to be held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, follows suit to the UN Summits on Development and Environment which took place in Stockholm in 1972, Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and in Johannesburg in 2002. By a lucky twist of fate, it will coincide with the 300th anniversary of Jean-Jacques Rousseau’s birth and the 250th anniversary of the publication of his seminal text *Du contrat social*.

The Rio meeting should be used as an occasion to acknowledge belatedly that the 18th century industrial revolution propelled the Spaceship Earth into a new geological era – the *anthropocene* – characterised by “the central role of mankind in geology and ecology”.

To make a successful entry in this era, we ought to take advantage of the next Rio de Janeiro meeting to outline a global strategy of transition towards an environmentally sound and socially inclusionary course, translated into long term national plans predicated on an explicit social contract.

2. History has taught us that, left to themselves, markets are short-sighted and insensitive to the social dimension of misdevelopment/development processes. To tackle simultaneously global warming and abyssal social inequalities prevailing at present between nations and within nations, we must turn to long term planning predicated on explicit social contracts. The plans ought to reduce the social debt while preventing dismal climate change. National plans must be coordinated so as to remove incompatibilities and bring about synergies.

The biblical needle eye may be narrow, but “yes we can”, as President Obama likes to say. Rather, yes we still can, provided that we act quickly and smoothly.

3. The 2012 Rio Summit should therefore be above all, a roadmap conference.

The UN country members ought to be required to produce long term plans (covering a 15 or 20 year time span), using such concepts as the ecological footprint and the biocapacity, as well as energy profiles on the one hand, and, on the other, the social variables such as opportunities for decent work and welfare State protection.

4. In parallel, the UN system should undertake two major tasks:
   a) Instituting an Inclusionary and Sustainable Development Fund encompassing a one percent GNP contribution paid by developed countries, the Tobin tax on financial speculation, a carbon tax to be instituted in order to lower the carbon emissions and to fund the development of less developed countries, finally, a toll on air and seas to be paid by aircraft and vessels coming from richer countries.

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2 This is the adjective used by Amartya K Sen.
It should not be too difficult to reach within a period of, say five years, two percent of the global GNP, in other words, a sum broadly equivalent to twenty percent of the worldwide investment, a major lever to induce the necessary changes in national and international development strategies.

b) Creating and fostering science and technology cooperation networks based on a new geography, namely that of biomes and therefore of parallels rather than meridians.

5. Between 2012 and 2015, the country members should prepare their national plans for the period of 2016 to 2030. The above mentioned Fund and S&T networks should play a major role in articulating the national plans with each other, first at the regional, and then, at the global level. The plans should aim at a high growth rate to be used to reduce the social inequalities, so as to bring those at the bottom of the social pyramid up to a decent level of material consumption.

6. A further step could then consist in the elaboration of a World Development Plan for the period of 2031 to 2050, addressing for the first time the question of slowing down of the world material output, and thereby reducing the hold of the homo faber on the time budgets of our societies, while increasing that of the homo ludens.3

This new stage in global planning ought to be inspired by Lebret’s concept of “the civilisation of being in the equitable sharing of having” (civilisation de l’être dans le partage equitable de l’avoir”). The sky will forever remain the limit for immaterial creativity. However, the pace of the transition to the steady states of the future will be conditioned by our ability to implement hic et nunc the indispensable social reforms paving the way to the immediate “equitable sharing of having” within countries and between countries.

7. One last word. The programme outlined above may be deemed ambitious. However, it remains within our reach. To move in this direction, we need not radically change the existing structure of the UN system. A more pragmatic way should consist in trying to make a different use of the existing institutions so as avoid wasting time in administrative reforms. At any rate, the main political battle will have to be won at each country’s level.

3 See on this point Johann Huizinga, Homo Ludens, a Study of the Play Element in Culture, Boston: Beacon Press, [1938], 1955.