



More people, more consumption, finite planet: demographics, development and decoupling

New York, 3 May 2010—There was once the hope of an unending process of improvement in the lives and livelihoods of people. Today, fears are being expressed of a race between development and disaster.

Economic growth has transformed the world beyond recognition, but its task is far from complete. Despite two hundred years of miraculous improvements in human wellbeing, two billion people are still mired in poverty, lack access to safe water, sanitation, or health services. Eleven million children die every year because of malnutrition and avoidable diseases.

Economic growth always provided an easy answer, but the world needs to go beyond easy answers. We are learning that economic growth cannot go on for ever on a finite planet. We cannot continue to extract materials nor dump our wastes endlessly. It all adds up, and sooner or later will hit the planetary boundaries. Indeed, we some planetary boundaries have already been crossed and others have moved closer.

The recent crises - economic, food, financial - have disrupted the growth process, as well as the progress towards the Millennium Development Goals—the eight universally agreed upon targets to slash poverty.

As stated in the Oslo Declaration on Sustainable Consumption, “the future course of the world depends on humanity's ability to provide a high quality of life for a prospective 9 billion people without exhausting the Earth's resources or irreparably damaging its natural systems.”

This is the challenge. How to make sure that poverty is eradicated, the benefits of modern science and technology are extended beyond a small minority of the world's people, and the development process achieves its goals, while ensuring that materials use and waste disposal is reduced.

The deliberations at the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD-18 and 19) will try to find some answers. The Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) supports CSD as its secretariat and also seeks to promote green growth and development decoupled from resource use through its analytical work and papers as well as its operational activities in service of member states in water and energy.

The long run challenges are clear. They constitute the 3D vision of the future: demographic, development, and de-coupling. Sustainability in a finite planet means a stable – that is, non-growing - population, high level of human development for all people and all countries, and a complete de-coupling of economic growth from materials use.

The demographic transition is well on its way and can be promoted through development.

The development transition is in its early stages; it speeded up in the previous decade, but this speed needs to be maintained.

The de-coupling transition is also in its early stages and development can facilitate it.

Therefore, development is the midwife of sustainability and sustainability is the life support system for development.

Fortunately, there is a growing movement among businesses, professionals, government officials and civil society organizations to see how it is possible to do things differently, by taking a new look at how we use resources, from their inception to disposal, from cradle to grave.

Green growth: the path towards sustainable development

Architect William McDonough has noted that in nature, “waste equals food.”

“One organism's waste”, he explains, “is food for another and nutrients flow indefinitely in cradle-to-cradle cycles of birth, decay and rebirth.”

In stark contrast, this has not been the case for manufacture and use of goods by humans, which has led to a chorus of calls for urgent change in the unsustainable patterns of consumption and production, and a move towards green growth. Those concerned with long-term trends maintain that it is no longer possible to do business as usual.

“Green growth is the path to meeting the climate challenge,” says UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon. “It can help us to lay the foundation for lasting and widespread economic recovery. It can help us to reduce poverty and achieve the Millennium Development Goals.”

The shift to green growth will be discussed at this year's meeting of the Commission on Sustainable Development. The meeting will address a cluster of related topics, including chemicals, waste management and mining. It will focus on sustainable management of materials. The central question it will strive to answer is: how to promote sustainable patterns of consumption and production through better management of materials throughout their life cycle. Sustainable transport is also to be considered, including transport of materials and physical products as well as people.

Fundamental shifts in the way societies produce and consume are essential for achieving global sustainable development. Life cycle thinking is a way of assessing the relationship between final consumption and material use and pollution over products' entire lives. By looking at environmental and social impacts from extraction or harvesting of materials through final recovery and recycling or disposal, it is possible to isolate the major adverse impacts and target policies or other measures to mitigate or avoid them. This approach can help, for example, in designing products which are easier to recycle and reuse, which make greater use of recycled materials in their own production, and which consume less energy in production and use.

Such a holistic approach offers entry points at various stages of the lifecycle that can positively impact the economy, the environment and society. Piecemeal policies and measures are unlikely to be enough. Policies are needed to ensure the proper signals are sent to producers and consumers to make sustainable choices.

That will often mean ensuring that product prices reflect their true social and environmental costs, including pollution. Education and awareness-raising are also important to shape consumers' preferences, so they seek out more sustainable products. As many supply chains are global, it is important that if consumers pay more for sustainable products the producers far up the supply chain share in benefits. Thus, a farmer in Benin, Egypt or South Asia should see a fair financial return from supplying organic cotton for a US or European retail chain.

Labeling of products (for example as organic or fair-trade) provides assurances to interested consumers that products meet certain standards about which they care. Traceability of products all along the supply chain provides the consumer valuable information as to the origin of the product and its components. For instance, a consumer who would like to purchase a piece of jewelry would be able to know where the gold or silver originated from and where it was manufactured. More and more companies are engaged in this process to ensure consumers that the minerals were not extracted in areas where human rights are not being respected or where revenues may be supporting militia groups.

Of course, supplying sustainable products, as well as providing reliable information on products' origin and production process often comes at an additional cost which consumers must be willing to pay. Over time, however, economies and innovations can be made to lower those costs, as with any economic activity, so that sustainable products should become progressively more cost competitive.

A transition to green growth requires serious action from different actors. It is crucial that governments provide a policy framework and adopt clean energy and energy efficiency policies causing less stress to the environment; help corporations develop greener business models; and encourage consumers to adopt more sustainable lifestyles, empower them to make informed choices and become agents of change and of sustainability – for example through their own procurement policies.

Dr. Al Iannuzzi, Senior Director, Worldwide Environment, Health and Safety, at Johnson & Johnson recently remarked, "the earth has limited resources and we recognize that being a good corporate citizen means we must protect the environment and natural resources that we are privileged to use. Pursuit of sustainable development helps us to grow our business while reducing the environmental footprint of our products and operations."

He added: "everyone needed to be working together to develop innovative ways to provide for the needs of the world's people while using less resources; it makes good business sense and failure to do so will result in degradation of the environment and damage the health of the world's population."

Regional and national initiatives

Several initiatives are underway around the world – at the regional, national and local levels. Countries have established green growth strategies or plans and priorities, set up national priorities and identified specific targets. The efforts of Governments to improve their environmental performance have resulted in some success. Some are adopting green stimulus packages and initiatives:

- Korea launched the world's first "green new deal" stimulus package in January 2009, planning over \$38 million in spending on various "green" projects.
- China is completing a \$440 billion package including to support wind and solar energy.

- In 2009, OECD countries adopted a Declaration on Green Growth, tasking OECD with developing a Green Growth Strategy bringing together economic, environmental, technological, financial and development aspects into a comprehensive framework.
- According to H.E. Mr. Carsten Staur, the Danish Ambassador to the UN, 17 per cent of Denmark's energy consumption is from renewable energy, up from virtually nothing a few decades ago, and the proportion is expected to be 30% by 2030. In the course of the past 30 years the wind energy sector has increased and now delivers the bulk of renewable energy in Denmark. There are around 5,200 wind turbines in a country of 5 million people.
- According to a UNEP report, more than 2.3 million green jobs have been created in recent years in the renewable energy sector. This sector still only supplies 2 per cent of the world's energy, so the potential for future job growth in the industry is substantial.

Some countries have energy efficiency and renewable energy targets.

- Austria aims for stabilization of absolute resource consumption in the short run and a fourfold increase in resource efficiency in the long run.
- New Zealand has a renewable energy target of 90% by 2025.
- Brazil aims to avoid 6400 MW in additional capacity through energy efficiency by 2030.
- Mexico aims to reach a 26% renewable energy target by 2012 and a halving of carbon by 2050.
- Several countries have pledged carbon neutrality—the Maldives by 2020, Costa Rica by 2021, Norway by 2030, and Sweden by 2050.
- California has a target of 33% renewable energy and reduction of 20% in per capita water use by 2020 as well as zero net energy use for all new residential buildings by 2020 and commercial buildings by 2030.

Green growth is an integral part of sustainable development. Green growth has been defined as the best way to produce an adequate supply of goods and services for everyone while putting less pressure on the environment and ecosystems. In other words, it is about de-linking economic and social well-being from environmental degradation and ecosystem destruction. There is an urgent need to move towards sustainable management of resources taking into account the social, economic, and environmental implications for humankind and the planet.

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