

Climate and sustainable development processes: towards convergence and integration

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While it may be possible to address climate change in ways that are not necessarily in line with sustainable development, the converse is not true: a global sustainable development framework has to address the challenge of climate change as a matter of principle because climate change disrupts both sustainability and development.

Accordingly, it should be generally accepted that the emerging Post-2015 Development Agenda, which includes the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process, should substantively address the climate crisis. But how should this Agenda co-exist with the processes under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)?

One answer is to say that there will be two separate tracks: a ‘legal’ track under the UNFCCC process which has the invocation of international law (both hard and soft law), and a ‘normative’ track under a broad development agenda which will furnish voluntary goals, targets and indicators, and simply label these two tracks ‘complementary’. The problem with this approach is that ‘complementary’ does not mean coherence, in the sense of the systematic promotion of mutually reinforcing policies, unless some organizational structure is put in place. Left alone, parallel tracks simply remain lines that run alongside each other and do not intersect; whilst they do not conflict, they also do not converge with each other. Worse, it may become the case that the normative track unwisely gives deference to the legal track (under the misguided notion that law trumps voluntary action), and we could end up with the ‘worst of both worlds’ where the complementary tracks end up being roads to nowhere.

A better alternative is to aim for the ‘best of both worlds’ where the two tracks can be made systematically coherent and mutually reinforcing and actually achieve positive results in climate change mitigation and adaptation. This approach would require putting in place an enabling organizational structure to promote the convergence of work streams and sharing of agendas, programs and personnel in the two tracks. The ultimate goal should be the formulation of an integrated global

climate policy that manages climate change in the context of the three (economic, social and environmental, or four if we include governance) dimensions of sustainable development.

The Post-2015 Development Agenda should not shy away from climate issues in deference to the UNFCCC process. The SDG framework should include goals, targets and indicators (GTIs) for ensuring a peak of global carbon dioxide emissions by a certain time horizon as well as managing other climate-related and cross-cutting issues. In the ‘best of both worlds’ scenario, such GTIs would be substantively coherent and mutually reinforcing with the objectives of the UNFCCC process.

The experience of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) provides an instructive lesson. The MDGs were weak on environmental protection; MDG 7 (‘ensure environmental sustainability’) included indicators for carbon dioxide emissions but they lacked prominence and were not taken seriously by the international community; instead, international action on climate change remained the province of the (highly troubled) UNFCCC. It would be an extremely disappointing outcome if the Post-2015 Development Agenda ended up being similarly ineffective.

In the ‘best of both worlds’ scenario, the UNFCCC process could leverage the full array and power of the global sustainable development processes, including the High-level Political Forum (HLPF). The HLPF, which will consist of meetings under both the United Nations General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, is intended to provide high-level political leadership to implement sustainable development. This political leadership could take the form of ‘orchestration’ in the sense of bringing various actors together in support of common goals and in the mode of ‘soft’ governance. Accordingly, the HLPF could help ‘orchestrate’ an integrated global climate policy and drive climate mitigation and adaptation within a broad sustainable development agenda.

Given the unfortunate impasses and deadlocks of recent years, it may be time for a fresh approach, to place climate change within the wider context of sustainable development, and to re-set the climate agenda on pragmatic pathways for true transformative change.