



Post-Rio to Post-2015 Think Piece **Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

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The Stakeholder Forum has ‘taken the pulse’ of the post-Rio+20 discourse and compiled a list of the most often cited principles for guiding the design of the SDGs. These guiding principles are listed (in random order) in Appendix A.

A ‘focus-group’ effort produced a list of twelve questions that might be most appropriate for consideration in designing meaningful SDGs (please refer to Appendix B). The contributors to this informal focus group effort were generally familiar with sustainability issues, but not necessarily familiar with UN processes.

A second list of SDG issues/questions was informally solicited from a smaller group of people who are familiar with both sustainability issues and United Nations development processes. These questions are summarized as follows:

1. Given the large number and diversity of human development needs and programs, what criteria should we use to select the most important ones for incorporation into the post-2015 SDGs?
2. How can we effectively communicate and promote collaboration between the proponents of the various human development programs?
3. In today’s world of increasing scarcity and human over-use of natural resources, how can we preserve planetary resource systems, while ensuring progress in human development?
4. How can we design goals for human advancement that acknowledge and operate within the limits of planetary boundaries?
5. How do we unify the disparate agendas for social advancement and encourage their recognition of resource limitations?
6. How can we help lay people to recognize that their everyday well-being is affected by planetary resource problems? How can we encourage people to ‘connect’ their thinking about local development challenges with global sustainability issues?
7. Why is a discussion of sustainability virtually absent from today’s political discourse, and how might we craft a goal that encourages political leaders to engage in this discussion? Must we give particular thought to designing sustainability goals that appeal to national political leaders?
8. How can we craft human development goals that take into account the interests of future generations, while at the same time promoting social justice today?

As United Nations representatives and other stakeholders embark upon the formidable task of promulgating meaningful sustainable development goals (SDGs), we should reflect on the guiding principles in Appendix A, and the questions summarized in Appendix B as well as the eight questions cited above. These lists are offered as an informal ‘vehicle’ that hopefully will promote a more informed discussion and broader understanding, as we collectively proceed with the design of meaningful SDGs.



One of the central themes of the SDGs, and what usually differentiates them from the MDGs, is the need to consider and emphasize the long-term sustainability of the global human development agenda. As stated in the UN System Task Team’s report , Realizing the future we want for all –

“Sustainability, broadly defined, should serve as a fundamental principle for all aspects of development and for all societies. It represents the key challenge for a transformative agenda: how to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and achieve more equitable and sustainable management and governance of natural resources while promoting dynamic and inclusive economic and human development.”

In response to this sustainability challenge we offer the following thoughts for consideration and discussion:

The importance of including resource sustainability (the environmental pillar) in the SDGs:

As we transform the MDGs into SDGs, we must recognize that sound development – if we wish it to be truly durable over time – requires that we live within our planetary resource means. With 7 billion people on the planet and rising levels of affluence, we are already exceeding nature’s limits. Climate change, peak oil, water scarcity, rising food prices, and biodiversity loss are all signs that we are exceeding planetary boundaries. In fact, scientists warn that by 2030, we may need two Earths to sustain our living standards. Alas, we do not have two Earths.

The SDGs must respond to this global reality and today’s challenge of resource over-use. Questions 3 through 6 above all touch on the important issue of living within our natural resource means. It should be observed that all these questions operate at the nexus of human development (both social and economic) and environmental preservation. We all share the goal of maintaining and accelerating progress in the global human development agenda. However, numerous resource challenges pose a compounded risk to the continued progress of global human development. In this light, we offer the following perspective which we call ‘Putting the “S” (resource sustainability) into the SDGs.’

Putting the “S” into the SDGs

The SDGs will matter

The stakes are high. The SDGs, like the MDGs, will serve as an international “rallying point” for investments in developing countries. They could also prove to be a useful mechanism for getting developed nations to curb wasteful consumption and accelerate the transition to renewable energy. For better or worse, they will “set the bar” for national and global sustainability. Any relevant omission from the SDGs could constitute a severe setback. Development goals and targets that were omitted from the MDGs in 2000 suffered from being excluded. Similarly, the failure to set the right goals and targets for the SDGs would seriously jeopardize the goal of moving the world towards a sustainable future.

The “S” (or sustainability) factor acknowledges the need to conduct our future global development programs in balance with planetary limits. The 66th Session of the UN General Assembly will set up a working group for purposes of drafting the goals and target dates for the SDGs. That process, which will take one year or longer to complete, will determine whether the SDGs will represent economic development “as usual,” or whether they will form a new point of departure that leads to a more sustainable world.

The “devil is in the details”

While there is a broad agreement about the need to make development more “sustainable,” there is no international consensus regarding how to achieve that end. The gap between what political leaders want in terms of development (the “political mandate”) and the resources that are realistically available to accommodate that development (the “reality mandate”) is wide and may be unbridgeable. Without strong and concerted action aimed at slowing resource consumption and projected population growth, the gap may never be closed. There is little — if any — room for error. A lot hinges on the precise wording of the SDGs.



We all probably recognize that truly sustainable economic and human development requires that we live within our ecological means. But how do we manage development in a truly sustainable manner? The answer lies in participatory natural resource planning and accountability. Our global human development programs – and the future health and well-being of human societies – require adequate resources and healthy bio-systems. Indeed, healthy and well managed resource systems provide the very foundation for all present and future well-being. Therefore, in order to avoid excessive extraction of resources, it is critical that we include metrics and goals that flag the sufficiency of the natural resources needed to achieve our global development vision. Yes, the world must aggressively move forward with an inclusive human development agenda, but as we do this, we must always keep a watchful and realistic eye on the resources needed to accomplish this agenda. The SDGs must include the principle of resource sufficiency and accountability.

Three essential principles for a sustainable world

There are three indispensable principles that must guide world leaders as they begin work on the SDGs:

1. True sustainability must be the goal.

With the world economy projected to triple or quadruple in the next half century, it's not enough to make the economy more efficient or "greener." Half-steps will not achieve sustainability. We must balance human needs with natural resources

2. Sustainability must be measured.

No one would think of driving a car or flying a plane without a fuel gauge. By the same token, we cannot plan for our future without knowing whether we have enough biophysical capacity to meet our projected needs. Resource evaluation is crucial.

3. Sustainability can only be achieved by reducing aggregate resource demands.

We are already exceeding bio-physical limits. Unless the emerging and developed economies curtail greenhouse gas emissions and slow their consumption of scarce resources, there will be little hope for the developing world. The SDGs must be global in scope.

Appendix A

Guiding principles for the SDGs

1. Voluntary participation by member states
2. Rights based
3. Universally applicable
4. Comprehensive and integrated in nature
5. Linked to the Millennium Development Goals
6. Focused on poverty elimination and marginalized groups
7. Need to address:
 - a. Environmental limits
 - b. Equity issues
 - c. Root causes
 - d. Conflict and corruption
8. Measurable
9. Common but differentiated responsibility
10. Ownership and legitimacy



Appendix B

Questions regarding the development and future content of global SDGs - focus group 1 (LF)

1. Looking beyond 2015, should the SDGs substitute for, or merely complement, the MDGs?
2. If the SDGs substitute for the MDGs, how much emphasis will be placed on development versus ensuring that development is sustainable in the long run?
3. If the MDGs are to be extended beyond 2015, how will the SDGs differ from the MDGs?
4. Will the SDGs attempt to achieve sustainability at the global level? At the country level? Or both?
5. Should the SDGs focus on specific environmental or resource challenges? If so, which ones should be addressed? Climate change mitigation? Climate change adaptation? Water scarcity? Food security? Elimination of food waste? Desertification and loss of topsoil? Collapse of the world's fisheries? Preservation of plant and animal species? Energy conservation? Fossil fuel subsidies? The distribution of renewable energy technologies?
6. In setting goals and targets to address specific environmental or resource challenges, should they be global or country specific? If applicable at the country levels, should they apply to all nations, or only to developing countries?
7. What, if anything, will be asked of developed nations? What kind of commitments will developed nations make to the successful completion of the SDGs? What form will those commitments take? Foreign assistance? Technology transfers? Technical assistance?
8. What is the appropriate timeframe for completion of the SDGs? 2030? 2050?
9. How will we measure success? Do we have the appropriate metrics? Or will we need to develop new indices or metrics?
10. Should the SDGs focus on population stabilization and reduction as a necessary component for sustainable human development and well-being?
11. How should population issues be incorporated into the SDGs? Should reproductive health, family planning, the empowerment of women through education, and other gender equity issues be part of the SDGs?

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