



UNEP

United Nations Environment Programme

PERSPECTIVES

ISSUE NO 12

“TOWARDS A GLOBAL AGENDA OF SUSTAINABILITY AND EQUITY: CIVIL SOCIETY ENGAGEMENT FOR THE FUTURE WE WANT”

Leida Rijnhout, Uchita de Zoysa, Ashish Kothari, Hali Healy

Convergence between MDGs and SDGs: a huge and necessary challenge

At the Rio+20 Summit the United Nations General Assembly (GA) resolved to put in place a set of Sustainable Development Goals (§ 245-251 of “The Future We Want”). For this purpose, an Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals was established on 22nd January 2013 by decision 67/555 (see A/67/L.48/rev.1) of the GA. Since that decision, several meetings of the Open Working Group have taken place at which numerous representatives from governments and civil society have expressed the view that the post 2015- and the SDG-framework should be merged into a single process. Although by no means a simple task, the authors of this article are in support of such a merger, arguing it is necessary to fully transform the development agenda, putting environmental sustainability at its core, and avoid the development of “green MDGs” that simply enable business-as-usual. The predominant focus of development cooperation on a “trade and aid” agenda must be replaced by policies that put equity, solidarity and justice at the forefront, addressing the root causes of unsustainable consumption and production patterns, and transforming them into sustainable lifestyles and livelihoods that benefit all. A paradigm shift is thus needed that replaces the mainly growth-based economic model with a new model that aims to achieve sustainable and equitable economies and societies worldwide, and ensures greater public participation in decision-making, in line with Principle 10 of the Rio Declaration from 1992.

A UNEP publication series that presents views from Major Groups and Stakeholders of Civil Society or about issues that are relevant for them. PERSPECTIVES is coordinated by UNEP’s Major Groups and Stakeholders Branch. The presented views are entirely those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of UNEP.

Development versus Environment?

Development (in the sense of opening up opportunities for human well-being) and the environment are inter-dependent. All economies rely on the use of natural resources. However for many of us, the circumstances of living in a modern and industrialised environment create the illusion of our separateness from nature. Often it is not understood that a damaged environment and insufficient management of natural resources pose a threat to society, nor is this fact properly considered in analyses provided by scientists

for development policies. Frequently, economists assume “nature” is an externality that comes at no cost and therefore need not be accounted for when calculating prices for goods and services, considering only the costs of labour and capital. Such an approach is tantamount to estimating the expenses of baking a pie based only on the price of the oven and the cost of the cook.

The conventional development paradigm is that poverty leads to environmental degradation, so international cooperation promotes development models worldwide. By contrast, the sustainability paradigm tells us this push for industrial and export-oriented development leads to irreversible environmental degradation, which leads to even more structural poverty...

It should also be recognised that the dominant development model is largely focused on the accumulation of material wealth. Genuine development should lead to well-being and happiness, without dependence on limitless exploitation of the Earth’s resources. A well cared-for environment is crucial for sustainability and survival of humankind.

As ecological economist and Catalan Professor Joan Martinez Alier (2002) points out, an “Environmentalism of the Poor” has evolved among (often vulnerable) peoples worldwide, whose lives depend directly on nature, and who are affected by pressure on natural resources and associated declining possibilities for achieving well-being for future generations. The challenge is therefore not simply to translate the externalities of the present period into monetary value (as so-called Green Economists would argue), but to recognise that those externalities represent serious obstacles to further development. In this sense, decreased access to satisfiers of basic needs (food, water, health, fresh air, etc) can be seen as an infringement of human rights.

The development of sustainable societies and economies requires profound transformations in the fundamental values and organizing principles of society, namely, new values and development paradigms that emphasize well being and material sufficiency for all, human solidarity and greatly enhanced global equity, re-affirmation of being part of nature, and ecological sustainability. The current discourse on the Green Economy should not be used to “green-wash” existing “brown” economies. A “green” economy that continues to focus on a singular growth-driven, high technology, intellectual property rights-dominated system, prioritizing free-market values over environmental and social considerations, will not really help the cause of sustainable development. What is needed is a vision of a nested system of community, sub-regional, and regional sustainable economies, in a diversity of settings, built on a foundation of integrity, accountability, subsidiarity and equitable distribution of power and benefits. The core idea is that all economies be made sustainable, replacing a singular centralized and dominating global economy. This must be the ambition of the SDGs.

Current international cooperation policies are often focused on delivering development assistance to poor countries. In the conventional development paradigm, development aid through financial transfers is seen as a moral obligation on the part of rich countries to the ‘disadvantaged’ developing world. A detailed analysis of global financial and material flows reveals however that there is also a flow from countries that are rich in natural resources towards industrialised countries. Dutch economist Lou Keune calculated the monetary value of this so-called “ecological debt”, concluding that the ‘overshoot’ of industrialised countries amounts to \$5.655 billion a year, roughly 100 times the amount of official development aid



(ODA is \$56 billion dollars a year). While this calculation is admittedly uncertain given the difficulties associated with assigning monetary value to nature, it does illustrate the degree to which financial and material flows from South to North exceed those from North to South. What becomes evident is an absurd situation of “reversed development aid” that allows the Global North to maintain high lifestyles through the excessive consumption of natural resources (“environment”) of the Global South, which is left without sufficient access to resources for its own development. It is justifiable to ask: “Where is the international solidarity and justice here?”

Hence, in rough terms, for every dollar of development aid given, \$100 worth of (undervalued) natural resources is returned. Rich countries also benefit from the relatively inexpensive occupation of enormous tracts of land in the South for production and consumption, and impunity for the environmental and social damage inflicted by their industrial activities. In order to achieve fair and sustainable development worldwide, the accumulation of the current and historical ecological debt by the industrialised world must come to a halt. This requires admitting that the increasing gap between rich and poor is the result of an active process that is often exacerbated by the current economic system and its orientation toward economic growth for its own sake, and putting an end to transfers of money and measures designed to stimulate trade. More emphasis is needed on redistribution of wealth and environmental and climate ‘space’ within planetary limits, if global and national policies are to tackle inequalities.

From MDGs to SDGs

The MDGs have proven to be an important tool for building international/global coordination capacity between states and other development actors. They have succeeded in bringing together public, private and political support for global poverty reduction and provided an effective tool for stimulating the production of new poverty-related data and additional aid commitments. In some countries, the MDGs have provided means for civil society and other development actors to participate more effectively. It is important that the post-2015 process, both in its design and implementation, builds on this momentum to further strengthen the voice of civil society organisations at all levels.

For the development of the SDGs we need a shared and bold vision of just, equitable and sustainable societies in harmony with nature in which every person and community can realise human rights, based on common responsibilities, wellbeing and a life free from poverty and exploitation.

Nevertheless, the MDGs have failed to address the root causes of poverty and of the lack of progress on realising human rights. Nor have they supported a trend towards ecological unsustainability. On the contrary, the ‘MDG approach’ has reduced the concept of ‘development’ to increased GDP-growth, placing trust in the long-defunct trickle-down effect.^{6 7} If one scrutinizes the results of the MDGs in fact, it becomes obvious that improvements, where they have occurred, have fallen short of both ambitions and needs. This is arguably due in part to the “Business as Usual” approach to global economic policies, which, as stated above, has led to an active process of enrichment of some part of society on the one hand, and the impoverishment of other sectors on the other. What is called for is therefore a fundamental paradigm shift in our economic logic and actions, to achieve sustainability, equity and well being at a global level. Poverty eradication in the Global South moreover requires an acknowledgement of the overuse of natural resources in the Global North. Northern countries need to focus on policies designed to reduce (extreme) material wealth, in order to protect and safeguard resources for the well-being and development of the poorer populations and future generations. The Beyond 2015 European Task Force (Concord) clearly promotes this new discourse in “Putting People and Planet First – Business as Usual is Not an Option” (April 2013). This, we argue, is the sort of new thinking that should provide the basis for the future SDGs.



MDGs	SDGs
Development	Sustainable well-being
Focus on developing countries	Focus on all countries
Aid and Trade agenda	Human Rights, Justice, and meaningful livelihoods
No recognition of planetary boundaries	Living within the limits of the resources of one planet
Environment is seen as secondary priority, economic development first	Environment (natural resources, healthy eco systems) is basic for developing well-being

Figure: the main difference between the MDG and SDG approach

The design of a future framework for the Sustainable Development Goals is an extremely challenging task since there is such a wide variety of issues that could merit inclusion, many of them interdependent. It will be important not to be limited to an ideal 'wish list' of goals, but to really focus on key indicators and objectives for achieving sustainability worldwide. Strong visions, and the courage to identify and tackle the root causes of the challenges faced by the world today, in a comprehensive manner, are absolute requirements in this task.

Global challenges for Sustainable Development

The most important international references in relation to Sustainable Development are reflected in two transversal documents: I) the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development, and II) Agenda 21: an action plan focused on social, economic and ecological problems. Both are outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development held in 1992 in Rio de Janeiro. The Brundtland report has been the basic foundation for both, providing also what today is the most common definition of Sustainable Development:

"Sustainable development is development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."

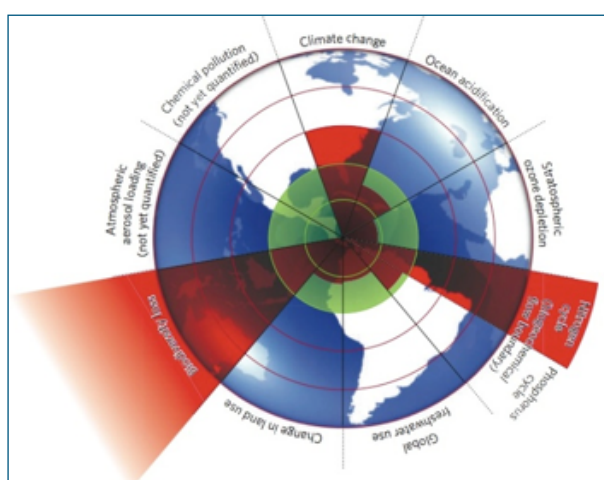
According to the same report, the above definition contains two key concepts:

"The concept of 'needs', in particular the essential needs of the world's poor, to which overriding priority should be given; and the idea of limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment's ability to meet present and future needs".

There are a number of important ideas to recall from the Brundtland-report for the future SDGs:

The earth system carrying capacity is limited. This is crucial, since science shows with increasing certainty that human society has already reached, and in some cases exceeded planetary limits.

Poverty and environment are two interdependent determinants, so if one fails, so does the other. Sustainable development implies meeting the basic needs of all and extending to all the opportunity to fulfil their aspirations to live in dignity. A world in which inequality is structural will always be prone to ecological and other catastrophes. "The Future We Want", the final outcome document of Rio+20 Conference reaffirms this statement.



Source: Johan Rockstrom et al, in The Nature 24 September 2009



Equity requires that natural resources need to be fairly distributed within and among nations. Meeting essential needs requires not only a new era of economic development for nations in which the majority are poor, but an assurance that those poor receive their fair share of the resources required to build and sustain their well being. An approach based on rights and justice is what sustainable development aims for. Contraction and convergence schemes for our economies are crucial for achieving equity.

Governance needs to be improved to enable the wide participation of society. Equity is dependent upon political systems that secure effective citizens' participation in decision making and greater democracy in international decision making.

Structural changes need to be made to the way we live, and exploit and use our natural resources. Sustainable global development requires that those who are more affluent adopt lifestyles within the planet's ecological boundaries - in their use of energy, for example by eliminating demand for luxury goods, and accepting and implementing strategies of 'sufficiency' rather than solely 'efficiency'.

Demographic management within the limited earth system is required. Further rapid growth in populations can increase pressure on resources and hinder improvements in living standards. Thus sustainable development can only be pursued if population size and growth are in harmony with the changing productive potential of the ecosystem.

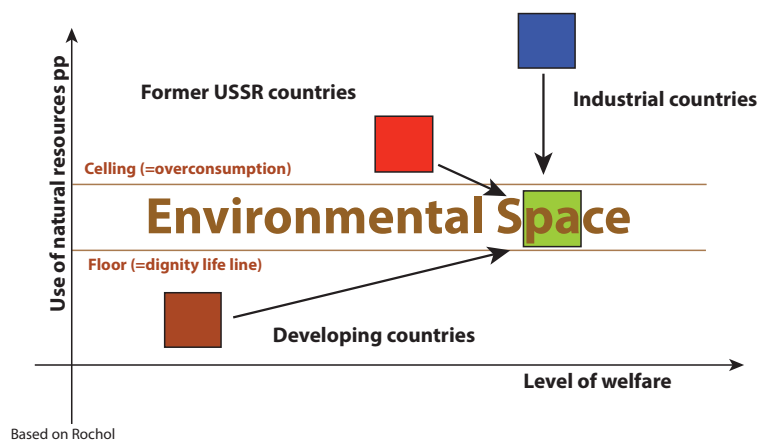
It is important to change and halt trends and policies that support unsustainable patterns of production and consumption. Our current economic system has, consistently, proven to be inappropriate for achieving sustainable development worldwide.

One of the key challenges faced today is the definition of "quality of life", since this involves not only an economic dimension but also elements of well being (for example dignity, health and respect for human rights). This means that the effective evaluation of whether or not a country has achieved its desired quality of life within planetary boundaries depends on understanding a complex combination of economic, cultural and social values. Unfortunately, as already stated, the idea that well-being, happiness and development are equated with the increasing consumption of goods and acquisition of material possessions is now globally widespread. This thinking is fuelled by both governments and the private sector: governments because they choose to measure national income by GDP figures, and are seen to be failing if this does not increase; the private sector because its *raison d'être* is continual maximisation of profit, for which it needs to produce and sell ever more, while cutting costs wherever possible, including through creating or maintaining "indecent and underpaid jobs". The role of international institutions in developing and perpetuating this model should also be analysed, as they play an important role in leveraging or hindering change. We have reached a stage today at which possession of material goods is often equated with happiness.

The current emphasis on permanent GDP growth (referred to in the Rio+20 outcome as "sustained economic growth"...) and possession of material goods is not only entirely unsustainable but ultimately self-destructive in the long run, both in economic and environmental terms. However, many examples can be found across the world that illustrate that change is indeed possible. Bhutan for instance has been experimenting with a national indicator of "Gross National Happiness" (GNH), based on measurements of sustainability. The four pillars of the GNH are the promotion of sustainable development, preservation and integration of cultural values, conservation of the natural environment and establishment of good governance. This approach has enjoyed its share of success and failure, and although it cannot be replicated everywhere, it shows the potential for a different pathway to wellbeing. Some South American countries are also now discussing different indicators and measures of progress, and indigenous peoples and civil society groups have advocated a series of alternative measures under the general rubric of *buen vivir* (living well) that should be piloted.



When basic needs have been met, the goal of human development should primarily be one of 'being', rather than 'having' more. However, in order to bring the standard of living of peoples across the world closer together, the poorest within all countries must be empowered and enabled to produce and consume more until equity is achieved. This necessarily implies that overconsumption has to be eradicated in rich countries and in rich segments of poor countries, one of the chief tenets of the European 'degrowth' movement. Furthermore, it is of the highest importance that trends of overconsumption are not transferred to life styles in emerging economies. It is simply no longer credible to imagine that the world's wealthiest countries can continue their current patterns of consumption and production growth, whilst encouraging such patterns in the Global South.



Graphic: Contraction and convergence scheme (ANPED 2011)

Our economic system is actually based on debt, much of it accumulated through 'virtual' monetary and financial activity. It is therefore essential to bolster what is called the 'real' economy, one that exists within the limits of the planet's resources. Increasing evidence suggests that commons-based and steady-state approaches offer pathways through which the economy can be brought into line with planetary limits.

Business as usual is not an option.

The starting point of a SDG/post-2015 framework must respect the above mentioned definition of Sustainable Development (as set out in the Brundtland Report), paying particular attention to the two key concepts of "basic needs", and "limitations of the environmental ability to meet present and future needs". The SDGs do not require new commitments, but demand ambitious means and targets, strong political leadership and the will to implement, which was agreed among nations in 1992.

Accordingly, the framework should also set out the conditions necessary for overcoming the obstacles faced by so many groups of people in participating fully in society and in political decision making processes. These obstacles are rooted in political, legal, social, cultural, economic, and other structures, manifesting themselves from the local to the international level. In addition, it is often the most voiceless groups that suffer from the accelerated impacts of environmental degradation, for example those resulting from the negative effects of climate change and biodiversity loss, demographic crises and mounting social inequality and ecological debt, all by-products of an ineffective paradigm of growth and development.



A number of new reports attempt to guide the UN process on the post-2015 agenda. Two of these, the report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Experts appointed by the UN Secretary General and the report of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, contain several positive elements on poverty, livelihoods, sustainability, and equity. However, they fail to deal with the structural roots of poverty, destitution, hunger, malnutrition, unsustainability and inequities, and their recommendations are insufficiently transformative for achieving sustainability, equity, and well-being.

At the launch of the HLP, report Tanya Cox, Chair of the CONCORD/Beyond 2015 Taskforce, stated: *"The UN high level panel report has all the buzzwords but the devil is in the detail. Missing is a commitment from developed countries for future development goals to apply to themselves. The solutions of the high level panel report don't sufficiently confront the challenges of today's world head on. It's very business as usual but speeded up. The report also has an over focus on economic growth without a plan B."*

Key problems include an inadequate consideration of direct democratic governance (leaving much power in the hands of central governments), the inability to recognise the contradiction between continued economic growth and the Earth's ecological boundaries, dependence on large private businesses, heavy focus on market and technological approaches to solving problems that are socio-political, complete neglect of traditional and community knowledge and practices, a strong bias towards cities and relative neglect of villages (more so in the High-Level Panel report), total absence of the mentioning of the importance of cultural diversity, spiritual and ethical approaches, unwillingness to tackle unbridled consumerism head-on, and lack of emphasis on local self-reliance for basic needs. There are moreover, no recommendations for reforming the global governance system to integrate the voices of non-state actors and organisations in a way that decreases the monopoly of nation-states in global decision-making.

Overall, these reports emphasise reforms of the existing system. Such reforms could be interim measures, but a truly sustainable and equitable future calls for more radical transformations.

The proposed framework

In order to design the future SDGs in a way that ensures that they contribute to the development of sustainable societies, in which equity, wellbeing, justice and dignity of all is secured, based on lifestyles within the limits of the carrying capacity of the Earth, and with a respect for life in all its forms and expressions, we propose that the SDG/post-2015 framework will be structured to contain:

1. ***An overarching, global consensus stating the vision of sustainable development, principles and the values that should guide policies and actions outlined in the framework:*** This would be similar to Agenda 21, and reflected in its entirety in all sustainable development goals. This shared vision can be inspired by what is already reflected in officially agreed international documents, principles and targets (UNDESA, FAO, WHO, Habitat, CBD, ILO). Important elements are common-but-differentiated responsibilities, the subsidiarity principle, the precautionary principle, Principle 10, the polluter pays principle, right to food and to full access to all kinds of basic needs. The shared vision should also be constructed on evidence-based reports on planetary boundaries, systemic change and resilience, transition management, as well as on civil society concepts, such as human rights based approach, redistribution of wealth, material flows and fair sharing of the ecological footprint and respect for species rights and animal welfare.
2. ***Mechanisms for monitoring progress made and ensuring accountability:*** For all goals we need clear and bold targets and timetables and review mechanisms. Countries should be required to explain every three years what they have done, how they have done it, and with what results. On the other hand, a bottom-up accountability to citizens should be recognised, through for example appointing an ombudsperson for future generations, and carrying out social audits, peer reviews and monitoring reporting. Clear deadlines should be set for such



mechanisms and systems of appeal established when all other avenues of accountability have been exhausted.

3. **Democratic governance and implementation:** Some countries have already agreed to define a National Strategy for Sustainable Development (NSSD). In this NSSD the SDGs can be integrated as main points of action, together with the country specific targets, and linked to the new High Level Political Forum. The World Bank's Poverty Reduction Strategy Plans (PRSPs) can be transformed into the NSSDs (especially since the PRSPs are overwhelmingly export oriented), which can shift their focus toward food and resource sovereignty. The NSSD would serve as the overall framework around which strategy plans and roadmaps are formed. Based on the subsidiarity principle, regional and local governments would define their own roles and responsibilities in harmony with the locus of power emanating from the smallest rural and urban settlements ('direct' or 'radical' democracy).
4. **Sources of finance for the SDGs should be clear from the start:** The specific budgets for achieving SDGs should be defined at national levels. Furthermore, all budgetary allocations that go against those goals have to be disallowed. In addition to being used in national budgets for realising policy strategy, the agreed 0.7 per cent GDP for ODA could be directed at the framework of the NSSDs, for achieving SDGs in partner countries. Public finances should be adequate, reliable and transparent and should not be dependent on profit-oriented private financial flows. Nevertheless there will be a need for further investments to be made. These could come from additional and alternative mechanisms, such as a global Financial Transaction Tax (FTT), CO2 tax, or a carbon, water, or ecological 'footprint' tax.
5. **Coherence checks with other (inter)national policies and institutions:** Sustainable Development needs a paradigm shift, but the majority of existing policies and institutions adhere to the dominant paradigm of unlimited growth, large scale, intensive and global production schemes, privatisation of the commons and creation of a debt-based economy. For that reason it is crucial that while implementing the SDGs there is a continuous coherence check with related internal and regional policies, like for Europe, the Europe 2020 Strategy or Common Agriculture Policy (CAP), but also with the rules of the World Trade Organisation (WTO) and the impacts of the international financial institutions (IFIs). Together with regular reviews of the SDGs, we need to analyse the kind of reforms that are needed to successfully overcome the obstacles posed by incoherent institutions and processes.
6. **Alternative indicators:** Debates on the "beyond GDP" indicators are growing. Existing sets of alternative indicators, such as the GNH, and the Genuine Progress Indicator (GPI), can be drawn upon to develop a holistic and interlinked approach to assessing sustainable development. Rather than requiring the development of new indicators, existing ones on environment, equity, redistribution of wealth, well being, etc., could be combined into one overarching indicator 'dashboard' that portrays levels of sustainable development as accurately as possible. As the MDGs have shown, data collection can be vastly improved and broadened as a positive outcome of such a framework. Process indicators on levels of participation and accountability processes should of course, also be included.

预览已结束，完整报告链接和二维码如下：

https://www.yunbaogao.cn/report/index/report?reportId=5_14728

