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Research Report

Post 2015: reconsidering sustainable development goals; is the environment merely a dimension?

Briefing Paper, No. 4/2013

Provided in Cooperation with:

German Institute of Development and Sustainability (IDOS), Bonn

Suggested Citation: Boltz, Frederick; Turner, Will R.; Wugt Larsen, Frank; Scholz, Imme; Guarin, Alejandro (2013) : Post 2015: reconsidering sustainable development goals; is the environment merely a dimension?, Briefing Paper, No. 4/2013, Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE), Bonn

This Version is available at:

<https://hdl.handle.net/10419/199704>

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Post 2015: Reconsidering Sustainable Development Goals: Is the Environment Merely a Dimension?

Summary

By the end of 2015, the United Nations will adopt a new global development agenda as a follow-up to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). To this end, UN member states are now engaged in a debate on defining universal Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), as decided by the 2012 Rio+20 Summit. According to the final declaration of that summit, these goals should “*address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages*” and should “*be coherent with and integrated into the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015*” (§ 246).

This wording can be interpreted to mean that there is an agreed effort to build upon the MDGs in drafting the SDGs – that these are sequential and nested steps, not parallel processes, which will culminate in a global agenda for sustainable development by the end of 2015. But the SDGs have one key feature distinguishing them from the MDGs: they will be universal in nature, providing guidance for related domestic policies of all UN member states. This is an important departure from the MDGs, which set quantified and time-bound policy goals for developing countries, and included industrialised nations in a supporting role through development assistance.

The SDG vision – with the potential to reduce barriers both among countries and among sectors – is a logical and needed step. Yet there are many political and institutional obstacles to ensuring an integrated set of goals:

transitioning to SDGs will require a change of perspective by negotiators, who must bridge the gap between conventional approaches to economic development and poverty reduction on the one hand, and to environmental sustainability on the other. And it will require a whole-of-government approach, instead of being the exclusive remit of ministries of environment and/or development cooperation.

Several lines of thought favour an integrated set of goals. The idea that environmental concerns can be subordinated to economic growth disregards the fact that our society and economy are bound by a natural biophysical system that sustains life on earth. But human society and nature operate on different time scales: while solutions to human suffering are required now, environmental policies must address the long-term effects of today's economic actions. The welfare of people today is important, but the welfare of future generations matters too: their fates are intertwined.

A universal set of SDGs can address the difficulties of global and intergenerational burden sharing. Negotiators should not shy away from the complexity this implies, as oversimplified goals will not be fit to the task at hand. The most challenging and important task will be to translate the adopted universal goals into quantified and time-bound domestic goals at the country level. Rich countries will have to support developing countries in implementing domestic policies, while rising powers should volunteer to do so, too.

Why SDGs and why now?

While important progress has been made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) by 2015, our accomplishments will likely fall short of our ambitions. At the same time, ever more daunting and urgent environmental challenges now confront humanity: a deepening biodiversity crisis, climate trajectories often exceeding worst-case predictions, and shocks to food and water supplies. This realisation has prompted a reflection on the nature of sustainable development. Is environmental integrity a dimension of development on par with economic and social concerns? Or is it a requisite condition? This debate has direct implications for the process agreed at Rio+20 to establish post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs drafting process provides an important opportunity to redress shortcomings of the MDG effort, to capture synergies in delivering towards the interconnected goals the interconnected goals of environmental, economic and social well-being and to strengthen commitments to truly sustainable development.

We thus face important questions about how much overlap there is – or ought to be – between the human development and environmental agendas. Should all development goals be concerned with environmental sustainability? Or should these goals be kept separate conceptually and in practice? We have an incomplete understanding of the interconnectedness among economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development. There is little consensus on how to achieve each of these separate dimensions, let alone on how to resolve them jointly.

However, while there may be conceptual, political and institutional barriers to integrating human development and environmental sustainability, this integration is not only possible, but necessary. The SDGs process provides a unique window of opportunity to move this integration forward. Merging the (to date) parallel processes of SDGs and MDGs will require tackling difficult questions, but the political momentum must be seized to build coalitions and think innovatively.

Our discussion begins with a characterisation of a key shortcoming of the MDGs: classification of the environment as a distinct goal rather than interconnected element of sustainable development. We then argue the conceptual case for merging the development and environmental agendas. Third, we examine the challenges of implementing these changes and how we can address them. Finally, we return to the political and strategic importance of integrating the global environment and development agendas more effectively, and we suggest a possible framework for the SDGs.

Origins of sustainable development

The idea of sustainable development as something that should include both socio-economic and environmental concerns is not new. The 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment focused global attention on this interdependency, noting that *“...man's capability to transform his surroundings, if used wisely, can bring to all peoples the benefits of development... Wrongly or heedlessly applied, the same power can do incalculable harm to human beings and the human environment.”*

The first Earth Summit in Rio in 1992 brought this into the mainstream. Even though environmental issues have gained more prominence since, “the environment” has often been seen by policy makers as an ancillary goal to other more important concerns. Our development aims have been decidedly focused on economic growth; goals for environmental sustainability have often been construed as safeguards external to or constraining economic performance, rather than something integral to it.

The idea that environmental concerns can be subordinated to economic goals disregards the fact that our society and economy are bound by a natural biophysical system. Natural resources and ecosystems are the bases not only of all material wealth, but a precondition for our very existence. We draw on nature to fuel our economic growth, and depend on its proper functioning to provide vital resources and to maintain conditions suitable for our success – and indeed our survival.

Yet our approach to environmental sustainability has thus far been one of establishing safeguards to mitigate harmful impacts or of offsetting such impacts through measures judged to be sufficiently compensatory to maintain the state of the environment at acceptable levels. This presumes that we possess adequate knowledge and certainty to define “safe limits” of environmental disturbance and degradation; while arguably our only certainty is that we do not. A safeguards approach sets the environment not as a criterion for successful development, but as an appendix to the principal goal of socio-economic growth. This approach is expressed in noble actions such as environmental impact assessments, establishment of set-asides and biodiversity offsets, but is fundamentally flawed in that it relegates the environment to a secondary concern.

This approach is mirrored in the institutional arrangements for achieving sustainable development. Instead of pursuing a whole-of-government approach, Ministers of Environment – often the least-influential members of cabinet – are in the lead, seconded by development agencies in the case of OECD countries. Similarly, within the UN, the environment holds an inferior institutional position.

Given the effective decoupling of environment from development, it is not surprising that conventional approaches to sustainable growth have failed to account for and address the systemic and increasingly complex environmental challenges we face. Nor is it contested that widespread environmental degradation will continue under business as usual.

Human activities have put regional- and planetary-scale systems at a risk of crossing physical thresholds that will trigger non-linear, abrupt environmental change (Rockström et al. 2009). Meanwhile, a growing – and ever wealthier – population will greatly increase global demands for energy, food and water, exacerbating sustainability challenges.

We must question the wisdom of the conventional approaches that have led us to transgressing these planetary boundaries. Recent evidence of the rapid decline of ecosystems vital to our survival, as well as uncertainty concerning “safe limits” to Earth system change, suggest that environmental integrity should be at the core of our development agenda.

The case for integrating the development and environment agendas

If policies and institutions neglect the relationship between environment and development, they will fail to meet the needs of a growing world economy (Sachs et al. 2009). For instance, efforts to reduce carbon emissions by switching from petrol to biofuels have diverted food crops for use as fuel, placing additional pressures on global grain markets.

Integrating environment and development agendas is not only challenged by path-dependent production systems and technologies, longstanding institutional divides, and interest groups, but also by incompatible decision horizons. Poverty alleviation carries an appropriate sense of urgency: solutions to human suffering are required now, even if we need to incur environmental costs to meet them. The environmental sustainability agenda operates on a different basis: the welfare of people today is important, but the welfare of future generations matters too; future fates depend on present decisions.

There are thus two good reasons why merging the development and environment agendas is not only possible but essential.

First, the environment is a foundation for development NOW. Deteriorating ecosystem services and degrading natural resources limit our ability to reduce poverty and secure economic development. Natural ecosystems such as oceans, forests, lakes and rivers provide food, raw materials and livelihoods for billions of people, and loss of these ecosystems in recent years is already costing billions to communities and economies (TEEB 2010). Moreover, the degradation of natural ecosystems hits the poorest the hardest. For example, it has been estimated that ecosystem services account for at least half of the “GDP of the Poor” – a huge share of the sources of livelihood of poor households worldwide (TEEB 2010). Preserving the health and resilience of the environment is thus fundamental to meaningful progress toward any human development goals.

Second, the environmental consequences of improving development outcomes today affect our ability to do so in the FUTURE. Depending on how we pursue development goals, we can either threaten or enhance natural resources and ecosystem services and similarly determine long-term potential for improving and sustaining human livelihoods. For example, improving access to electricity in South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa is widely seen as a desirable development outcome. But achieving such a goal by extracting and burning coal contributes to global warming that will ultimately put people in those very places at risk of catastrophic extremes in climate, environmental risks and natural resource scarcities.

Setting development goals that do not take into account such consequences merely postpones difficult decisions, threatening the very premise of sustainable development. Deferring the environmental consequences of our development decisions to a later date (the “grow now, clean later” maxim) is dangerous, for two reasons: First, because delay might be prohibitively expensive: proactive measures now are often more cost-effective than emergency responses later. Second, because the consequences of envi-

ronmental degradation could be irreversible and undermine the well-being and security of future generations.

Conversely, the purpose of integrating development and environment goals is to take the vicious cycle of environmental degradation and impaired development and make it virtuous, leading to both greater short-term efficiencies and long-term sustainability in improving human well-being. For sustainable development to succeed on any time horizon, sound integration of the environment in development efforts must thus be our guiding principle.

Mainstreaming the environment into sustainable development: the implementation challenges

The integration of environment and development goals may begin by addressing those issues in which efficiencies and sustainability gains are most evident. A starting point is to focus on those material aspects of development that depend the most upon our natural capital: food, water, health and energy.

A good example of the alignment of environmental and poverty-reducing objectives is the UN's *Sustainable Energy for All* initiative. Here the developmental goal – to improve energy access in developing countries – is matched by an environmental one – to do so without increasing carbon emissions. The keys to this are access, efficiency, and use of renewable technologies.

Similar goals should be envisioned for the “interlinked” concerns of food, fresh water and health security. *Sustainable Food for All* would require improved access to adequate, nutritional food, and maintenance of the environmental bases of food production – inputs of soil, nutrients, water and energy. Sustainability would necessarily have to address the entire network of actors and inputs along the food chain, from production to retailing and waste management. Similar complexities would apply to water and health goals, but these are necessary and not overly complex endeavours.

Integrating environmental and development goals should not be limited, however, to those objectives in which the overlap between poverty and environment is obvious. Other fundamental goals such as equality of opportunities, personal safety, or biodiversity conservation, must be taken into account as well. The environment-development connections within these areas may not be as evident, but they usually exist nonetheless. For instance, minimum levels of biodiversity are necessary to sustain pollination, soil fertility, disease and pest regulation, water provision – all indispensable to poverty alleviation. In all cases, the task is to make the compatibilities and tradeoffs explicit. We can sensibly address any tradeoffs in policy decisions only by being clear about the benefits put at risk by the loss of biodiversity or by unfulfilled development opportunities.

The result of this process should be a unified set of objectives and a shared agenda effectively addressing the interconnectedness of environment and development aims. Such an agenda will result in gains in efficiency and effectiveness of our sustainability pursuits. This will mean that investments will have greater impact, costs will be lowered, and coordination among institutions will be improved.

Sustainable Development Goals: a proposal

Rather than distinguishing pillars of economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion, SDGs must break from failed convention and gain efficiency and relevance by integrating environmental and social dimensions into economic development aims. Additional goals related purely to social and environmental outcomes will be necessary but the economic dimensions of sustainability cannot be dissociated from their environmental foundations.

Accordingly, respecting the need to build upon and strengthen our commitment to valid objectives of the MDG framework, we suggest the following framing for the SDGs:

- Food security for all: physical and economic access to sufficient, nutritionally adequate and safe food and its effective utilisation; founded upon ecologically sustainable agriculture, fisheries and rural development policies and practices.
- Water security for all: access to safe drinking water and sanitation, secure environmental flows to sustain human and ecosystem health, and protection against water-related hazards.
- Health for all: health equity, health security and healthy environments, ensuring access to treatment for infectious disease and family health, mitigating the emergence and incidence of disease.
- Sustainable energy for all: universal access to energy, with increased share of renewable energy sources and improved energy efficiency.

In addition to these SDGs in which the overlap between environment and development is most clear, the list must include other basic human development objectives. These should build from the following base principles:

- Opportunities for all: reduced poverty and inequality, access to social services and security.
- Peace and justice for all: personal security, political

voice, transparent and equitable governance and access to fair justice.

Finally, the SDGs should include a baseline goal guaranteeing the basic functions of the Earth system that underlie human well-being. This goal should build on, rather than interfere with, ongoing negotiations on these topics:

- Earth system security: policies and incentives for an effective global programme of ecosystem conservation, restoration and low emissions to avoid harmful or irreversible damage to ecosystems.

Devising a sound set of universal goals for sustainable development will be challenging, as will be their translation into domestic policies and targets given the acute nature and urgency of both environmental and development demands. As they must resolve these interconnected but often competing demands, the Sustainable Development Goals may be more complex or contested than their forerunners, the MDGs. But this does not make them less tractable, as our examples show, and their applicability across broader demands will add to their relevance. Short term costs in resolving conceptual and practical differences and overcoming institutional and political inertia will be outweighed by efficiencies gained in policy and practice.

Linking environment and development in one sustainable development agenda will broaden the constituency for sustaining Earth's natural capital to secure enduring human well-being. Combining universal goals with national strategies for sustainable development, with time-bound quantified targets and indicators, will help to achieve them. Such national strategies will make the breadth of values of nature more evident and the time scales over which they provide essential benefits to communities, poverty alleviation, and economic development understandable. They can help to explicitly recognize and resolve critical tradeoffs for human development and stewardship of the biosphere, setting a prudent course for the Anthropocene.

DIE's post-2015 briefing paper series has so far covered the following issues:

Loewe, M. (2012): Post 2015: How to Reconcile the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?, Bonn: DIE (Briefing Paper 18/2012)

Stepping, K. (2013): Post 2015: What Can Be Learnt from the Impact of Health Performance on Donor Policies for Health Assistance?, Bonn: DIE (Briefing Paper 1/2013)

Brandt, C. / Richerzhagen, C. / Stepping K. (2013): Post 2015: Why is the Water-Energy-Land Nexus Important for the Future Development Agenda?, Bonn: DIE (Briefing Paper 3/2013)

Literature

Rockström, J. et al. (2009): A safe operating space for humanity, in: *Nature* 461 (7263), 472–475

Sachs, J. D. et al. (2009): Biodiversity conservation and the millennium development goals, in: *Science* 325 (5947), 1502–1503

TEEB (*The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity*) (2010): The economics of ecosystems and biodiversity : mainstreaming the economics of nature : a synthesis of the approach, conclusions and recommendations of TEEB, Geneva, Switzerland

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