



How to build sustainable development goals: integrating human development and environmental sustainability in a new global agenda

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Summary

Combining human development and environmental objectives is firmly on the agenda for a new set of global priorities after 2015. The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons endorsed this approach in the Monrovia communiqué, outlining a vision for a new development agenda that is “people centred and planet sensitive”. The Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals is driven by the Rio+20 conclusions, which defined the priorities for the future as:

Poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development.

Creating the post-2015 global development agenda is about combining the needs and aspirations of people with the imperative to protect the natural resources on which human life depends. The opportunity for the post-2015 agenda is a set of goals which reconciles the two most important trends in recent years – growing wealth but, at the same time, growing environmental degradation. Progress on extreme poverty cannot be put into doubt because of high consumption by people and countries far away, but policies to promote human progress which do not take into account environmental limits will ultimately prove to be self-defeating. As every aspect of human life becomes more and more affected by the changing environment, the urgency of achieving both ends becomes increasingly obvious².

But how, exactly, might these two aspirations be combined in different areas? This paper suggests some criteria to guide both the construction of goals and the nature of the global partnerships which will be central to their implementation.

There are likely to be three things a new framework will try to do. Firstly, it is agreed that there is an imperative to meet the basic needs and rights of the world’s poorest people and eradicate poverty now and into the future. Secondly, in moving beyond extreme poverty, the framework will probably aim to drive improvements in the efficiency of resource use to provide for a growing and more prosperous global population. And thirdly, at a global level, the framework may confront the need to reshape production and consumption patterns so that they are consistent with planetary boundaries well into the future.

The exact way that these two objectives are combined will vary from issue to issue, and we do not yet know which issues will become new goals, but the aspiration at this point is for the whole framework to add up to an integrated approach to promote sustainable human development.

The paper discusses three different ways of integrating human development and environmental sustainability objectives within new goals, depending on the outcome being sought. We do not propose any particular framework, but suggest how goals might be constructed in different areas, both in the areas of outcomes and in the global partnerships which will drive implementation.

² This case has been put compellingly in the paper from Talberth, J.; Suter, S.; Horn-Phathanothai L.; ‘Defining a safe operating space for development in the post-2015 era’, World Resources Institute, March 2013

Goals for a people centred and planet sensitive development agenda

Like the MDGs, any new development framework should create a global consensus to direct political action and resources towards a set of focused priorities for action, and enable all stakeholders to see if progress is being made. Both the High Level Panel and the Open Working group are agreed that this agenda must include both human development and environmental sustainability objectives. The implication is that a new framework will incentivise an end to extreme poverty, provide a road map to a better life for all people, and ensure that sustained human progress takes place within planetary boundaries. This paper suggests some criteria for how these aspirations could be realised in different sectors, in the construction of a set of goals that, when taken together, could comprise a truly integrated sustainable development agenda:

- **Meeting the needs and rights of the world's poorest people:** There are some human development objectives that can be met with minimal impacts on environmental sustainability. For example, education and healthcare, the rule of law and provision of political freedoms, or the expansion of incomes to a basic minimum level, are central to eradicating poverty and can be met with little impact on overall global resource use. The **outcomes** defined in these goals would be mainly human development outcomes, and the **partnerships** would involve mainly technical assistance, knowledge and resource transfers.
- **Supporting sustained prosperity for all:** Other human development objectives, equally important for both poverty eradication and growing prosperity for all, would, if achieved, have a greater impact on global resource use. While providing access to food, energy and water for the world's poorest people should be possible without significant environmental consequences, meeting the aspirations of a growing global middle class in these areas will require new approaches to both production and consumption if planetary boundaries are not to be breached. In order to ensure that progress can be maintained into the future, environmental sustainability would need to be built in from the start. The **outcomes** defined in these goals would be about improving human development, together with more efficient and sustainable resource use – so-called 'triple-win' policies. The **partnerships** would involve both knowledge and resource flows to contribute to improvements in human development outcomes and sustainable resource use, and also commitments from all countries to reduce their use of natural resources, so as to provide the 'environmental space' for others to flourish.
- **Defending progress into the future:** A third category of goals might be agreed which seek to protect the core planetary resources on which progress everywhere depends, and which are therefore critically important for the sustained prosperity of this and future generations. The **outcomes** defined in these goals would be mainly about promoting global public goods and protecting key planetary boundaries. The **partnerships** would involve joint commitments to promote the sustainable use of natural resources and improve their equitable distribution.

The selection of goals in the post-2015 agenda will depend on a process of political negotiation between governments, drawing on the opinions and aspirations of people everywhere as expressed through consultations. It is quite possible, but by no means guaranteed, that a combination of all three types of issue will be covered in a new agenda.

Whatever the final list, the goals and targets eventually chosen will embody different aspirations for human development outcomes, and be shaped by different environmental threats and challenges, resulting in different types of global partnerships being required for implementation.

Meeting the needs and rights of the world's poorest people

A first category of human development objectives comprises those that can be met with minimal impacts on environmental sustainability. Certain services such as education and healthcare, the provision of political freedoms, or the expansion of incomes to a basic minimum level, are central to eradicating poverty, and can be met with little impact on overall global resource use. This list corresponds to the 'social floor' identified in the influential paper from Kate Raworth of Oxfam proposing a 'doughnut' comprising a social floor and planetary ceiling within which humanity would need to allocate resources and achieve human development outcomes (Raworth, 2012).

Among the ferment of ideas about new issues and ways of thinking about goals, it is important to remember that the basic human needs at the heart of the current MDGs have not gone away (UNDG, 2013). It is clear from the global MY World survey that education and health are consistently ranked as among the highest priorities for people in low-income countries, together with the job opportunities which, with social safety nets, are essential to ensuring higher incomes. High quality and widely accessible education and health services, together with a safety net in the form of cash transfer programmes, have been a core part of policies for inclusion and tackling inequalities in almost every high income country and increasingly in middle income countries. In the post-2015 context, one would probably add personal security and political participation as key aspirations of poor people and a core part of ending poverty.

Making progress on these issues will involve decisions by the governments of low and middle income countries to provide the services or other opportunities required to meet the goals. For some, mainly low-income, countries, there would also be responsibilities for development partners to assist with resources and knowledge. It is here that the detail of partnerships around aid flows, and other development finance issues, are likely to be key to reaching agreement on and implementing a new agenda.

In the construction of this category of goals, the world will need to learn the lessons from the most successful experiences of poverty eradication in recent years and the innovative policies that have been instrumental in this success. Most of these examples are from middle income countries: Brazil and Mexico have pioneered large-scale cash transfers, for example, and China and India are currently developing plans for universal health care systems.

There is a link between these goals and environmental outcomes: individual health, for example, can be affected by changing disease patterns caused by climate change, or by environmentally destructive practices such as air pollution. However, this is an argument for having a coherent framework which deals with environmental issues in other goals, rather than an argument for incorporating every issue within every goal. While no policy change can ever be entirely environmentally neutral, these goals are ones which can be achieved now and into the future with little direct impact on resource use. It is therefore appropriate for the goals, targets and indicators in this type of goal to reflect mainly the human development objectives, and the partnerships required to deliver these.

Model goal

Define human development outcome (possible framing around 'getting to zero', or improvements in human development outcomes for all countries) for goal.

- **Outcome** targets for over what timeframe different aspects of that goal should be achieved (e.g. quality and access for education, services and disease areas for health, income per day for income goal), could include targets for equity including gender equality.
- Possible **partnership** targets for contributions to achieving that goal (e.g. development finance, global level policy change, public private partnerships, knowledge transfer and south-south cooperation)
- **Indicators** appropriate to monitoring progress on targets (e.g. stunting for health goal, learning outcomes for education goal, \$1.25 or \$2 a day poverty for income goal, foreign aid as percentage of GNI for global contributions to goal)

Suggested areas covered by this type of goal: health, education, social safety nets, personal security, political voice

Supporting sustained prosperity for all

Other human development objectives, equally important for both poverty eradication and growing prosperity for all, would, if achieved, have a greater impact on global resource use into the future. While providing access to food, energy and water for the world's poorest people should be possible without significant environmental consequences, meeting the aspirations of a growing global middle class will require new approaches to both production and consumption if planetary boundaries are not to be breached. The creation of sustainable pathways to meet these objectives would need to be built in from the very start.

This second category contains the areas where the human and the environmental objectives are most closely interwoven. If properly framed, the changes incentivised by these goals will be felt in all countries, though in very different ways. It is here that the objectives of increasing the resources used by some, enhancing the efficiency of resource use everywhere, and reducing the resources used by others elsewhere in the world, could come together in single goals.

There is an overlap between this and first category, in that for almost every human development objective meeting the needs of very poorest could be done with minimal impact on overall resource use, given the very low starting points for resource consumption. However, the difference between this and goals in the first group would be that once a minimal level of consumption was reached, increasing aspirations would quickly start to make a bigger demand on global resources. It is therefore important that sustainable pathways are developed from the start, in order to avoid significant challenges later on.

This set of goals would not be more or less important than the first set, and the issues would be no less central to ending poverty. Ensuring adequate and nutritious food for all, is, for example, right at the heart of a poverty agenda, as is primary education. But a goal on food would have quite different implications for environmental sustainability than one on education, and it is this empirical fact which should be recognised in how human development and environmental objectives are combined in different parts of the future development agenda. Ensuring food security for all now and in the future will require that environmental objectives around greater efficiency of land and water use be built into development plans, while universal primary education is arguably one of the objectives in the first group, which can be implemented without special targets on natural resource use.

Food, water, and energy are just three areas where human development outcomes and environmental sustainability must be considered together, as the population (in some countries) increases, and living standards rise. By 2030, the world will need at least 50% more food, while the demand for land faces additional pressures from biofuels and carbon sequestration (World Bank, 2007). The overall demand for water will have increased by 30% and two-thirds of the world's population are likely to live in water-stressed areas (The Water Resources Group, 2009; Bailey, 2011). The world will need 45% more energy, and at the same time will have had to achieve deep cuts in greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions to avoid disastrous climate change – at present only 13% of energy comes from renewable sources (International Energy Agency, 2011). These pressures will push the world further towards – or over – some planetary boundaries, and the consequences, in terms of climate change and resource depletion will, in turn, make progress against poverty harder, and may even send it into reverse.

Goals in this type of area will need to do three things: increase access by some people to the resources used for consumption and production, incentivise all governments to develop resource-efficient pathways for future consumption and production, and incentivise some governments to reduce the resources consumed in current production and consumption patterns.

Which countries would need to take which actions is likely to be at the heart of the politics of agreeing this type of goal. In the case of the goal on Sustainable Energy for All, the most widely known of the proposals in this area, the detail on which countries are responsible for which parts of the goal is left unspecified. The target of achieving universal energy access is clearly designed for those countries where people currently lack access, but the target for increasing the share of renewables in global energy outputs could be achieved through many different combinations of national level actions by different countries. The detail would need to be worked out through separate negotiation after the agreement of the overall goal and target. This could be a strength, if it led to a staged approach to negotiating very difficult issues, or a weakness, if it created a situation where aspirations were agreed but actions did not follow. A carefully graduated set of responsibilities would be needed to maintain a political consensus on this type of goal – it is possible that this could take several years to agree.

However the division of responsibility is worked out, the key feature of this category of goals would be that achievement would not be possible without both human development and environmental sustainability targets being achieved.

Model goal

Define sustainable development outcome (e.g. 'sustainable energy for all'; 'sustainable jobs for all', 'sustainable water for all') for goal.

- ***Outcome*** targets for timeframe and level of achievement of human development component (e.g. date for universal energy or water/sanitation access, date for achievement of level of formal sector employment, etc).
- ***Outcome*** targets for timeframe and level of achievement in increasing the efficiency of resource use (e.g. reducing the energy input for food production)
- ***Outcome*** targets for timeframe and level of achievement in reducing overall resource use (e.g. date for doubling share of renewable in global energy supply, date for halving the carbon intensity of economic growth at global level, date for reducing global per capita freshwater use)

- **Partnership** targets for global contributions towards implementation (e.g. level of ODA/climate finance for sustainable infrastructure projects; private sector financing of sustainable infrastructure projects, elimination of fossil fuel subsidies, technology transfer).
- **Indicators** to measure progress on targets.

Suggested areas covered by this kind of goal: infrastructure (energy, water, transport, ICT), economic growth and jobs, food and nutrition (including land use)

Defending progress into the future

Even if poverty eradication is achieved and economic transformation well underway in every country, there is a risk that human progress everywhere could be undermined by environmental pressures – either by catastrophic climate shocks, or by the gradual impact of increased pressure on resources. Some argue that defending progress into the future by building in goals focused solely on environmental boundaries should also form part of a new global development agenda. If such goals were agreed, and this is by no means certain, it would require quite a different set of objectives and partnerships to goals in the first two groups above. Rather than a focus on human development objectives for current generations, these goals would bring attention to bear on a range of areas where global agreements are required to safeguard key common resources which do not come under the jurisdiction of individual governments, primarily the world’s oceans and the world’s atmosphere.

Both issues are the subject of ongoing, difficult, global negotiations, and it is unlikely that new goals could break the political deadlock. However, if a new set of goals is to provide a complete road map to sustainable human development, then it could aspire to also address the problem of managing global resources in common.

A global goal in these areas would have environmental sustainability objectives, focused on promoting global public goods in the area of resource use and planetary boundaries. Implementing this type of goal would require all countries to agree an equitable way of managing common global resources, and ensuring that individual and collective use of the resources contributed the maximum possible to improving human welfare.

Model goal

Define environmental sustainability outcome (keep global warming within 2 degrees Centigrade, maintain biodiversity in the world’s oceans)

- **Outcome** targets at global level (e.g. reduction in carbon emissions, nitrogen concentration in the oceans, replenishment of fish stocks)
- **Partnership** targets for global action to make this possible, including climate finance and technology transfer

For some issues, like climate, these goals could serve as placeholders with the numerical targets in ‘square brackets’ awaiting global agreements made in other fora.

Suggested areas covered by this type of goal: climate change, ecosystems (oceans, rivers, forests) and the biodiversity resources contained therein

Conclusion

Tackling poverty eradication and environmental sustainability simultaneously through one set of goals offers an opportunity to address the two biggest global problems of the age. The two are intertwined, yet the obligations and actions required of different stakeholders in achieving them, are very different.

The opportunity for the post-2015 agenda is a set of goals which reconciles the two most important trends in recent years – growing wealth but growing environmental degradation. This would be an agenda which sets the world firmly on course for the eradication of extreme poverty, but in the context of limited resources which need to be shared out fairly between countries and between people. Progress on extreme poverty cannot be put into doubt because of high consumption by people and countries far away, but policies to eradicate poverty which do not take into account environmental limits will ultimately prove to be self-defeating.

This paper offers a practical way of thinking about the challenge and breaking it down into distinct sets of issues. The resource implications of different poverty reduction objectives are very different, and this should be reflected in new goals. The success or failure of all goals will ultimately depend on national level action. But some issues require little of the global community apart from resources or knowledge transfer, while others require far more in the way of reduced resource use in order to allow for increased consumption among the poorest. In addition, there are some common global challenges which need to be addressed if human progress everywhere is to be maintained, and which could, potentially, be addressed in a new agreement if the politics allows. These distinctions should be reflected in a new agreement. Framed in the right way and with sufficient political support behind it, a post-2015 agreement could define a whole new global approach to human progress, one which is appropriate both to the realities of global politics and of the challenges we face.

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