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CENTER ON INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION



The UN's Role on Sustainable Development

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Introduction

The issue of sustainable development has never been more topical for the UN. The Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has signalled that he regards the issue as the top priority for his second term, and has convened both a High Level Panel on Global Sustainability, which reported in early 2012, and the major initiative Sustainable Energy for All (SE4ALL). He has also signalled that he wants sustainable development to be the central organising paradigm for the rapidly evolving post-2015 agenda on what should follow the Millennium Development Goals, throwing his weight behind Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – which have now emerged as the key outcome from the Rio+20 conference.

Yet despite all of this activity and political support, the sustainable agenda remains highly contested – as does the role of the UN on this issue area. Many recent high level gatherings, including Rio+20, the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit and the 2011 Commission on Sustainable Development, have been disappointments. The UN remains heavily fragmented on sustainable development, despite attempts at reform during recent years. And for all the rhetoric on sustainable development at global level since 1992, most key environmental indicators remain in the wrong direction.

This background paper aims to take stock of the role and the performance of the UN on sustainable development, particularly in relation to other key actors. It documents how thinking on sustainable development has evolved since the 1987 Brundtland Commission; how the UN has itself adapted in response; and discusses the outlook for the UN's future on this cluster of issues.

Part 1 of the paper sets out a discussion of sustainable development, focusing in particular on how thinking about environment and sustainability has evolved over the last 50 years. It argues that a lack of clear thinking at the conceptual level about what is and is not included in the term is partly responsible for much of the confusion and overlap in how the UN attempts to deal with it.

Part 2 of the paper assesses the UN's key roles on sustainable development, including knowledge and data-gathering; supporting intergovernmental decision-making; financing; and implementation in developing countries.

Part 3 of the paper focuses on the UN's less formalised role in the area of leadership, agenda-setting and catalysing action. It argues that this is the most important area of the UN's work on sustainable development, but that significant reform is needed in how the UN undertakes this role.

Part 1: What is sustainable development?

The ambiguity at the heart of sustainable development

Most policymakers think they have a fairly good idea of what sustainable development means. The 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission famously defined it as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”. More broadly, sustainable development practitioners often see it as referring to a policymaking approach that places particular emphasis on ‘connecting the dots’, breaking out of institutional or sectoral ‘silos’, and aiming for integration of economic, social and environmental concerns.

But while these rather broad and loose definitions may appear fairly self-explanatory at first glance, they actually leave considerable ambiguity about what is and is not included – with two main schools of thought on what sustainable development actually means.

Is sustainable development essentially a synonym for “environment” – covering, therefore, issues like climate change or biodiversity, but not maternal mortality or peacekeeping? Or is it about connecting the dots between *all* areas of policymaking, in effect another term for what foreign policy practitioners would call “grand strategy”; or what international development professionals would call “policy coherence for development”?

These two schools of thought, and their differing views on where the boundaries of sustainable development really lie, create constant difficulties. During the work of the UN Global Sustainability Panel, for instance, there were regular debates over whether the global financial and economic crisis was within the Panel's purview.

In part, this ambiguity derives from how the discourse of sustainable development has evolved over the years. Many people would date the start of the modern environmental movement to 1962, when Rachel Carson's book *Silent Spring* was first published. Then, environmental issues were seen as primarily national in scope, and focused heavily on pollution as the central environmental issue.

By the early 1970s, pollution was still front and centre, but environmental issues were increasingly seen as a global issue. The first pictures of the earth from space had just become available, producing an electrifying set of images that would animate the first Earth Day, in 1970. Two years later the first major multilateral environmental summit was held in Stockholm – the same year that the Club of Rome's seminal *Limits to Growth* report was published. Issues of resource scarcity also became topical all over the world, following a spate of extreme weather events in 1972 (drought in the US and Soviet Union, failure of the Indian monsoon, the peaking of a multi-year drought in the Sahel), and still more so in 1973 with the first OPEC oil shock.

Over the 1980s, environmental issues were increasingly framed in terms of climate change (then still known as the 'greenhouse effect' – something that a third of Americans had heard of as early as 1981) and the ozone layer. During this period, multilateralism on environmental issues reached what is probably its most optimistic period to date, most notably with the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Ozone-Depleting Substances, the creation of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change in 1988, and the signing of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change at Rio in 1992.

At the same time, this period also saw an increasing focus on the linkages between environment and other issues. The Brundtland report in 1987 was a defining moment

in reframing environment as sustainable development. Five years later, the UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio also attempted to 'connect the dots' between environmental conservation and international development.

Yet while issues of global environment and sustainability have reached new peaks in public awareness since the 1992 Earth Summit – most notably in 2005-07, a period during which the world saw Hurricane Katrina, *An Inconvenient Truth*, the Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change and the awarding of the Nobel Peace Prize to the IPCC and Al Gore – international action appears to have lost momentum. After all the battles to get the Kyoto Protocol into force, the instrument appears on the verge of fizzling out. Each subsequent summit – the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg, the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit and the 2012 Rio+20 conference – only reaffirmed the loss of momentum.

While the essential insight of the Brundtland Commission that environment is ultimately not separable from either economy or society is clearly right, it also introduced a still-unresolved tension between 'mainstreaming' (in which sustainability is an objective to be pursued across all policy areas) versus a 'standalone' approach (in which the issue is regarded as an agenda that can be pursued on its own). While the former is undoubtedly necessary, it is also politically much harder; conversely, while the latter is more achievable, it is also much more limited in what it can deliver.

These trade-offs create a lack of conceptual clarity on what sustainable development is really about – which in turn also affects how organisations' work is framed. If, for example, the successors to the Millennium Development Goals are framed as Sustainable Development Goals, then is this a positive recognition of the need for a more integrated vision of development, or a dangerous dilution of current emphasis on poverty reduction objectives?

Questions like these are not merely semantic. Without clear answers, the risk is that institutions working on sustainable development, including the UN system and its constituent parts, move forward without strategic clarity on either ends or means.

Alternatives to Sustainable Development as a framing concept

It is also notable that the term ‘sustainable development’ appears to be becoming less resonant with many audiences. Recent years have seen a proliferation of alternative terms and concepts that in effect contest the right of sustainable development to be seen as the central organising concept in this space. For example:

- **Climate change** and the idea of a ‘**low carbon economy**’ have come to be used as a central organising concept for many companies and policymakers (though perhaps slightly less so since the disappointment of Copenhagen in 2009).
- More recently, ‘**green economy**’ and ‘**green growth**’ have become popular terms, especially among companies, although there is also often confusion about exactly what these terms refer to.
- **Resource scarcity** is another term that has significantly increased in use, especially since the 2008 food and fuel spike, with the idea of a ‘**nexus**’ of land, food and water (and often energy as well) now widely recognised. By emphasising natural resources, this term can be more resonant with economic policymakers and the private sector, though it arguably places too little emphasis on biodiversity and other ‘ecosystem services’.

However, while these terms may offer better political narratives than the rather dry terminology of sustainable development, they also lack the definitional clarity that sustainable development could have, if the term were used with more precision. Joseph Tainter, a historian of how and why civilizations have collapsed in the past, has put it as follows:

“It is useful to think of sustainability in the metaphor of an athletic game: it is possible to “lose” – that is, to become unsustainable, as happened to the Western Roman Empire. But the converse does not hold. Because we continually confront challenges, there is no point at which a society has “won” – become sustainable in perpetuity, or at least for a very long

time. Success, rather, consists of staying in the game.”¹

In this sense, sustainability is about more than just environment – more fundamentally, it is about institutions, economies and societies that are able to adapt and endure for the long haul. It is this long-term, future-oriented aspect of sustainable development that is arguably most important, and that is least captured by alternative terms such as green growth.

By extension, it also bears emphasising that sustainable development is strongly concerned with issues of *limits*, given that questions of unsustainability naturally arise when current development paths are on course to exceed naturally imposed limits.

Accepting that naturally imposed limits do exist does not mean that there are necessarily limits to economic growth *per se*. To be sure, it could yet emerge that limits to growth do exist: while green growth focuses on ‘decoupling’ economic growth from environmental impacts (i.e. reducing the resource intensity for each unit of production), progress on this to date has been far outpaced by higher rates of economic growth itself, so that total environmental impact is still rising. It seems clear that revolutionary technological breakthroughs (or, conversely, savage economic contractions) will be needed for decoupling rates to surpass those of growth itself.

Even if there *are* limits to growth, it will take time for this to become clear. What can be said with much more confidence at this stage is that there are clearly limits to the sustainable use of certain key natural systems and resources, both renewable and non-renewable – and that the most fundamental task for sustainable development is to integrate recognition of this into economies, fiscal systems, and debates about equity and fair shares.

One of the most significant analyses of recent years in this area has been the work of the Stockholm Resilience Centre on ‘planetary boundaries’, a concept first proposed in 2009 as a way to think about a ‘safe operating space for humanity’. Planetary boundaries are key thresholds or

1. <http://campfire.theoil Drum.com/node/6942>

tipping points beyond which there is a risk of “irreversible and abrupt environmental change”.

The Stockholm Resilience Centre team identified nine such boundaries: climate change, biodiversity loss, biogeochemical flows (both nitrogen and phosphorus), stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, global freshwater use, land use change, atmospheric aerosol loading, and chemical pollution. The SRC analysis also suggested that human activity is already beyond safe levels in climate change, biodiversity loss, and the nitrogen cycle; and that it may now be approaching the boundaries on interfering with the global phosphorus cycle, global freshwater use, ocean acidification, and global land use change.

While much work remains to be done to improve definitions of exactly where boundaries lie and build up systems for monitoring them, the SRC’s initial work on defining the nine planetary boundaries is arguably one of the most significant advances in the concept of sustainable development since the Brundtland report in 1987, in that it begins to systematise knowledge about where key thresholds for global systems lie and how close to them human activity is moving.

In the light of the discussion set out above, and in particular assuming the working definition of sustainable development just suggested, what does this say about what is the UN doing on sustainable development – and what should it be doing?

The next two parts of the paper set out a spectrum of functional areas in which the UN plays a role, in each case discussing both current performance and how the UN’s role could evolve in the future.

Part 2: The UN’s formal roles on sustainable development

Knowledge and data-gathering

Knowledge and data-gathering is an area where there is broad consensus that the UN has a key role to play, which fits in to the UN’s so-called “normative” mandate on global issues. It is also an area where the UN can point to many successes. At global level, the jewel in its crown is the work of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, co-‘owned’ in the UN system by UNEP and WMO. On top of this, the UN can point to key global outlook reports such as the Millennium Ecosystem Assessment, UNEP’s Global Environmental Outlook, and others besides.

The UN’s coverage of sustainable development issues at country level is less comprehensive, but this could change if (as the Global Sustainability Panel proposed) the UN were to become a platform for country-based sustainable development performance indices, coupled with a system for sustainable development peer review between countries. These were arguably two of the best and most practical recommendations set out in the GSP, given their potential to help disseminate best practice – especially given that notable innovations in sustainable development are now starting to take place in many emerging economies, and some low income countries (such as Ethiopia). However, that they were not picked up in the Rio+20 outcome document makes their implementation unlikely.

The other key innovation that could take place in the UN’s data-gathering function in sustainable development is the possibility of the UN building up a comprehensive system for monitoring the planetary boundaries identified by the SRC. The SRC itself is clear that much more work remains to be done to research where key thresholds lie and how close to them humans have come. At the same time, given that the SRC is a think tank (albeit one with serious academic credentials), it lacks the same standing as a formal international organisation or intergovernmental body.

In scaling up monitoring of planetary boundaries, the UN could follow a range of different models: from a body similar to the IPCC, to the role taken on by UNEP or some other UN agency, or indeed some kind of ‘virtual’ function perhaps similar to the UN’s Global Pulse system on monitoring human vulnerability.

As well as providing policymakers with useful datasets that are often not available elsewhere, the UN’s role on data-gathering at global level is also important in two other key ways. First, it matters that the UN is defending the principles of sound science and evidence-based policymaking at a time when they face significant challenges. This is most evident in the case of the IPCC and climate policy, but also relevant in other areas.

Second, it is important to recognise that UN data-gathering exercises are significant in that they provide *deliberative platforms for strategic conversations*, as well as the data itself. The story of the IPCC provides an especially good example of this, in that the IPCC has provided an ‘anchor’ for global understanding of the issue and perceptions of its seriousness. As historian of the IPCC Shardul Agrawala has put it, “The more credible experts there were already in the IPCC, the more attractive it was for other established experts to join, [and] the more internal strength the institution had to defend its scientific integrity against political pressures.”²

It was with this idea of data-gathering as a platform for building shared awareness that CIC proposed in 2011 the World Resources Outlook, which would be compiled jointly by a range of international agencies. While the report would be intended to assess the state of scientific knowledge on key resources, together with economic dimensions and social vulnerability implications, the main objective would be to create more interoperability between international agencies working on different aspects of resource scarcity, by getting different organisations with different perspectives and datasets to work together on producing a shared output.

2. Shardul Agrawala, “Context and Early Origins of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change,” *Climate Change*, 39, 1998.

The value of this kind of approach was shown in advance of the 2011 G20, when a range of international agencies – including the IMF, World Bank, UN High Level Food Task Force, WTO, UNCTAD, OECD, WFP, FAO and IFAD, as well as the International Food Policy Research Institute – were tasked with producing a joint analysis of food security issues. Far from a lowest common denominator, the report set out a hard-hitting analysis that tackled contentious issues such as biofuel support and export restrictions head-on. While the process was painful for all involved, according to the head of one of the agencies engaged in the process, the fact that the report had been commissioned by the G20 meant that awkward divergences of view were recognised and worked through rather than swept under the carpet.

However, although the Global Sustainability Panel proposed that such an exercise be undertaken regularly (albeit badged not as a World Resources Outlook but as a Global Sustainable Development Outlook), this recommendation was not included in the Rio+20 outcome document despite featuring in successive drafts of the outcome prepared in advance of the summit.

Supporting intergovernmental decision-making

Closely related to the UN’s role on agenda-setting is its job of facilitating collective action by its member states – from organising summit meetings and other decision-making forums, to supporting treaty frameworks.

Recent years have seen widespread recognition of the problem that many summits and decision-making bodies have remits limited to one single aspect of sustainability – reinforcing sectoral ‘silos’ or ‘stove-pipes’. The 2004 High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, for example, argued in an oft-quoted passage that,

“The fragmented sectoral approaches of international institutions mirror the fragmented sectoral approaches of Governments: for example, finance ministries tend to work only with the international financial institutions, development ministers work only with development programmes,

ministers of agriculture work only with food programmes, and environment ministers only with environmental agencies.”³

Within the environmental sector specifically, problems of fragmentation are arguably even more pronounced. Since the Stockholm Environment Conference in 1972, and even more since the Rio Summit in 1992, dozens upon dozens of Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) have been agreed: not just high profile treaties such as the 1985 Vienna Convention for the Protection of the Ozone Layer (and its 1987 Montreal Protocol) and the 1992 UN Framework Convention on Climate Change or Convention on Biodiversity, but also agreements on topics from access to information to transboundary movement of hazardous wastes, from trade in endangered species to desertification, and from tropical timber to biosafety.

Many of these treaties are agreed in a blaze of publicity, but then recede rapidly into the background, suffering from an implementation gap that stems from a failure by member states to follow through on agreed pledges on domestic action, funding, technology transfer, and capacity building assistance for least developed countries.

As the limitations of single-issue approaches have become recognised (especially in the environmental arena, where environment ministers may lack enough clout at the Cabinet table in capitals to secure serious action), more and more issues have in recent years been escalated to the level of heads of government. The G8 and more recently the G20 have been especially important, but head of government have also become more engaged in some issue-specific summits (e.g. the 2009 Copenhagen climate summit).

The main advantages of escalating tough issues to this level, in theory, are that heads have the big picture, and are supposedly better able to identify linkages and trade-offs, and to drive whole of government approaches. In practice, though, the reality is that heads have extremely limited resources, with their time at a premium, and their (relatively small) staffs often directed towards fire-fighting immediate term crises rather than looking towards the

longer term – all the more so since the eruption of the global economic crisis.

G8 and G20 summit meetings have also proven consistently reluctant to get into issues that would entail significant domestic implementation commitments, except in conditions of direst emergency (such as at the London Summit in 2009). As a result, the track record of heads in addressing sustainability has so far been relatively limited.

Towards a more integrated approach?

The Commission on Sustainable Development, created following the 1992 Rio Summit, was intended to play the ‘connecting the dots’ role in sustainable development, in effect creating a new level of decision-making that would sit between single issue forums and head of government level.

However, there is now almost universal agreement that the CSD has not worked out as planned – with the body unable to undertake political heavy lifting, focusing largely on environment rather than on broader policy coherence for sustainability, and with representation of member states still largely by environment ministers.

The UN’s Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), the parent body of the CSD, has been similarly hamstrung in its ability to move sustainable development agendas forward. Both CSD and ECOSOC have also proved susceptible to becoming bogged down in issues that are not obviously of direct relevance to sustainability, such as Israel / Palestine issues.

With the problems discussed above now widely recognised, the run-up to Rio+20 saw attempts to identify ways of improving the ‘institutional framework for sustainable development’, in particular through proposals for a new Council on Sustainable Development and a new World Environment Organisation.

The idea of a Council on Sustainable Development was set out in detail in the GSP report, which argued that the new body should replace the CSD. Such a Council, the Panel argued, could improve integration of the three aspects of

3. High-level Panel on Threats, Challenges and Change, United Nations, 2004.

sustainable development, have a higher profile than the CSD (with more engagement of heads of government), and assess sustainable development performance at both global and country level, including through a new country peer review mechanism.

However, it remains unclear why a new Council would fare any better than the CSD in improving decision-making on sustainable development. The language used in the Panel report to explain what a Council would actually do is for the most part vague, involving abstract verbs such as “engage”, “promote”, “integrate”, and “review.” It is also unclear why renaming the Commission a Council would make heads of government more likely to attend meetings. And while, as noted earlier, a country peer review mechanism would be a welcome innovation in the UN system, it is not clear that a Council needs to be created as a home for this function.

The new Council was not formally endorsed in the Rio+20 outcome document, which instead decided to establish a “universal intergovernmental high-level political forum” that would eventually replace the CSD. However, most of the details of the body were left to the UN General Assembly to decide in a future negotiation.

The World Environment Organisation – also not taken forward in the Rio+20 outcome document – suffers from many of the same problems as proposals for a new Council. The rationale for a WEO (or, alternatively, an upgraded UN Environment Program) uses many of the same abstract verbs as those used to promote a Council on Sustainable Development, together with the questionable argument that merging UNEP with various MEA secretariats would somehow create a new international organisation of similar stature and clout to the World Trade Organisation.

Ultimately, the central problem with both proposals is that they assume that a poorly configured global sustainable development organogram is the reason why governments have made so little progress on improving global sustainable development indicators – when in reality, the problem largely reflects insufficient political space for

member states to get more serious about sustainability issues. This problem, and what the UN can do about it, is discussed in Part 3 of the paper.

Financing

At present, the most important financing window for sustainability is the Global Environmental Facility, which was founded in 1991 and has since then disbursed \$10.5 billion in grants as well as a further \$51 billion in leveraged co-financing. The GEF is overseen by a governing Council of 32 constituencies (split more or less evenly between developed and developing countries), and funds agencies including the World Bank, UNDP, and UNEP, as well as national governments and civil society organisations. The GEF also acts as the financing mechanism for various multilateral environmental agreements.

Where things get more complicated, however, is the extraordinary recent proliferation of financing windows on climate change. Among the most important are⁴:

- **The World Bank’s Climate Investment Funds (CIFs).** These include the Clean Technology Fund (CTF) on low carbon development – so far the biggest climate fund, with nearly \$5 billion pledged and \$1.9 billion already approved – and the smaller Strategic Climate Fund (SCF - \$1.3 billion pledged), which in turn includes the Pilot Program for Climate Resilience (PPCR - \$1.2 billion pledged), Forest Investment Program (FIP - \$650 million pledged) and Scaling Up Renewable Energy Program (SREP - \$400 million pledged). Much of this money is in the form of loans rather than grants.
- **GEF money earmarked for climate change.** The GEF Trust Fund’s ‘focal area’ on climate change already has just over \$1.1 billion approved under the GEF’s fourth replenishment round, with a further \$1.1 billion pledged under GEF 5. The GEF also administers the Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF - \$400 million pledged) and the Special Climate Change Fund on long-term adaptation measures (SCCF - \$200 million pledged).

4. All of the data here taken from Overseas Development Institute’s excellent <http://www.climatefundsupdate.org/listing>

- **The Adaptation Fund.** The AF is a financial instrument of the UNFCCC, and is financed through a 2% share of emissions reductions certified under the Kyoto Protocol's Clean Development Mechanism. The AF has its own governing board, the World Bank as Trustee, and is administered by the GEF. Over the past two years, the Fund has spent \$115 million on climate resilience.
- **The Green Climate Fund (GCF),** which was agreed on at the Copenhagen Summit in 2009 as an "operating entity of the financial mechanism of the [Climate] Convention", which is expected to mobilise \$100 billion a year by 2020, from a mixture of public and private sources (although there is so far little clarity on the ratio of the two).

In addition, a number of bilateral climate financing windows have been set up by individual governments (with Japan pledging \$11 billion from public sources and \$4 billion from private sources, the UK pledging \$4.6 billion, Germany pledging \$850 million and Norway pledging \$500 million). In the future, it is also possible that financing arrangements on Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD+) and Payments for Ecosystem Services (PES) could emerge to become highly significant.

Five main observations can be made of this alphabet soup of financing arrangements.

First and most obviously, sustainable development finance has slid into a configuration of almost unbelievable complexity, with massive duplication of scope between the various funds discussed above (as well as numerous smaller ones not mentioned here). In part this reflects the equally Byzantine nature of UN climate talks and related negotiating processes, as well as often highly polarised political dynamics between donor and recipient countries, but the result remains one of much higher transaction costs. There is also no guarantee that this profusion of new financing arrangements will be well anchored in best practice in the broader international development sector.

Secondly, it is clear that despite a great deal of talk about financial pledges, this is so far not being matched by

action. Despite the impressive pledge figures for some funds, the tally of amounts actually received in each case shows every Fund in receipt of less than \$200 million, with the sole exception of the GEF 4 Trust Fund – which ceased funding operations in June 2010. The gap between rhetoric and reality may be most pronounced of all in the case of the Green Climate Fund, where for example early signs in the European Council suggest that the ratio of public to private funding may be diminishing fast.

Third, the UN system has been very actively engaged in discussions over climate finance – but has often come across as a competitor for funding and institutional 'turf' rather than as a disinterested adviser on the most effective architecture. UNDP, in particular, is often referred to privately by negotiators as having been voraciously acquisitive for control or shares of climate finance.

Fourth, it bears noting that the failure of Copenhagen to agree a new global climate deal has seen previous optimism over climate finance give way to a more gloomy sense of what the future may hold, with major unresolved questions about the future of the Kyoto Protocol and its associated emissions trading systems. On top of this, the savage downturn in the Eurozone has seen sharp falls in the price of carbon in the EU Emissions Trading Scheme, in turn leading to significantly reductions in demand for permits from the Clean Development Mechanism (and hence less climate finance for developing countries). The outlook for the CDM appears poor unless the EU commits to a 30% emissions reduction by 2020, which is unlikely.

Fifth and finally, however, it is important to remember the extraordinary potential that sustainable development finance has for driving change, and potentially transforming development prospects.

One vivid illustration of this potential can be seen through comparing global official development assistance (ODA) flows with global climate finance. In 2010, total global ODA came to \$128.7 billion, according to OECD figures, an all time high. One month later, data from the World Bank showed that the value of the global carbon market in the same year had reached \$142 billion – \$13 billion more than ODA.

To be sure, the development impact of this large sum is limited, given that most of the value of the global carbon market remains in developed countries. No developing countries have binding emissions targets – so none of them possess the newly minted tradable assets known as Assigned Amount Units (AAUs, created under the Kyoto Protocol). And while the Clean Development Mechanism was supposed to create a way for poor countries to benefit from emissions trading, these benefits have to date accrued almost exclusively to emerging economies (41% of CDM permits, called Certified Emissions Reductions or CERs, have gone to China, 14% each to Brazil and India, 11% to South Korea, 5% to Mexico, and just 2% to the whole of Africa).

But in a sense, this is the whole point. The poorer a country is, the lower are its per capita emissions – and hence the more money it would stand to make if it had an equitable share of global emissions trading permits (based, for example, on countries having equal per capita entitlements to a global carbon budget). An equitable approach to emissions trading, then – or to REDD, or payments for ecosystem services – would represent a massive shift away from an aid paradigm, and towards a paradigm in which trade drives major new finance for development flows, with *all* countries having powerful incentives to keep their emissions as low as possible.

In this sense, perhaps the biggest failure of the UN system is that (with the odd exception, such as UNCTAD) it has been so slow to recognise the development potential of genuinely equitable financing arrangements, instead remaining stuck in the old mode of soliciting voluntary contributions from donor countries. If the UN were more focused on acting as an architect and an advocate, rather than as a potential beneficiary of the proceeds of new funds, it could potentially have a much more tangible impact on making genuinely sustainable development a reality – not only in financing at the national level, but also moving towards a system for financing the provision of global public goods.

Country level implementation

Finally, there is the role of the UN system in helping to make sustainable development a reality at country level. It is ‘on the ground’ that it becomes clearest why sustainability fundamentally needs to be understood as a mainstreaming issue, not as a separate, stand-alone area of activity – and still less as a synonym for environment.

In broad terms, the sustainability agenda has two main dimensions at country level. First, there is the need to move towards economies and policies that are sustainable for the long term. Second, there is the corresponding need to build resilience to the consequences of current unsustainability – whether this is local, national or international.

Resilience

Start first with resilience, which is arguably the more active of the two agendas at present. Resilience is defined by DFID as “the ability of countries, communities and households to manage change by maintaining or transforming living standards in the face of shocks or stresses”, or (more technically) by four of the leading theorists in the field as “the capacity of a system to absorb disturbance while undergoing change so as to still retain essentially the same function, structure, identity and feedbacks”⁵

In practice, a focus on resilience implies two key areas of work. First, it is clear that a number of specific areas of policy are especially relevant to resilience. Among the most important are social protection, disaster risk reduction, climate adaptation, agriculture (given that three quarters of poor people are rural) and employment / livelihoods.

The second key area of work implied in a resilience agenda relates less to specific policy areas and more to a government’s overall strategic capacity for managing risk and reducing vulnerability. This is partly a technical question: whether the government is able to undertake early warning, whether it has the capacity to innovate under pressure, and whether it has the capacity to work systematically with other governments to reduce risk.

5. <http://www.ecologyandsociety.org/vol9/iss2/art5/>

But it is also a political question, raising fundamental issues about countries' overall political settlements – for example, whether political systems are seen as accountable and responsive, whether processes exist for resolving conflicts peaceably rather than through recourse to violence, whether risk is broadly or narrowly distributed in society, and the extent of inequality in the country.

Significantly, a resilience agenda focused on the areas above would look rather different to the existing MDG-focused agenda, which places far more emphasis on service provision in social sectors like health and education and largely overlooks all of the areas just mentioned. A resilience agenda would also look distinct from a growth agenda focused on private sector, infrastructure and trade regimes (although the extent to which growth was inclusive or not would clearly be relevant for assessing resilience).

Different parts of the UN system already work extensively on individual facets of the agenda sketched out above. Disaster risk reduction, peacebuilding and other preventive approaches have become highly topical in the humanitarian context. Numerous agencies are involved in climate adaptation. Many more are engaged in advocacy for a 'social floor' built on social protection provision and other measures. Some agencies – notably UNDP and OCHA – are also starting to adopt resilience as a core organising principle in their work.

However, what the UN still lacks is an overall coherent approach to resilience that is more than the sum of its parts. The gap between crisis response and humanitarian assistance on one hand and long term development on the other remains marked, for example. Much remains to be done to work out how the UN could improve its support to strategic capacity building for resilience rather than remaining in an comfort zone of project implementation where UN agencies may often lack a clear comparative advantage anyway.

Long term sustainability in economics and policy

The second key dimension of sustainability at the country level centres on the need to move towards economies and policies that are sustainable for the long term. Two of the most important aspects of this long-term sustainability, clearly, are the need for low carbon development, and for green growth more broadly.

Sustainability here is not simply a matter of reducing environmental impacts (where lower income countries arguably have less responsibility to act than developed countries). Instead, the desirability of low carbon and green growth development trajectories centres on the need to avoid 'lock-in' to development paths that may become progressively more expensive as resources become more scarce, and if carbon pricing becomes a larger factor over time.

As with resilience, specific implementation measures in the area of long-term sustainability can be sorted in to two categories: one more sector-specific (for example, on power generation, the built environment, transport policy, and agriculture), and one focused more on strategic capacity building. The example of Ethiopia provides a case in point: the government's 'Climate Resilient Green Economy' strategy is built on a set of priorities in a small number of key sectors, together with measures to upgrade the government's overall coherence and capacity on green economy issues.

As with resilience, numerous UN agencies are pursuing sector-specific projects, in many cases enabled by funding from the Global Environmental Facility (where UNDP and UNEP are both key beneficiaries). But it is less clear that many UN agencies have an overall theory of change about how to build strategic level capacity on sustainable economics – in part, perhaps, because of the lack of countries in which such an approach has really been successfully embedded.

UN system coherence on sustainability

One other issue with the UN's approach to sustainable development implementation in countries centres on the need for improved coherence within the UN system.

As has been widely chronicled, for example in the report of the SG's High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence on development, humanitarian assistance and the environment, UN agencies are currently highly fragmented in their approach to development and sustainability, with high duplication of roles and too little focus on working together.

While the System Coherence Panel set out extensive recommendations on improving the coherence of UN development assistance at country level, it took sustainability and environment into account only minimally in its analysis and recommendations. Accordingly, while the subsequent Delivering As One agenda was rolled out in a number of pilot countries (although far more slowly than recommended in the Panel's report), this did not represent a step change in how the UN factored sustainability into its planning (for example in UNDAFs) or program implementation.

This oversight remains largely unaddressed six years later. While the Global Sustainability Panel could have explored ways of upgrading the UN's country level work in this area, it too failed to do so, instead focusing its green economy recommendations almost entirely at what governments should do rather than on what UN agencies could do to help them, and its institutional recommendations almost exclusively at the global rather than country level.

Notwithstanding these omissions, yet another High Level Panel is probably the last thing the UN system needs, especially with the GSP's report still so recent. However, one obvious coherence issue that could be addressed is the overlap in roles between UNEP (which is currently keen to scale up its country operations dramatically) and UNDP (which regards climate and environment as a potential major funding source, and currently has energy and environment as one of its core 'practice areas').

In fact, there are good grounds for questioning whether *either* of these agencies really has a core comparative advantage in project implementation in the environment sector. Instead, UNEP arguably has much greater competence at the global level, especially on data-gathering and agenda-setting. UNDP, meanwhile, arguably has important abilities in building governments' capacity to deal with sustainability at a more strategic level.

Ultimately, much of the responsibility for working through this conundrum resides with Resident Coordinators, as well as with UNDP in its program as opposed to coordination role. As the UN's work on sustainability in countries becomes more important – especially with the prospect of the launch of the UN's new partnership facility – the UN's cadre of RCs will require close evaluation, to ensure that they have both the knowledge and the skills needed for this changing landscape.

Part 3: The UN's catalytic role on sustainable development

Finally, there is perhaps the UN's most important role in sustainable development – not its formal mandate on data-gathering, supporting intergovernmental decision-making, coordinating finance or even implementing programs on the ground, but its 'soft' role in areas like leadership, agenda-setting and bringing moral pressure to bear on member states.

The political context for sustainable development and the space for UN leadership

The political context for sustainable development has often been extremely dispiriting over the past several years, which have seen numerous disappointments – most obviously in the case of the Copenhagen climate summit, but also including the very weak outcome of Rio+20 and the break-up without *any* outcome of the 2011 Commission on Sustainable Development.

These disappointments have been in keeping with the wider trend in intergovernmental negotiations, with other summit processes – the WTO, the G20 and the G8 – also failing to agree much action despite a period of pronounced international turbulence. These so-called "G Zero" dynamics may persist for some time, given the backdrop of an increasingly multipolar world – although it is also possible that more frequent and severe shocks (economic, environmental, social) might galvanise governments to recognise and act on global interdependence through more ambitious collective action.

As discussed in the last chapter's section on decision-making, the fact that the political conditions are not currently in place for the decisive shift towards long-term thinking is a much bigger problem for sustainable development than how institutions are configured. As a previous analysis argued in 2010,

Most global risks pose complex collective action challenges, yet governments are hamstrung by strong pressures driving them to compete rather than cooperate, and in particular by the fact that

political incentives do not favour risk management.

While vast resources can be brought to bear on fire-fighting obvious crises (such as the credit crunch or Greece's implosion), or when the decision has been taken to fight a war (Iraq, Afghanistan), governments gain minimal credit when they invest successfully in resilience (as in the case of swine flu). They are blamed when they fail to respond to a risk (quite rightly), but find it hard to win the support from society needed to underpin bold and far-sighted action that could prevent such risks from erupting in the first place.⁶

These problems are most acute at international level, where policymakers can come under heavy fire for focusing too much on global issues rather than 'problems at home' – even when it is precisely the failure to manage global risks that has led to problems erupting at home in the first place. (As Mark Malloch Brown has put it, "the dilemma of the modern politician is that the answers are abroad but the votes are at home".⁷)

In the context of sustainability specifically, many politicians (and publics too) lack the political energy to engage seriously with the fundamental questions of equity and fairness that unavoidably arise in any discussion about managing planetary boundaries or other environmental limits.

At present, the 'ecological footprint' of high income countries is three times as high as that of middle income countries, and five times as high as that of low income countries.⁸ Accordingly, if total resource consumption is to be brought within sustainable limits, *and* low income countries are to grow their economies and improve their material standards of living, then the growing 'global middle class' (primarily in developed countries, but increasingly in emerging economies as well) will need to drastically reduce its ecological footprint in order to provide a 'fair share' of limited environmental and resource space for the world's poor.⁹

6. Alex Evans and David Steven, "Organizing for Influence: UK Foreign Policy in an Age of Uncertainty," A Chatham House Report, June 2010.

7. Mark Malloch Brown, *The Unfinished Global Revolution*, (New York: Penguin, 2011).

8. Alex Evans, "Resource Scarcity, Fair Shares and Development," World Wildlife Fund and Oxfam discussion paper, 15 July 2011.

9. Alex Evans, "Resource Scarcity, Fair Shares and Development," World Wildlife Fund and Oxfam discussion paper, 15 July 2011.

However, these issues remain in effect unmentionable in most intergovernmental discussions. In the UN climate process, for example, all the rhetoric about ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ does nothing to change the fact that the question of ‘carbon space’ remains firmly off the table, as does any discussion of how to share out a safe global emissions budget.

In large part this is because emerging economies are intensely wary of any approach that could curtail their right to (fossil fuel intensive) development; but this reluctance to engage is also politically convenient for high-footprint developed countries, most notably the United States. As a result, a largely tacit low ambition consensus often exists between the US and emerging economies – as was clear at Copenhagen.

While emerging economies frequently stress the need for developed countries to move first on reducing their emissions, or engage in rhetoric about themes such as “sustainable production and consumption” (a heavily loaded phrase on the Global Sustainability Panel), the underlying reality is that of a number of countries who are indispensable in global deals on sustainability are avoiding the hard issues and instead falling back on the comfortable belief that technological solutions will emerge in time to reduce global unsustainability trends.

This raises the question of what, if anything, the UN can do to change the current political calculus on these issues, especially given that there are clear limits to how far member states will put up with pressure from the UN to change their domestic policies.

Start first by considering the role of the Secretary-General. Under previous Secretaries-General, sustainable development was rarely a top priority issue on the 38th floor, instead left for the most part to heads of funds, programs and specialised agencies. This was in part a reflection of personalities: But it was also a reflection of capacities within the UN secretariat, where skills in environment and other aspects of long-term sustainability have tended to be relatively poorly represented among the staff.

However, the priority placed on sustainable development has increased dramatically under Ban Ki-moon. Ban convened a head of government level climate change summit in New York within eight months of the start of his term, and thereafter assumed a high profile role in UNFCCC climate talks at both Bali and Copenhagen. More recently, he stated that he regards sustainable development as the top priority of his second term, which has also seen him advocating explicitly for Sustainable Development Goals to be the successor framework for the MDGs, and sponsoring both the Global Sustainability Panel and the Sustainable Energy for All initiative.

What is less clear is whether the exercise of leadership by the UN has been guided by a clear theory of influence, or of how and where the SG can add most value to the debate. Beyond the Secretary-General’s office, a number of other senior UN figures have shown themselves keen to set and lead sustainable development agendas. However, there remains an open question about whether UN leaders’ attempts to shape sustainable development agendas have added up to more than the sum of its parts. What is required is a serious analysis of where the UN and its agencies have value to add. A strategic vision of how the UN can play a catalytic role in a highly contested area is a central test for the UN’s relevance in the future.

Rio+20, the MDG’s and the SDGs

Ultimately, the UN’s success or failure on sustainable development is likely to be judged in large part on outcomes from Rio+20. While the SG has insisted that Rio+20 was a success, arguing that “in Rio, we saw the further evolution of an undeniable global movement for change”, the summit produced very few concrete actions, and appears most unlikely to make a serious impact on headline global sustainability performance indicators.

The one major outcome that did emerge from Rio is the outcome document’s decision to call for a set of Sustainable Development Goals to replace MDGs after 2015. With a little over a year to go before formal proposals are brought to the General Assembly, the SDGs agenda could go either way – and the emphasis placed on the agenda by both UN and national leaders has turned this into a high stakes game.

To be sure, there are powerful arguments for a more holistic and integrated approach to development, with more emphasis not only on green development paths and resilience, but also on the need for a transition towards more sustainable consumption patterns among the 'global middle class' in developed and emerging economies.

However, while the policy rationale for SDGs may be easy to discern, the political space for such an ambitious framework is harder to make out. While the MDGs reflected broad international consensus, no such consensus exists – yet – on the much more contentious ground of sustainable development. Particularly worrying is that the Rio outcome document sets up a General Assembly-led working group to make recommendations on SDGs that appears to be a parallel, rival process to the SG's new High Level Panel on post-2015.

As a result, it looks possible that a major push for SDGs risks ending in either a major bust-up, with no goals agreed; or a set of goals with plenty of rhetoric, but no serious delivery plan to underpin them. Either of these outcomes would represent a major setback for the UN on sustainable development, as well as a serious risk of losing the MDGs' clarity of focus on poverty reduction.

Towards a clearer theory of change

Overall, the UN system comes across as lacking a clear enough theory of change on sustainable development. In particular, the UN is prone to throwing huge amounts of energy at organising supposedly landmark summits that then turn out to be yet another damp squib – which in turn creates a pernicious sense that nothing moves forward on sustainable development. So how can the UN move towards a more robust and effective theory of change on sustainable development, and deploy its leadership and agenda-setting resources more effectively?

First, it should build up its own capacities – including more and better staff with sustainability expertise in the Secretariat, and especially in the SG's office. The UN development system as a whole needs to work as a team and resist fragmentation and competition for funding.

Second, the UN should be clear on where it does *not* have serious capacity to set agendas. One such area, for example, is the field of public communications and outreach, where the UN has both limited expertise and a limited mandate (in that no government would be likely to be very tolerant of any UN campaign that actually proved to be effective in mobilising its citizens to bring pressure against it).

Third, while UN leaders may be limited in what they can do to change domestic political contexts in member states, they can at least be clear in their statements – on and off the record – about what will and won't work.

UN leaders could be much more frank about the fact that that the reason why sustainable development summitry has yielded so few dividends over the past several years is not because member states have not yet found the right decision-making forum for dealing with sustainability issues; rather, it is simply that not enough major powers are yet ready to deal seriously on sustainable development issues.

At the same time, UN leaders can also be clearer about what kind of action is required in order to tackle global sustainability issues (for example stressing the limitations of bottom-up 'pledge and review' approaches to reducing emissions and the ultimate necessity of binding targets and timetables) – as both successive UNFCCC secretariat heads and the SG himself have argued.

The UN could also potentially do more to stress the need to upgrade systems for improving delivery of member states' agreed commitments (whether these are financial commitments, or promises to undertake domestic action such as reducing emissions). For the most part, compliance and enforcement regimes on MEAs are notably weak: under the Kyoto Protocol, for example, parties that fail to meet their targets only receive a 30% fine in the next Commitment Period (if indeed they choose to join at all), and are asked to develop a 'compliance plan'.

The fact that member states make promises on sustainability with their fingers crossed behind their backs remains a key obstacle in many (if not most) multilateral

environmental agreements, and undermines trust for future agreements. Yet discussion of serious treaty enforcement mechanisms remains firmly off the table for most MEAs, with many policymakers saying privately, with no apparent sense of irony that tougher enforcement sanctions would only make for weaker targets.

Setting agendas through building shared awareness

Perhaps most importantly, the whole UN system needs to focus on its role in developing *shared awareness* between senior national and international policymakers – which is arguably its most important role of all in the area of leadership and agenda-setting.

Shared awareness here refers to a common understanding around which coalitions can coalesce and start to build momentum. This depends not merely on accumulation of data and information, but much more fundamentally on analysis, synthesis, resonant narratives and the need for a ‘common language’ about the issue.

The early success of the IPCC represents a case of this kind of theory of change, with the Panel’s scientific expertise contributing to a much broader narrative about climate change. The Stern Review on the Economics of Climate Change was another example, in which the Review’s economic analysis supported the political message that solving climate change would be cheaper than allowing it to go unchecked and trying to adapt to it.

However, while there are many examples of shared awareness emerging through data-rich exercises such as the IPCC and the Stern Review, there are fewer examples of the UN consciously building up shared awareness in summit processes.

This is partly because of how summits are conducted. The American historian William Lind provides a tongue in cheek comparison of high level intergovernmental decision-making in the early nineteenth and twentieth centuries that will resonate with any diplomat who has sat through a full session of the CSD or an all night plenary of the UNFCCC Conference of the Parties, commenting that,

“In 1814, the Congress of Vienna, which faced the task of putting Europe back together after the catastrophic French Revolution and almost a quarter-century of subsequent wars, did what aristocrats usually do. It danced, it dined, it stayed up late playing cards for high stakes, it carried on affairs, usually not affairs of state. Through all its aristocratic amusements, it conversed. In the process, it put together a peace that gave Europe almost a century of security, with few wars and those limited.

In contrast, the conference of Versailles in 1919 was all business. Its dreary, interminable meetings ... reflected the bottomless, plodding earnestness of the bourgeois and the Roundhead. Its product, the Treaty of Versailles, was so flawed that it spawned another great European war in just twenty years. As Kaiser Wilhelm II said from exile in Holland, the war to end war yielded a peace to end peace.”¹⁰

Recent years have seen a number of innovations in summitry that have attempted to address the point that Lind is writing about. The G8 began life in the mid-1970s as a Group of Six, and was explicitly intended to break out of stilted, formalised summitry and move towards a much franker and less formal model of engagement. More recently, the International Commission on Intervention and State Sovereignty managed to build a dramatic degree of shared awareness about its Responsibility to Protect concept very rapidly, which in turn catalysed a coalition that successfully pushed for R2P to be formally adopted at the 2005 World Summit. In the sustainability context, the Major Economies Forum (MEF) has sought to create a more collaborative atmosphere than has always been evident within the UNFCCC.

However, the UN has often seemed to struggle with this looser, more informal, collaborative and coalition-based approach to change, instead staying stuck in the model of set-piece summits. In part, this is the consequence of acute sensitivities about legitimacy and universality on the part of many G77 countries, who are often sensitive about the UN’s (still often very formal) High Level Panel

10. <http://www.lewrockwell.com/lind/lind123.html>

processes. Nevertheless, the need to break out of often stalled or zero sum summit processes is a key requirement for the UN, and an area where it needs to do much more to raise its game.

One key area of sustainable development in which the UN is currently trying to do this is in brokering multi-sectoral partnerships.

The new partnerships agenda

With the failure of summit processes increasingly apparent, various parts of the UN system are increasingly focused on multi-sectoral partnerships.

As already mentioned, the Secretary-General's office has become strongly enthusiastic about the Sustainable Energy for All initiative, a partnership centred around a High Level Group co-chaired by the DG of UNIDO and the Chairman of Bank of America. The High Level Group also includes members from the governments of India, the United States, Brazil, Russia and China; from companies including Eskom, Vestas, Renault-Nissan, Accenture, Siemens, Statoil and Suntech; and from international agencies including the UN Global Compact, OPEC's International Development Fund, the International Renewable Energy Agency, the World Business Council for Sustainable Development, the World Bank, UNDP, UNEP and the World Conservation Union.¹¹

This kind of partnership may be nothing new for networks such as the World Economic Forum or the Clinton Global Initiative, but it represents a significant departure for much of the UN system, especially the SG's office. At the same time, the SG's convening power means that he is well placed to catalyse more such partnerships in the future. Signals suggest that the SG is preparing to do just that: Assistant Secretary-General for Policy Planning Bob Orr is moving to a new ASG role running a UN partnerships facility, for example.

In many ways, the new partnership agenda is an unavoidable requirement arising from the deepening interest in sustainable development at the highest level of

the UN. If the next few years do see an evolution from the relatively narrow agenda set out in the MDGs to the more holistic agenda that might be covered by a new set of SDGs, then it follows that a much broader range of actors will be needed to turn aspiration into reality.

While companies and civil society organisations were clearly relevant to the MDGs (and might perhaps have usefully been more engaged in developing and implementing them), the MDGs were at root a deal between governments. The political bargain they represented was, in effect, that donor countries would increase aid spending (enshrined in the results of the Monterey summit on financing for development in 2001) and move from structural adjustment towards a more country-led approach (enshrined in Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers); while partner countries would focus more spending on 'pro-poor' sectors, in particular social sectors such as health and education.

But on broader sustainable development goals, there are limits to how much progress governments can make on their own. Companies, in particular, will be essential partners, both as investors and as implementers of technology and infrastructure. In this regard, it makes sense to engage them much more fully in multilateral processes. This is an area where the UN system has often fallen down in the past – at Copenhagen, for example, many CEOs responded positively to invitations to attend the summit, but then found themselves relegated to side events rather than seriously engaged in policy discussions.

Many of the most progressive companies on sustainable development – firms such as Unilever, PepsiCo or Anglo-American – have moved a long way from the shallow voluntarism that was the hallmark of the 'corporate social responsibility' agenda of ten or fifteen years ago. Then, CSR was often seen as another name for charitable giving. Now, the most progressive companies are thinking in genuinely systemic terms: looking not only at their own sustainable development performance, but also at their partners throughout their supply chains (an area where WalMart is seen as particularly interesting) and increasingly in how their consumers use their products as well (where

¹¹<http://www.sustainableenergyforall.org/about-us/high-level-group>

Unilever's 'Sustainable Living Plan' is widely viewed as landmark approach in the breadth of its ambition).

At the same time, it is important to be clear about the limitations of partnerships. Monitoring and audit of companies' commitments is often weak: where companies make funding or implementation commitments –for example during the US's 2012 G8 agriculture and food security agenda –many of the public relations benefits are upfront, rather than based on results at the end of the process.

The usual questions also arise about whether companies' actions are really additional to what they would have done anyway, or instead represent a reputational boost for what was in fact business as usual. Some partnerships do not even require companies to commit to specific actions, but rather to abide by often highly general principles (for example the Global Compact's Ten Principles). Most fundamentally, it is important to remember that while progressive companies may be more engaged than ever before, there are many companies much less seriously engaged on sustainable development – and many more not engaged at all.

These limitations may not matter much if partnerships are seen as a way of promoting voluntary action, highlighting best practice, and creating reputational benefits to reward companies genuinely committed on sustainable development. But they matter a great deal if partnerships come to be seen as an alternative, rather than a complement, to more structured policy frameworks that come with a high degree of specificity about who is supposed to do what and when, clarity about how these actions add up to an overall desired outcome, and clear incentives or sanctions to make sure that agreed actions are actually undertaken.

While partnerships represent useful 'no-regrets' actions that can be undertaken while the political context for intergovernmental action is inauspicious, it remains essential not to mistake them for a complete solution. Without a clear overarching framework, voluntary partnerships are extremely unlikely to lead to the

transformative changes required to make economies sustainable.

In this sense, the most fundamental question in the sustainable development partnerships agenda is less how such initiatives can catalyse voluntary action than how they can catalyse diverse political coalitions – of companies, NGOs, governments, international agencies and so on – that can lobby for the international regulatory frameworks, of which global carbon pricing is just the most obvious example, ultimately needed to make sustainable development a reality.

Some partnerships already recognise this fact and enshrine it as the central political reference point that it needs to be. For example, 30 companies including Alstom, BNP Paribas, Credit Agricole, GE Energy, Google, Nike, Sony and Swiss Re issued a joint declaration in 2010 calling on the European Union to set a target of reducing EU emissions by 30% below 1990 levels by 2020, arguing that this would provide them with greater regulatory certainty and clearer economic signals needed for them to increase investment in low carbon technologies.¹²

The UN system has a potentially critical role in catalysing and supporting partnerships. But it needs to recognise the distinction between these politically oriented forms of partnership, geared towards the creation of a comprehensive framework, and those on the other hand constrained to voluntary actions only, with limited influence over companies that choose not to join.

12. <http://www.theclimategroup.org/our-news/news/2010/10/13/businesses-call-for-eu-policy-move-to-30-per-cent-emissions-cuts-by-2020/>

Conclusions

At the end of this review of the UN's performance on sustainable development, what are the key conclusions and areas for further action that stand out? Set out below are ten key areas where the UN could improve its performance.

- 1. Be clear on what sustainable development is – and is not.** Sustainable development is about more than just the environment. That does *not* mean that it includes everything. Instead, sustainability needs to be understood as being primarily about 'future-proofing' development and making sure it is built to last, without the prospect of it becoming a victim of its own success.
- 2. Make sustainability a lens for talking about globalisation's 'long crisis'.** Globalisation's current crisis is in many ways the result of endemic short-term thinking in politics, economics and society: being clearer about this could help the sustainability agenda to break out of its current dead-end environmental ghetto.
- 3. Stop fiddling with the organogram and think harder about function.** As Rio+20 will once again show, the UN and its member states constantly create new institutions, or debate endlessly how to reconfigure UN agencies and how they relate to each other. They should focus much harder on what *functions* the UN needs to deliver on sustainable development, and then work outwards to assess whether there are gaps in its delivery capacity.
- 4. Start building up institutional infrastructure for monitoring planetary boundaries.** One key example of where such a functional gap exists is in monitoring of the nine planetary boundaries identified by the Stockholm Resilience Centre. The UN is better placed than anyone else to build up a global mechanism for monitoring humanity's proximity to these boundaries – which can in turn play an IPCC-like role in setting a political agenda on the need for change.
- 5. Shift to thought leadership and strategic level capacity building rather than project development.** The value added by the UN in project implementation is less clear than it was two decades ago, especially in environment. Rather than competing for climate finance and implementing roles on the ground, many UN agencies would be better off focusing at a higher level – in particular on working with governments to help them take a more strategic approach to green economy and resilience.
- 6. Recognise that the UN's most important role is in building shared awareness.** Important though the UN's remit is in areas like data-gathering, treaty-hosting, financing and implementation, its *most* important role is in helping to set global agendas – all the more so during a time of 'G Zero' dynamics at global level. To play this role to the full, UN leaders need to think much harder about their theory of change and how and where they can exert influence.
- 7. Talk about fair shares – and work with developing countries to secure them.** However much some countries may want to avoid talking about it, progress on sustainable development will not be made without much franker discussion of equity and fairness issues, given the reality of planetary boundaries and environmental limits. The UN needs to do all it can to open up more space for discussion of this emerging agenda – and should work with developing countries to help them push this agenda forward at intergovernmental level.
- 8. Be ready for shocks.** In thinking about its theory of change on sustainable development, the UN needs to focus less on the next big summit and instead get much better at taking advantage of the creative potential of shocks and crises – especially given that current unsustainability can be expected to drive plenty more of them.
- 9. Staff quality is everything.** To be most effective at setting agendas on sustainable development, the UN needs to invest heavily in a skill-set that is hard to define and harder skill to recruit for – one that emphasises

capacities like influencing, advocacy, strategic synthesis, coalition-building and brokering. The UN is less good in these areas than it thinks it is, and needs to get much more serious about the people it hires and how it invests in them thereafter.

10. Understand partnerships primarily as political coalitions. The UN's new enthusiasm for partnerships is welcome – but only if it understands where multi-sectoral partnerships can and cannot add value. The UN needs to understand them not as an alternative to formal intergovernmental decision-making but as a complement to them, and above all as a way of opening up political space for them.



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