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Social justice and sustainable development impacts each and every one of us

Andrea Maia (Mediar360 - Dispute Resolution) · Friday, May 25th, 2012

When the airplane approaches the south zone of the city from the ocean side, flying into Rio is breathtaking. The sight of the long beaches, covered with white sand with the buildings in the background, perfectly framed by the green mountains is a pictorial representation of an idyllic place. From the top of the Sugar Loaf, Jesus watches over the city. It is flying into a postcard.

Flying into Rio from the opposite direction is, however, a different experience altogether. Suddenly, the city reveals its impoverished population, with over 500 slums, or, as we call around here, “favelas”. The loss of green coverage becomes visible. The lack of sewage pollutes. Poverty and inequality become concrete.

These two contrasting images are probably emblematic of the challenges that will be facing the countries participating in the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, from June 13th through 22nd, in Rio. Nicknamed Rio + 20, the conference will focus on two main themes: green economy in the context of sustainable development; and poverty eradication. Underlining these two themes, is the question: how to achieve sustainable development and social justice at the same time?

I believe that the Alternative Dispute Resolution (ADR) field has a lot to contribute to the answer. The inequalities and contrasts that we described in Rio are present in most of the large cities, particularly in the developing world. They are the materialization of latent conflicts that flow from unsustainable development, as it is impossible to achieve sustainable development without some degree of equality.

In order to negotiate this “social peace”, ADR, and particularly mediation, comes in handy. With mediation citizens who usually wouldn't have the financial resources nor the necessary information to access to the court system might gain ease access to justice.

One of such community programs is already in place in one of the largest and poorest slums in Rio, the so called “Complexo do Alemão”, located in an impoverished area in the northern region of the city. This initiative provides mediation training to local community leaders, who then take the role of mediators in disputes among residents, therefore granting a fair and simple solution. Besides, this is a way for the State to be

present in the communities, thus empowering the citizens.

Not only “social peace” but also environmental solutions can be achieved through mediation. However, this effort will only work if the stakeholders are motivated to come to the negotiating table.

It is unavoidable that the questions related to sustainable development and social justice will affect and involve a multiplicity of stakeholders and interests. It is predictable that each stakeholder will have different motivations, such as creating value; improving or repairing relationships, and others. Despite this fact, policy making will have to be mediated in order to accommodate these parties and interests so that sustainable development and social justice are not seen as mutually excluding, but rather are seen as complementary.

In a time and era when Earth’s physical limits are quickly approaching, during each and every one of the multiple steps in the process of achieving both social justice and sustainable development, the focus must be shifted from individual needs to the collective satisfaction of all stakeholders. Stakeholders must move from a distributive view of these issues to an integrative approach.

Only through cooperation will it be possible for mankind to share the same ecosystem on a permanent basis, while guaranteeing the survival of our species in the long term. Failure, in this case, is not an option for anyone. Social justice and sustainable development impacts each and every one of us.

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