Presentation Outline: “Economic Growth and Sustainability? Framing a New Model for Development” Twenty years after the first Rio Summit – the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development (UNCED) – the global community faces continued challenges in reconciling economic prosperity and growth with escalating environmental challenges. In hindsight, the notion of “Sustainable Development”, a concept that became the guiding principle of the original Rio Summit, has proven largely aspirational in scope and difficult to apply in a specific context.

Individual economies both in the developed and developing world have successfully begun decoupling their growing economies from a simultaneous increase in their ecological footprint; yet even in countries with a corresponding political will, true sustainability – in the sense of not “compromising the ability of future generations to meet their needs” – remains as elusive as ever. Around the globe, rapid depletion of finite natural resources, loss of natural habitats and biodiversity, and the threat of a changing climate all add up to an unprecedented planetary crisis.

What have we learned in terms of reconciling economic growth, social progress and environmental protection? Has sustainable development – a formula that seeks to balance economic, social and environmental priorities – been revealed to be nothing more than an astute slogan to appease different political interests and stakeholders, or does it retain the conceptual robustness needed to guide individual and collective action as we face the foregoing challenges? Are we ultimately locked into a paradigm of economic expansion that is intrinsically averse to real sustainability, requiring a radical departure from the epistemic premises underlying our political systems and the global economy?
In that same context, the discussion of a “Right to Development” may have lost some of its earlier momentum as rapidly growing economies in the developing world overtake many established industrialized countries on a number of metrics, from healthier public budgets and trade balances to more favorable demographic trends and better functioning public and social infrastructures. Yet elements of that divisive argument have resurfaced in the context of international cooperation on climate change, where a fundamental rift between developed and developing countries has been enshrined in the very regime architecture. As traditional distinctions erode, what does the “Right to Development” even mean in a more sustainable future?

Finally, to what extent can we already draw on empirical evidence to inform a debate that has, to date, largely been about political questions of power, equity, and moral obligation? Can nations that have committed themselves to a “green economy” offer hopeful lessons for the international community? If so, what are the likely challenges that global society will face in coming decades, and what opportunities that can be harnessed in the process? And, given the plethora of existing legal arrangements and institutions, what governance reforms or newly created structures may be needed to achieve the global transformation that is called for? Formulating answers to these difficult questions is nothing short of a monumental challenge; and yet, at this critical junction in the pathway of human society, it translates both into a historic opportunity and great responsibility for participants at the Rio+20 Summit later this year.