



NEW YORK UNIVERSITY

CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



**Climate, Scarcity and Sustainability in the Post-2015
Development Agenda**

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Introduction

Climate, scarcity and sustainability are crucial issues for the future of development – and hence for the post-2015 agenda. But they are also among the most politically difficult. And while sustainability issues were not a big issue at the London meeting of the UN High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which was focused mainly on household level poverty, they are likely to figure more prominently at the Panel's second meeting in Monrovia in February, and in particular its third meeting in Bali in March – which will focus on national and global level issues respectively.

Before these meetings, sustainability advocates have some hard thinking to do: on both their policy objectives and their political tactics, in both the Panel and the post-2015 agenda as a whole. Their strategy must be based as much on political judgement as on the policy outcomes they would prefer in an ideal world. They need answers to questions such as: what political space, if any, can the Panel and the post-2015 agenda help to unlock? What would be supposed to happen as a result of getting any particular goal? What are the risks with any given approach, and how could it backfire? Above all, *what is their theory of influence?*

Background

MDG7 has not worked. Aside from the imbalance of having one goal on environment and six on development, MDG7's targets included some issues (biodiversity, drinking water and sanitation, urban slums), but omitted others (climate change, water depletion, land degradation, oceans, food security, sustainable agriculture, access to energy), apparently at random. Its aim of mainstreaming sustainability into country policies lacked a clear delivery plan, and has failed to drive action. Above all, it said nothing about developed countries' responsibilities to tackle their own unsustainable consumption – and how this undermines development in poor countries.

But while few would argue for MDG7 to be carried over as it is, there is no consensus on what should replace it – not least because of the toxic political context for *any* multilateral sustainability agenda. The recent track record

includes minimal airtime for sustainability issues in the G20, exceptionally weak outcomes at Copenhagen in 2009 and Rio in 2012, and failure to agree any outcome at all at the supposedly uncontroversial 2011 Commission on Sustainable Development.

At the heart of these impasses is a basic disagreement on how to tackle global sustainability, centred on the vexed issue of equity and 'common but differentiated responsibilities'. On one side is the G77 group of developing countries, and on the other developed countries – with massive unresolved arguments between them about how to share the burdens of change. As a result, there is a sense among many in the post-2015 debate that sustainability issues are just too difficult – and that attempting to take them on could lead to a train crash that not only fails to win sustainability goals, but in the process also loses the chance to secure new goals on eradicating poverty.

Yet disentangling sustainability from development is easier said than done. For one thing, the two agendas are *already* conjoined politically. The Rio 2012 outcome document formally defines Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the destination of the post-2015 process. At the behest of a group of countries led by Colombia, Rio also mandated the creation of an intergovernmental 'open Working Group' on SDGs that would report to the UN General Assembly, with which the High Level Panel will need to converge at some point.

More fundamentally, there is the fact that that out in the real world, climate, scarcity, unsustainability and development have long since morphed into a single challenge. Poverty reduction is the first casualty of unsustainability, with poor people disproportionately reliant on natural assets and vulnerable to climate and scarcity risks. At the same time, current models of development are also the main *driver* of unsustainability – most obviously in 'developed' countries, but increasingly also in emerging economies which, though far behind high income countries in per capita impacts, are nonetheless helping push the world towards ecological tipping points.

The default scenario

It is already possible to sketch out the default scenario for how sustainability issues will play out in the post-2015 process. Already, a number of key players are clear in private that they neither expect nor want the High Level Panel to get into sustainability issues in detail. Instead, they believe the Panel should focus on a narrow vision of poverty reduction, with sustainability left to the Working Group (which might only get underway once the Panel's work has finished). The two strands of the post-2015 agenda could then be brought together later under a unified SDG umbrella.

The main problem with this approach – or advantage, depending on your point of view – is that UN watchers are increasingly concluding that the Working Group is unlikely to make much of an impact. A long series of meetings in New York has failed to agree on who should be on it. Even if it does manage to launch, it appears extremely unlikely to reach consensus on a coherent set of SDG proposals. This raises the question: why would Brazil, China and other emerging economies call for a tough focus on “sustainable production and consumption” on one hand, but on the other hand then push for it to be discussed in a group that looks unlikely ever to get off the ground, much less agree anything of substance?

A cynic might reply as follows. While a little North / South grandstanding does no harm at all in the G77, these countries' main objective remains avoidance of any multilateral commitments that might prevent them from growing along their current (unsustainable) trajectories. Brazil and China, for example, already have per capita resource consumption levels above the global average, and are projected to rise much higher between now and 2030. As one senior emerging economy diplomat closely connected to the post-2015 agenda succinctly put it, “we need a post-2015 agenda that focuses on people, not planet”.

In this sense, the most important dividing line in multilateral sustainability policy is not the one between ‘North’ and ‘South’, whatever the public rhetoric might suggest. Instead, it is between those that want a voluntary,

technology-led, nationally driven approach; and, on the other hand, those that favour a more internationally coordinated approach – including binding targets. Adherents of the second approach agree that technology and flexibility of national approach are crucial; but argue that clean tech will not be taken up at scale without global frameworks that create more investment certainty through greater assurance about what actions will be taken by which countries.

This is, of course, the dynamic that dominated Copenhagen in 2009. Now, it is re-emerging in debates about sustainability more broadly – including post-2015. As at Copenhagen, the US appears likely to align itself with China and Brazil in a tacit low-ambition consensus. But this time around, other countries look likely to join in too. Developed countries with a strong poverty focus, such as the UK, may judge that inclusion of sustainability in post-2015 is more of a risk than an opportunity. Low income countries, meanwhile, might also welcome a narrower focus, fearing their concerns will be lost in a broader agenda.

Two alternative scenarios

The scenario above confronts sustainability advocates with a dilemma. They are in a weak position to start with, with few recent successes, and the beginnings of a settled consensus in favour of a scaled down approach to sustainability. If they raise the stakes too high in pushing for an alternative approach, they may find themselves blamed for failure to agree any successor framework to the MDGs, and for losing the existing MDGs' poverty focus in the process. Yet the urgency of sustainability issues – and their implications for development – are only increasing. What to do?

To start with, they should lead forcefully with the argument that development that is not sustainable is not worth having – given that *unsustainable* models of development will only end up a victim of their own success. (They can argue with justification that this is exactly what is already happening – both globally, and in emerging economies where developed country offshoring of dirty industries is leading to massive environmental stress.) They must show

that sustainability debates are about not some normative, 'nice-to-have' agenda; rather, they are about whether it is really sensible to build castles on sand. Beyond this, they have a choice between two approaches, one higher and one lower in ambition.

Option 1 : A few sustainability related goals, plus mainstreaming 'green growth'

The lower ambition option would focus on winning a few post-2015 goals with strong recognition of natural resource limits, while also securing strong language on how to incorporate sustainability into the enabling environment for development. Some of the obvious contenders for goals would be universal access to energy; food security and/or agriculture; and extension of MDG 7c on water and sanitation. In each case, there are clear links across to sustainability, which could be explicitly recognised in goal language.

At the same time, the Panel could set out a clear analysis of why and how countries can build sustainability into their development plans. The analysis could include the need for whole of government approaches, and examples of what that looks like in practice; policies and measures that can take sustainability forward (such as full cost pricing / regulatory approaches / social protection and other climate adaptation policies); and greater clarity on how to incentivise the private sector to scale up clean tech investment. Logically, this analysis should extend to *all* countries, not just 'developing' ones: sustainable development paths are most urgently needed in high income countries, after all.

The key advantage of this approach is that it would probably be sellable to most countries, including emerging economies and perhaps even the US – based as it is on their voluntary approach. This approach would also take the sustainability agenda forward (a bit) from MDG7, by continuing to try to mainstream recognition of natural resource limits through other areas while focusing more of the headline post-2015 goals on sustainability-related areas.

But it would have disadvantages too. A voluntary approach might increase political acceptability, but at the price of effectiveness. It is far from clear that this approach would deliver much (if any) additional action. Countries would be likely to limit themselves to 'no-regrets' measures and avoid incurring any significant costs in the absence of assurances about other countries taking action too – a problem that would be especially acute if (as seems possible) political difficulties meant that the Panel ended up saying nothing about developed countries' responsibility to tackle their own unsustainable consumption patterns.

Option 2 : Focusing goals explicitly on planetary boundaries – and fair shares within them

The higher ambition option, on the other hand, would be to seek explicit recognition of planetary boundaries in the post-2015 framework, and for this to be the basis for mainstreaming sustainability into development objectives. This could potentially be achieved through a twin-track set of goals – with one track focused on eradicating poverty, and the other on the nine planetary boundaries proposed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. Crucially, though, the High Level Panel would be setting out proposals on *both* areas, rather than deferring sustainability to the Working Group (a recipe for almost certain failure).

While planetary boundaries are still a young concept, they are becoming the most important idea in sustainable development to emerge in the 25 years since the Brundtland report. They recognise natural resource limits as critical – but, importantly, focus not on abstract, polarising ideas like 'limits to growth', but instead on evidence-based, quantified limits to the sustainable use of particular renewable and non-renewable resources. In so doing, the approach aims for a clear definition of the safe operating space for a sustainable global economy. It also highlights the most important point about 21st century environmental stress: that far from implying gradual, linear change, it is about the risk of abrupt, catastrophic and irreversible shifts as key thresholds are passed.

One of the key challenges in developing any set of goals on planetary boundaries is ensuring that the goals – and policy based on them – can evolve as scientific understanding

of the boundaries becomes more sophisticated. There is also the fact that not all of the planetary boundaries apply at global level: while the boundaries on (say) climate change, ocean acidification or ozone depletion are clearly worldwide, others – like fresh water depletion, land use change or atmospheric aerosols – will often be regional, national, or sub-national in scope.

The first step towards managing these challenges is to set up a more serious and comprehensive global institutional mechanism for monitoring all nine boundaries – including a regular global ‘Outlook’ report. Like the IPCC, this mechanism would draw on the best available scientific, economic and technological expertise, and both explore the trajectories that current policies place us on, and where key risk thresholds lie. It would not only create essential new data sets, but also act as an ‘anchor’ for global conversations and pressure for policy development. Crucially, using post-2015 as a platform for launching this mechanism would also take planetary boundaries out of the political cul-de-sac that multilateral environmental policy has now clearly become, and instead put them where they belong: at the heart of debates about how the world as a whole should grow over the course of the century ahead.

It would also be essential to recognise that *no* developing country would assent to goals on natural resource limits without explicit assurances about fair shares to environmental space, and protection of their right to develop. Unlike the voluntary approach favoured by the de facto emerging economy / US alliance, explicit recognition of planetary boundaries unavoidably leads on to the need for supranational frameworks, and to from there to hard-edged distributional questions.

To be sure, the post-2015 framework may not be the place to get into the details of (say) how to share out a global carbon budget. But its status as the world’s pre-eminent international development agenda makes it absolutely the right place to send an unambiguous signal about the need for fair shares to natural assets.

At one level, this agenda is about universal access to energy, food or water: goals on these areas could include explicit reference to planetary boundaries on, for example, climate change or use of nitrogen, phosphorus, land or water. (The current MDG 7c, by contrast, makes no mention of the idea that fresh water might not be infinite.)

At regional and global level, meanwhile, emphasis on fair shares within sustainable limits would reframe equity discussions around how to share out entitlements or assets rather than – as now – burdens. This would nudge policy discussions towards clearer recognition of the need to protect fair shares of finite environmental space for developing countries and poor people – and of the need for all countries to bring (and then keep) their own consumption levels within their fair shares, or else pay others a fair price for the right to use some of their entitlement.

This principle would still be commensurate with a bottom-up approach in which countries were free to find their own ways to live within boundaries, decide which technologies to adopt, and shift effort to wherever it is least expensive. Crucially, though, this would happen within a coherent, quantified overall framework designed to ensure that national choices still add up to a sustainable global outcome.

The key disadvantage of this approach, of course, would be the political difficulties associated with it. Brazil, China, and the US are especially uneasy about admitting the existence of boundaries or limits. In the latter, any agenda along these lines would play directly to the fears of right wing political constituencies, further reducing the Administration’s room for manoeuvre. The risks of a political train crash on post-2015, in which the prospect of poverty eradication goals is lost, would be very real.

Conclusion and recommendations

So which option should sustainability advocates go for? In a nutshell, both. It would clearly be irresponsible to adopt a Tea Party style zero-compromise stance, and hold poverty eradication goals hostage to agreement on planetary

boundaries. But at the same time, private recognition of what is possible in the current political context needs to be matched with forceful public emphasis on what is necessary.

Start with the public position. Key global environmental indicators are now deteriorating with frightening rapidity. As far as scientists can tell, three planetary boundaries have already been crossed, with another three at imminent risk. This is happening because of economic growth – primarily in high income countries, but increasingly in emerging economies too. Sustainability advocates need to show that if the post-2015 agenda does not focus on the need for growth and development to take place *in a fundamentally different way*, then it will just replicate existing problems, at larger scale.

Sustainability advocates also need to be much more serious and determined about how to characterise the dividing line between the approach they believe is necessary, and the low ambition alternative. They have been deeply unwise to allow the choice to be framed as one between bottom-up / low ambition and top-down / high ambition, when in fact *both* approaches are bottom-up in the sense that they are based on the need for flexibility in national approach. Instead, they need to make clear that the key dividing line is that where the low ambition approach is based on the idea that natural systems will somehow award ‘marks for effort’, their approach is based on identifying, and then *doing*, what science indicates is in fact necessary.

Above all, issues of sustainability need to be rescued from the environmental prison in which they are currently languishing. Environmental summitry has become the world’s principal breeding ground for multilateral zombies (staggering on, moaning piteously, never quite dying) with few if any really significant wins in the 15 years since Kyoto. This should surprise no-one, mirroring as it does the fact that in capitals all over the world, environment ministers lack the clout to make change happen. Instead, issues of resource limits need to be brought to the heart of debates about how we develop – not in some vague, aspirational way, but by starting from quantified estimates of how much environmental space is available for the

world’s 7 billion (and counting) human inhabitants to share between them.

As they pursue this strategy, sustainability advocates need to bear in mind that while political space is acutely limited at present, they can expect much more room for manoeuvre to open up at key points between now and 2015 – for example in the aftermath of major shocks such as extreme weather events or resource price spikes. No-one can predict such events, but it is absolutely possible to *anticipate* them, given the direction of travel over the last few years. When such moments occur, everything depends on having the right ideas ready ‘on the shelf’. *Now* is the moment to pre-position these ideas – and lay down clear markers about what it will actually take to solve the crisis of global unsustainability.

Within the post-2015 process, the High Level Panel is – for now and for the foreseeable future – the only game in town. Those Panel members who are serious about sustainability need to organise themselves (by the end of January at the latest) around a clear set of propositions, and then orchestrate a ‘moment’ at which they bring their asks to a head. Developing country governments will be especially crucial, given that they have most to lose from unsustainability and have the greatest moral authority in the post-2015 process. Indonesia, Mexico and Colombia are likely to form the indispensable core of any coalition of progressive-minded developing country governments on the Panel.

In substantive terms, sustainability advocates should play for four key outcomes in the Panel’s report. First, explicit recognition that avoiding dangerous natural resource and ecosystem thresholds must be a core part of the future global development agenda, and that globalisation needs to become not just inclusive and resilient, but also sustainable. Second, goals on access to energy, food and water, again with clear acknowledgement of natural limits and the need for sustainable resource management in every case. Third, if the post-2015 framework includes provision for countries to pledge voluntary national targets on sustainability, then these should at least be buttressed by transparent accountability and review mechanisms.

Fourth and finally, the Panel should make explicit reference to the need for global development to take place within planetary boundaries – and recommend the creation of a formal global monitoring mechanism, as outlined in option 2. This approach would avoid the Panel having to quantify planetary boundaries itself, or get into acutely difficult distributional issues when there is insufficient political space to reach a deal - but would still build vital political momentum around the idea of planetary boundaries, and create a clear ‘hook’ for political pressure in the future. At a point when the global sustainability agenda is losing momentum rapidly, and potentially at risk of stalling altogether, building these long term agendas for the future may be the most important contribution that the Panel can make.

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His publications include:

[Resources, Risk and Resilience: Scarcity and Climate Change in Ethiopia](#) (NYU 2012)

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