

Designing SDGs that Foster Human and Economic Development within Planetary Boundaries

Inter-sessional Meeting between Major Groups and other stakeholders and the Open Working Group on SDGs
22 November, 2013

Background Paper Session 4

Introduction

We share this planet with millions of other species and varieties of life, and depend on ecosystems for all our basic needs. Human societies now face risks posed by global environmental change, including climate change and biodiversity loss, and we need to seize opportunities to permit a transition to global sustainability. For stated policy objectives on sustainable development to succeed, societies can no longer view the global economic system and the political systems that shape it in isolation from the Earth system. People must now become planetary stewards.

Economic development and global governance must value natural capital, and respect planetary boundaries while ensuring equitable resource use. They must also ensure equitable resource use and pursue pathways that manage and utilize finite resources efficiently and sustainably. The path forward hinges on an interconnected approach to policy and a rapid response in action. Political recognition and acceptance of the scale of the challenges has led to wide ranging efforts to solve them. Looking ahead, we should strive for the conditions and cooperative frameworks that advance science, research, development, and innovation to better understand the planet's life supporting systems and address challenges and risks. Governments and all stakeholders have important roles to play in contributing to advance understanding in pursuing options that balance benefits and risks, and in promoting sustainable policies and actions.

Three branches of scientific inquiry are critical to the foundation of an approach that advances the understanding of current conditions and stimulates the search for solutions. The first addresses the scale of human action in relation to the capacity of the Earth to sustain it. A significant feature of the Ecological Economics research agenda draws on work on the essential role of the life-support environment for human well-being and on biophysical constraints for the expansion of the economic subsystem. The second is the work on understanding essential Earth Systems. This includes studying the impact of human actions, brought together in the evolution of global change research toward Earth System science and in the development of sustainability science. The third is the framework of Resilience. This links to complex dynamics, emphasizing multiple basins of attraction and thresholds effects.

There is consensus in the global environmental change research community that humanity has reached a level of human impact on the Earth system

where we face the risk of fundamentally disrupting the stability of the Earth system which is a prerequisite of a prosperous human society. The concept of planetary boundaries has been developed to outline a safe operating space for humanity that carries a low likelihood of harming the life support systems on Earth to such an extent that they are no longer able to support economic growth and human development. The concept of Planetary boundaries does not place a cap on human development. Instead, it indicates what is the safe space for innovation, growth and development in the pursuit of human prosperity in an increasingly populated and wealthy world.¹

Integrated goals addressing natural resource management issues, within planetary boundaries

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are an opportunity to bring “sustainability” and “development” together in a mutually reinforcing and measurable way to: (1) animate global and regional cooperation among the nations of the world; (2) draw on and mobilize the resources of non-governmental constituencies; and (3) respond to new challenges in population dynamics that emerged over the recent decades, such as urbanization. Rio+20 highlighted how necessary the engagement of ALL countries and ALL stakeholders will be in addressing sustainability challenges.

There is strong potential for the SDGs to be more than the sum of their parts and the convergence of the MDGs and SDGs into a single coherent post 2015 development framework to be a desirable and efficient way to proceed.

The SDGs should be based on best available knowledge of the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development and their interrelations. Each must be a “fundamental” that underpins all three dimensions of sustainable development and be viewed from both “sustainability” and “development” standpoints. Furthermore, a clear framework within which each country can make its own choices, plans and commitments in the context of an overall shared goal is needed. A strategic planning framework that helps each country contextualize the suite of SDGs as a whole for its own jurisdiction and citizens would help allocate priorities, resources and effort and provide a basis for communications.

The “fundamentals” that need to be given a primary focus are those on which everything else depends. They are air, water, land, energy, food, managing wastes, and the stability of our life support systems, including the climate system and biodiversity. While each has specific constraints, they are all interrelated and together enable vital development issues such as public health, education, national security, economic activity, employment and so forth to occur. If progress is being made on these “fundamentals” of sustainable development, it will decisively underpin the necessary progress on poverty alleviation and improving quality of life. Without getting the

¹ http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/06/Rockstroem-Sachs-Oehman-Schmidt-Traub_Sustainable-Development-and-Planetary-Boundaries.pdf

fundamentals of water, energy, and food right first, we will not get the results that are hoped for.

The challenge of feeding the world efficiently and equitably is considerable, but not insurmountable. Eradicating hunger and malnutrition in our lifetime is achievable, as outlined in the Zero Hunger Challenge. To do so, a strong foundation of multi-lateral and cooperative mechanisms that work across disciplines, sectors and national boundaries must be established. More integrated planning, greater cross-system coherence and further encouragement of city-region food systems with an ecosystems approach are needed across the global food security agenda.

Urbanization – with its challenges and also its opportunities – is recognized as a megatrend in population dynamics. For the SDGs to be globally relevant they must be relevant to city-dwellers. Indeed, Member States’ responses to the questionnaire on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) show cities among top priorities. Policymakers need to adopt a wider view of cities’ use of space and resource footprints and to connect local development with global impact to achieve long-term urban sustainability.

By empowering sustainable urbanisation at the city-region scale we will address sustainable human development, poverty and inequality and its interconnected economic, social, environmental, and cultural aspects, at the spatial scale and the level of governance at which the increasing majority of humanity resides.

Enabling conditions for sustainability will need to be front and center, building on a foundation of economic growth, improved quality of life, good governance and strong institutions. We must set priorities or else risk spreading the efforts and resources “too thinly.”

The measures required to assess progress must be thought out now and the means to monitor and report on results must be devised. Where possible and appropriate, these should be built on processes put in place for the MDGs and incorporate the lessons the MDGs have taught us, including the importance of devising clear and precise definitions and establishing baselines, against which to measure progress.

Conclusion

A future of well-being free from the scourge of poverty while embracing responsible environmental stewardship is the sustainable development challenge facing us all.

The experience of the MDGs has taught us quite clearly that processes of top-down and bottom-up have to meet for future SDGs to be successful. A high-level vision and commitment at a global level that gives clear direction and hope is an essential dimension. While global goals and targets are extremely important, the SDGs should not specify “how” countries would

meet them, but leave it up to each country to define how it implements its own actions, either individually or in partnership with others.

Different countries have different starting points, different means, different natural resources and different objectives. Moreover, they are facing and coping with dynamic and ever changing circumstances – one need only reflect on the state of the world 20 years ago compared to today to understand how necessary building flexibility and evolution into the SDGs will be – both to adapt to such unanticipated changes, and also to spark and inspire innovation in policies and practices.