

## *Rousseau, Rio, and the Green Economy*

CARLOS LOPES<sup>1#</sup>

**Abstract:** *The Social Contract* by Jean-Jacques Rousseau emerges as the most compelling and seminal piece of political theory. It explores legitimate political order in the context of classical republicanism. This paper delves into the following questions around Rousseau's thesis: What would Rousseau make of the contemporary multilateralist surveillance regime, gridlocked in key areas that have direct links with human security? How would he square with a society that seems to be at odds with the nature-society equilibrium that he staunchly advocated for? Will Rousseau be able to lift today's generation out of the collective myopia that focuses on individualism as the gateway to a prosperous future?

**Keywords:** *social contract, collective action, governance, justice*

### Introduction

JEAN-JACQUES ROUSSEAU emerges as the principal source of knowledge for 19th century philosophy. It is rare for one man to epitomize such a wide range of attributes — democrat, romantic, educational theorist, botanist, composer, the man who stood for the underdog, and the philosopher. In the 1760s, Rousseau's influence on education, sexuality, politics, and the self were brought into sharp focus in four of his most compelling literary pieces: *The Social Contract*, *Emile*, *Julie*, and *The Confessions*.

*The Social Contract* emerges as Rousseau's most compelling and seminal piece of political theory. It explores legitimate political order in the context of classical republicanism. In his treatise 'man is born free but everywhere he is in chains', Rousseau asserts the inalienable rights of the individual and the sovereign 'will' of the people. According to Rousseau, freedom is natural, basic, and innate. His idea of a form of social organization that guarantees social autonomy, and still holds sacred the values of a socially cohesive community, is a recurrent theme in *The Social Contract* (1913).

Rousseau's fundamental belief in collective law remains a timeless principle. According to him, equity and freedom are essential lubricants to a functional society. His principle of collective governance is kindred in

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<sup>1</sup> Economic Commission for Africa.

<sup>#</sup> Corresponding author. E-mail: [ESOffice@uneca.org](mailto:ESOffice@uneca.org)

spirit to a multilateral policy system that advocates sustainable development as the principle of governance and institutional infrastructure. Today, 300 years after Rousseau's birth, 20 years after the original Rio Earth Summit, and following decades of multilateral negotiations, Rousseau's principles of social responsibility, civic freedom, and collective sovereignty are undergoing sharp scrutiny. In short, Rousseau's well-worn Social Contract has unmasked the complexity of re-configuring the world's problems into a singular, dominant global governance regime.

What would Rousseau make of the contemporary multilateralist surveillance regime, gridlocked in key areas that have direct links with human security? How would he square with a society that seems to be at odds with the nature–society equilibrium that he staunchly advocated for? Will Rousseau be able to lift today's generation out of the collective myopia that focuses on individualism as the gateway to a prosperous future?

The rise of inequality across the world has revealed new governance challenges and made obvious the shortcomings of the two most critical institutions, the state and the market, to act as regulatory forces. Can the principles of Rousseau's Social Contract help to square this circle? Three centuries after Rousseau's compelling plea for social autonomy, multilateral institutions have not succeeded in mending the broken pieces of a Social Contract. Some of the questions that plagued Rousseau's world on inequality, freedom, poverty, nature, and society remain relevant in today's society. Nation states converge and diverge on how to achieve the tenets of sustainable development, the same way Rousseau's ideas divided the public opinion of his time.

The article will present arguments for a parallel reading of Rousseau's principles of the Social Contract in a post-1992 Rio Earth Summit world. If indeed sustainable development is considered as a governance model, it would be important to understand what the Rio+20 Summit added to this model. Finally, it will be crucial to examine the perception of asymmetries in today's multilateral regimes and governance.

The article shall point to the fact that both Rousseau's principles and those of the two Rio Summits are essentially about change and that both argue for an institutional regime — a regime to uphold change through rules, social justice, and freedom. Institutions, such as the 'sovereign' state or an international regime, such as the United Nations are seen as necessary to chart the course of change. In essence, they determine its contours, and oversee and regulate its enforcement. Rousseau juxtaposes the natural versus the unnatural. He concedes that the maintenance of a Social Contract is contingent on the process under which members of society determine the social order (Rousseau 1913). This social order is not natural; it is created and maintained by humans in society. When acknowledging the role of social order, Rousseau is also alluding to the complex machinery, processes, and sustenance mechanisms that need to co-exist along the vision of the social order he advocated for. In today's more complex world, the arguments for a maintenance regime for sustainable development and a fairer society have become compelling.

## Rousseau's Social Contract and 'Sustainable Development': What Parallels Can We Draw?

There are five conceptual arguments that can serve to read Rousseau's contribution to contemporary debates.

*First*, Rousseau's world of the Social Contract has several parallels with a post-1992 sustainable development world. As stated earlier, both Rousseau and the iconic Earth Summit are part of change processes. In many ways, the entire concept of sustainable development can be seen as a process of change. However, it is an active process of regulation and self-regulation as well as adjustments and re-adjustments, with transmutations at all levels.

*Second*, Rousseau's Social Contract proposals cannot materialize without some form of associations and an institutional architecture that will devise and uphold the 'rules of the game'. Equally, a sustainable development regime is maintained by an international structure, i.e., a global system. Its enforcement and management will need robust institutions to monitor progress.

The problem is to find a form of associations, which will defend and protect with the whole common force the person and goods of each associate, and in which each, while uniting himself with all, may still obey himself alone, and remain as free as before.

This is the fundamental problem of which the Social Contract provides the solution (Rousseau 1913).

Rousseau's essential yardstick for success resides in the way institutions are sought as a means to maintain social order and cohesion. Rousseau's state of law comes to full representation in an environment of economic institutions. A Social Contract is borne out of this institutional glue. The existence of a state of law represents institutions and describe the rules therein that determine the manner in which individuals in society deal with each other (North 1990). Rousseau's Social Contract is strongly equated with good institutions. It can only be sustained if the individuals within the system do not attempt to dislodge it. In this view, the state of nature is the natural default action for humankind; yet, the danger is that when the state of nature is in place, resources tend to be wasted in expropriation and rent-seeking activities (Cervellati 2005).

*Third*, Rousseau's narrative of freedom has the same motivations as the notion of sustainable development and the principles embodied in Agenda 21. Agenda 21 — the blueprint for how countries can achieve sustainable development — gives voice and agency to all stakeholders. It puts development at the centre of the debate and local actors as the frontrunners in deciding how strategies can be formulated and actions implemented. Rousseau's freedom narrative may sound ambiguous and even contradictory. In *Book I* of the Social Contract, Chap. VI, Rousseau poses the challenge as he sees it:

Find a form of association, which defends and protects with all common forces the person and goods of each associate, and by means of which each one, while uniting with all, nevertheless obeys only himself and remains as free as before.

The question remains: Why must the move to a political society leave everyone as free as before? How does one reconcile the freedom of citizens along with the coercion that a government has to apply to make its citizenry obey its will? It is clear that the principles of sustainable development cannot be understood in the absence of real freedom.

Amartya Sen's idea of expanding the concept of development to include freedom understood as access to basic entitlements is linked to the tenets of sustainability and the Rousseauian ideal. According to Sen, deprivation is strongly associated with the absence of entitlement to "some good rather than the absence of the good itself" (Sen 2009). He argues that in a famine context, the default analysis is not an absolute absence of food or poverty, but rather the absence of entitlement to the food that is available. Sen asserts that famine tends not to occur in a country where free press and openness is observed. In short, when victims of famine are able to make visible their plight, governments are compelled to respond. To a large extent, he poses a fundamental question to Rawls and other political theorists such as Rousseau: if justice is reduced to the product of a contract, who will uphold the interest of non-contractors, foreigners, and future generations? These interested parties may be overlooked.

The Rousseauian idea of the 'general will' is a metaphor for social autonomy. It is indicative of the sustainability of societies acting collectively to ensure that future generations do not have to bear the burden and correct the wrongs of present generations. The notion of intergenerational equity mirrors Rousseau's 'general will' as a symbol of law that will work for the collective good of citizens. Our collective force in a Rousseauian world is when our dependence is de-personalized, and we embrace the community as a way of escaping social ills. The 'general will' exercises the main role of reconfiguring forms of dependence. It ensures that society is properly structured to uphold the freedom of each individual. The 'General' — Rousseau's short hand for the state — will also establish the rule of law to ensure that all members of society are equally treated. Rousseau's sense of 'enlightened self-interest', in which individual members of society are recognized by propping up each other's self-esteem, is the same vision as found in Agenda 21. This is a vision that reinforces the principle that by acting today in harnessing the Earth's resources, one is merely acting in one's own and in the interest of future generations.

*Fourth*, the notion of power also allows a comparator of Rousseau's 'General' to the dominant state and the multiplicity of non-state actors in today's complex world. The management of global problems goes beyond the responsibility and purview of the unitary state actor. This is a very different reality from Rousseau's

world where the state was 'omnipresent'. The implications of managing global issues, such as climate change, trade, or transboundary resources are not respectful of borders. They tend to 'leak' and 'spill' over national boundaries (Castree 2003).

The state may exercise its legitimacy and authority within national boundaries, but non-state actors in the form of international regimes continue to assert their authority and governance models, with many countries facing the same global challenges. Today's dominant state, protagonized by the principle of sovereignty, is losing ground. International regimes are in high demand for the expansion of collective territoriality of the state and reduction of transaction costs. They act as providers of information and facilitators of inter-state co-operation (Hasenclever *et al.* 1997).

With international regimes wielding greater authority in the regulation of global governance processes, the role of the state has been weakened. Rousseau's Social Contract does not reflect the proliferation of non-state actors in an increasingly complex world. Global challenges, such as biodiversity, climate change, and international trade remain state prerogatives. Boundaries confer both sovereignty and exclusivity to the state. When some state powers are shared or ceded to international regimes as part of a process, it is done with a prerogative to roll back any decision contrary to sovereignty interests. As Paterson argues, the 'fundamental [yet largely unacknowledged, and certainly unexamined] commitments in this understanding of global environmental politics are of an inter-state understanding of global politics, a liberal understanding of political economy, and of the neutrality of science' (Paterson 2001).

A *fifth* parallel between Rousseau and the post-1992 world can be found in the immediacy of institutions as emblematic structures for change. It is worth noting that Sen offers a counter argument to Rawls, and even Rousseau, on the importance of institutions as upholding the rule of law. Rousseau's Social Contract is intimately linked to an institutional order as the main legislator of rules that predetermines social behaviour. The naive assumption is that the right set of institutions will prevail. Little importance is given to contradictory human behaviour. As Immanuel Kant put it: '*even a race of devils could, if intelligent, produce just institutions and a just society*' [emphasis by author] (Kant 1957). Current international governance and decision-making processes unmask this assertion.

Sen's depiction of Sanskrit literature on ethics and jurisprudence outlines the difference between *niti* and *nyaya*. A careful analysis of both terms reveals their association with justice, but they both summarize different notions. *Niti* is used to refer to correct procedures, institutions, and formal rules; whereas *Nyaya* is a more all-encompassing term that looks to the world that emerges from the institutions we create, rather than merely mirroring the structures of institutions. Hence, Sen, similar to Adam Smith, Douglas North, and J S Mills points to the importance of having a more holistic representation of institutions, looking at them not just through the



prism of realization, but, more inclusively, taking into account other factors, such as human behaviour.

### **Understanding Sustainable Development as a Governance Model: Contribution of Rio +20 to the Model**

When in 2002, activists, policy-makers, and stakeholders met in Rio de Janeiro under the auspices of the United Nations, the intent was to chart a course for the future of humanity. This ‘new’ resolve was reminiscent of the commitments that global leaders rehearsed before with a pledge to lift people out of poverty and protect the Earth. The Rio+20 Summit was intended as a celebration of the original Earth Summit of 1992. Beyond a celebration of past commitments, Rio+20 was also meant to reaffirm political commitments and help global leaders take concrete actions to move towards a green economy. Twenty years after the iconic Earth Summit, the world has become a more complex place where poverty and inequality remained staple attributes. So, what is the verdict? Many pundits describe Rio+20 as a ‘non-event’, ‘failure in leadership’, ‘vague agreement’, or ‘weak outcome’.

Scientists and activists alike had pinned their hopes on a conference that would emphasize the expediency of a world in distress. But, it is not just the Earth’s life system that is under threat; the fact is that more than one billion people go to bed hungry every night. This stark reality is certainly an aggravation of what Rousseau observed in the 18th century, at least in size and complexity. Rio +20 may appear as a demonstration of how the world is getting worse rather than better.

Critics of Rio+20 seem to have forgotten the controversy of the 1992 Earth Summit. It was perceived by some critics that the summit failed to set a new direction for life on Earth. When one attempts to fast forward 20 years ahead, one can quickly discern the remarkable positive evaluation the conference received since.

Whatever the complexion of the immediate evaluation of the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, it is nevertheless clear that countries failed to design their cooperation mechanisms in ways that provide a new momentum for the implementation of Agenda 21. The Summit simply laid bare the fact that global commitments — with strict targets and uniform measurements of progress — were politically unrealistic (Papa and Gleason 2012). Therein lay both the challenge and the paradox.

Three hundred years after the birth of Rousseau and the foundation of social autonomy, can global leaders come up with a ‘blueprint’ to regulate the affairs of so many diverse people, economies, ecosystems, and social formations? How can this uniformity in measurement enable and kick-start action on key principles associated with the Social Contract, i.e., equity, freedom, the rule of law, etc.?

Yet, kick-starting some of the principles of sustainable development has further polarized the world in 2012 Rio; global leaders have channelled their energies in

defining what green economy is and what it is not. The term achieved diplomatic momentum at the summit. Many developing countries were concerned that this new concept will replace sustainable development. Those, who advocated just sticking to sustainable development, felt that major policy matters on finance and technology were deliberately forgotten in the interest of an even looser term. Hence, the debate was given an ideological and semantic resonance.

Some countries, mostly from the South, asserted that the green economy is simply a component of sustainable development and should not be used to dictate the pace of international policy governance. For richer countries, greening the economy — through clean energy — could be a safe pathway to increase economic growth and create new ‘green’ jobs. Subsequently, the efforts to adopt a green economy road map with environmental targets, goals, and deadlines met with great resistance at Rio.

In addition, some critics argue that Rio +20 was a failed opportunity in its interpretation of the ‘Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)’, a replacement for the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). SDGs were omitted from the General Assembly Resolution, which provided the mandate for convening the Rio +20 Summit. However, SDGs have now regained a new momentum since Rio.

Rio produced the typical asymmetrical relationships with the EU insisting on emphasis on energy, water resource efficiency, land and ecosystems, as the critical areas for measuring the SDGs; whilst the G77 and China placed more emphasis on greater balance between the three pillars of sustainable development. Another vexing issue is related to the MDGs and how these are translated as development agendas across the developing world. Many developing countries are concerned that the high visibility that is given to SDGs might drive the original MDG targets and indicators into obscurity. They would instead like to see a better manifestation of how the MDGs and SDGs can be integrated.

Another problem evident in 2012 Rio was the lack of robust institutional arrangements that will champion the implementation of actions decided in Rio in the same way that trade is strongly equated with the World Trade Organization. But perhaps more controversial is the issues of finance and technology and the means of implementation. The cleavage between developed and developing countries on this topic was even starker. Developing countries argue that leapfrogging environmentally sound technologies should mean structured support from industrialized nations. This was a key plank of the argument of developing countries in 1992 and remains a constant in the negotiations 20 years later. The question of new and additional financial flows and respect for the agreed aid target of 0.7 per cent has also been avoided systematically.

The overriding question remains: Should countries commit to new goals and implementation of new concepts, such as the green economy, if they are unable to secure pledges made 20 years ago? It seems that Rio+20 did not succeed in answering these questions and failed to chart a clear course that will support many of Rousseau’s ideals on social justice and freedom.



### ***Sustainable development: An impractical tool for global governance?***

Sustainable development was born out of a historical context. The theory was an attempt to resolve the tension between environmental concerns resulting from the ecological consequences of human activities on one hand and economic, social, and political concerns on the other. The central tenet of sustainable development resides in the concept of equity and social justice for all. This is often associated with the Rawlsian theory that suggests a bias in resource allocation to benefit the least advantaged societies (Rawls 1971). The intergenerational solidarity principle, translated into the will that resource management of today should not compromise the well-being of future generations, remains popular.

More than two decades after the concept was given visibility by the Brundtland Report, our understanding of sustainable development is still evolving (Newman 2006). Indeed, subsequent international conferences, such as the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, reinforced the need for change in the way societies produce and consume as a precondition for achieving sustainable development (UN ECA 2008–09). In fact, the Economic Commission for Africa's *Sustainable Development Report* emphasizes the importance of moving towards sustainable consumption and production to fulfil the dual aspirations of economic growth and poverty alleviation.

The terminology sustainable development also implies balance, i.e., the ability to use the different capitals — social, natural, and physical — in ways that do not jeopardize natural support systems (Kates *et al.* 2001). The amount and distribution of the various capitals matter (Kates and Dasgupta 2007). The terminology has achieved greater political legitimacy as argued by Brundtland: “the ‘environment’ is where we live; and ‘development’ is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable” (United Nations).

Yet, in spite of this evolution, sustainable development continues to suffer from definitional vagueness (Happaerts 2012). Most critics of sustainable development tend to see it as far too normative and ambiguous, incapable of bringing practical solutions to complex development and environmental problems (Newman 2006). To break away from this inherent fuzziness and ambiguity, the term ‘sustainability’ is invariably used as a substitute for the absence of clarity in the path towards development. As Holling argues (Holling 1973), sustainability is the capacity to “create, test, and maintain adaptive capability”. Development, on the other hand, can be a process of environmental management that is evolutionary in nature.

### ***Sustainable development model: The ‘absence’ of a ‘blueprint’***

The so-called new engines of global growth, such as Brazil, Russia, India, and China have a collective GDP coming closer to that of Japan, France, the United Kingdom (UK), Italy, Germany, and the United States (US) put together (Nayyar 2008). These new engines of growth also need to look at their roles in acting as models or champions for sustainable development. What is their potential for



achieving sustainable development? China is an example of a country that has achieved growth, but has only recently started linking growth to the principles of environmental preservation.

Critics argue that the concept of sustainable development needs to be more flexible and dynamic, so that it is able to lend itself to ecological and social realities. Sustainable development is a process of transformative change across scales and governance regimes. It thus requires an enabling environment, robust institutions, and a set of rules to be adhered to. These are not processes that one can ‘stumble’ into; rather it needs continuous direction and focus.

### **Perception of Asymmetries in the Current Multilateral Regimes and Governance**

The challenge of a multilateral governance model that advocates sustainable development cannot be severed from one that is able to set global agendas, legitimize principle of common actions, and bring global communities to commit to a process of implementing change at local, national, and international levels. This operational space can only happen in architecture with actors that ‘play’ the role of multilateral diplomacy. For instance, the United Nations provides the critical platform for multi-party negotiations, a vehicle for change. It is also the ‘stage’ where forms of multilateral diplomacy can be evaluated and even contested.

Principles such as ‘common but differentiated responsibility’, ‘subsidiarity’, ‘the polluter pays’, have become synonymous to an institutional structure that is largely perceived as an enforcer. As in Rousseau’s Social Contract, the seeds for a transformative development are deeply rooted in the capacity of the perceived institution and how it induces change.

The asymmetries of the world hitherto anchored mainly on the North–South divide have become even more diffused and stratified, with wide-ranging inequalities ranging from technology, science, and even to the basic production system. Thus, the expectation that the North will provide the key to unlocking development in the South is a ‘pipe’ dream. Many of the big Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries have channelled their energies elsewhere and concerns on how efficient and clean technologies can be transferred have remained rhetorical questions. Global leaders, such as the European Union, have not succeeded in persuading a disinterested USA to take a stronger role in the management of global commons (Vogler and Stevens 2007). Consequently, the paradox is that the role of the United Nations in managing the state of equilibrium between the three pillars of sustainable development has become more difficult. The South’s prevailing viewpoint focuses on environmental degradation as the chief culprit to their growing problems of poverty and deprivation (Najam *et al.* 2006). The voices of the G77 and China seem to have become even more



discordant than before. Yet, we are in a world where coalition politics and key networks increase their bargaining power.

How can Rousseau's Social Contract principle be given more relevance in a complex world, where present generations are held accountable by future generations? Justice between generations is becoming even more compelling. With growing environmental degradation and economic stagnation, the idea of justice between generations was felt acutely in the 1970s. Indeed, the welfare of future generations has resonated throughout the generations as a predominant ideology, often expressed in 'faith in the future'. The Renaissance — 'rebirth' from sleep — and the 18th century Enlightenment period, all promoted the idea of progress in human affairs. In the 19th century world, this continued interest on human progress was associated to the Industrial Revolution. However, by the 20th century, the future was mired in pessimism with World War II, the Holocaust, and the spectre of a nuclear war.

Whatever the strength of this 'master narrative', the notion of intergenerational equity and solidarity shaped the global governance regimes. One could argue that previous political theorists have not sufficiently thought through the notion of reciprocity. Indeed, the utilitarian principle based on the 'greatest good for the greatest number' seemingly placed more emphasis on the quantity of life rather than the quality and how this will put future generations at risk. Rousseau, Kant, and Locke present a challenge to the notion of reciprocity. In short, if our current actions have implications for future generations, how can our lives be affected by unborn generations?

Obligations to future generations present a central ethical problem, both in terms of how to approach the reality of an aging population in most of the developing countries and significant parts of Asia and Latin America, and a booming younger population in Africa. Let us consider this conundrum. In the interest of intergenerational equity, how can we draw up a new Social Contract that will take into account changing demographic dynamics?

The answer to this 'riddle' will lie in the ability to rectify the youth asymmetry that the world is currently witnessing. In its latest report on the global population trends, the United Nations said that the world's population will increase to 7.2 billion and is projected to reach 10.9 billion by 2100. Population growth is likely to increase in the world's poorest countries, with high fertility rates, concentrated mainly in Africa. It is estimated that half of the population growth between 2013 and 2100 will be concentrated in just eight countries — the Democratic Republic of Congo, Ethiopia, Niger, Nigeria, India, Tanzania, Uganda, and the US.

The current youth dynamics in Africa presents a challenge. It is reported that in less than three generations, 41 per cent of the world youth will be Africans. It is believed that between 2010 and 2020, Africa will add an additional 163 million people to its potential labour force. In addition, the labour force of Africa is set to increase outgrowing China by 2035. Approximately, 54 per cent of Africa's

youth is currently unemployed and more than three-quarter live on less than US\$2 a day. The continent also showcases a tendency of youth with higher education levels to be unemployed. Another constant is that government programmes aimed at promoting youth employment tend to be inefficient. This is the case for at least 21 countries in Africa.

This generation of young people has a huge potential to expand Africa's productive work force, promote job creation and entrepreneurship, and harness the enormous resources that the continent is endowed with. Poor investment in the youth of today and tomorrow can constitute a curse for the continent. Balancing the development sheet needs to be done in ways that do not leave a majority of the world's population disenfranchised.

But, how prepared is Africa to deflect the potential tension that can arise from an urban youth population that is rapidly growing, educated, unemployed, frustrated, and lacking a political space? Given the relative stagnation of employment in the 15–24 age bracket, how can Africa design and use a new social contract to ensure that the marginalized youth are not written off and are fully absorbed in the economy?

The real challenge of the 21st century will be the ability to address this demographic mega trend in a manner that will preserve the interests of future generations. How can a new Social Contract realign the disenfranchised, the old, the young, and the poor back to the centre of a development agenda? Today's elderly generation in Europe or Japan is able to enjoy a relatively prosperous old age mainly because their working lives were comparatively more prosperous than those of their parents. To what extent can Europe or Japan sustain its social welfare system without re-negotiating a new contract with Africa's youthfulness?

Rewriting a new Social Contract implicitly means that there is a level of dissatisfaction with the way our world is configured presently. How do we create a redistributive system that is 'solidaristic' and helps to enhance both intragenerational and intergenerational equity? How do we create new institutions that can lift people out of poverty based on a Social Contract that seeks to provide security and welfare to the poorest in the remotest outposts of the world?

The Rio rationale 20 years ago is not radically dissimilar to the Rousseauian ideal of freedom and justice, and the need for a participatory form of democracy that becomes the model of choice. A wholesale shift from the Rousseauian ideal to a new contract that will take into account intergenerational equity and ensure that institutions are aligned to societal needs will be hard to develop. However, there are real risks for policy-makers and humankind in general if we dismiss these ideals as utopian. The collective interest is strongly rooted in the ability to institute the behavioural response that will ensure—whilst cognizant of a risk-sharing approach—opportunities are provided to future generations.



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