



# Contents

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Dedication .....	ix
Acknowledgments .....	xi
Foreword.....	xix
<i>David W. Orr</i>	

## INTRODUCTION

1 Failing Governance, Unsustainable Planet .....	3
<i>Michael Renner and Tom Prugh</i>	
2 Understanding Governance .....	20
<i>D. Conor Seyle and Matthew Wilburn King</i>	

## POLITICAL GOVERNANCE

3 Governance, Sustainability, and Evolution .....	31
<i>John M. Gowdy</i>	
4 Ecoliteracy: Knowledge Is Not Enough .....	41
<i>Monty Hempel</i>	
5 Digitization and Sustainability.....	53
<i>Richard Worthington</i>	
6 Living in the Anthropocene: Business as Usual, or Compassionate Retreat? .....	63
<i>Peter G. Brown and Jeremy J. Schmidt</i>	
7 Governing People as Members of the Earth Community .....	72
<i>Cormac Cullinan</i>	
8 Listening to the Voices of Young and Future Generations.....	82
<i>Antoine Ebel and Tatiana Rinke</i>	
9 Advancing Ecological Stewardship Via the Commons and Human Rights .....	91
<i>David Bollier and Burns Weston</i>	

10	Looking Backward (Not Forward) to Environmental Justice . . . . .	105
	<i>Aaron Sachs</i>	
11	The Too-Polite Revolution: Understanding the Failure to Pass U.S. Climate Legislation . . . . .	115
	<i>Petra Bartosiewicz and Marissa Miley</i>	
12	China’s Environmental Governance Challenge . . . . .	129
	<i>Sam Geall and Isabel Hilton</i>	
13	Assessing the Outcomes of Rio+20 . . . . .	138
	<i>Maria Ivanova</i>	
14	How Local Governments Have Become a Factor in Global Sustainability . . . . .	152
	<i>Monika Zimmermann</i>	
<b>ECONOMIC GOVERNANCE</b>		
15	Scrutinizing the Corporate Role in the Post-2015 Development Agenda . . . . .	165
	<i>Lou Pingeot</i>	
16	Making Finance Serve the Real Economy . . . . .	174
	<i>Thomas I. Palley</i>	
17	Climate Governance and the Resource Curse . . . . .	181
	<i>Evan Musolino and Katie Auth</i>	
18	The Political-Economic Foundations of a Sustainable System . . . . .	191
	<i>Gar Alperovitz</i>	
19	The Rise of Triple-Bottom-Line Businesses . . . . .	203
	<i>Colleen Cordes</i>	
20	Working Toward Energy Democracy . . . . .	215
	<i>Sean Sweeney</i>	
21	Take the Wheel and Steer! Trade Unions and the Just Transition . . . . .	228
	<i>Judith Gouverneur and Nina Netzer</i>	
<b>CONCLUSION</b>		
22	A Call to Engagement . . . . .	241
	<i>Tom Prugh and Michael Renner</i>	
	Notes . . . . .	253
	Index . . . . .	285

# Assessing the Outcomes of Rio+20

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Ecosystems and economies are intertwined, and international cooperation is critical to addressing cross-border threats to the integrity of habitats and biomes. Economic and political effects of national policy decisions can reverberate around the world within days. Simply put, sustainability cannot be achieved without integrating environment and development at the international level. This was recognized as early as the 1970s, when governments convened at the landmark Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment to create the architecture for global environmental governance, defining sustainability as an economy “in equilibrium with basic ecological support systems” and recognizing the confluence of environmental, economic, and social concerns.<sup>1</sup>

But 40 years later, global environmental, economic, and social problems have become more prominent, acute, and urgent. Consequently, governments and citizens are putting growing pressure on international institutions to deliver results as effectively, efficiently, equitably, and quickly as possible. In 2012, nearly 50,000 people representing governments, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), businesses, and citizenry from all over the world assembled in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for the largest-ever global environmental summit—the United Nations (UN) Conference on Sustainable Development, also known as Rio+20—to review accomplishments and reinforce commitments.

Weary of empty political promises, analysts predicted the breakdown of Rio+20 months before it started and deemed it a “colossal failure of leadership and vision” immediately upon its conclusion. Greenpeace dubbed the event’s 50-page outcome document, *The Future We Want*, “the longest suicide note in history.” Upon careful examination, however, it is clear that while the conference did not create a collective global vision for a radically different world, its outcomes are nonetheless significant and will likely shape global governance in the immediate decades to come.<sup>2</sup>

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Rio+20 resulted in important conceptual, institutional, and operational outcomes that will have a direct impact in the context of the post-2015 development agenda. Conceptually, the conference created a new narrative of sustainable development, overcoming some limitations while reinforcing others. It also rekindled countries' political commitment to sustainable development, at least in rhetoric. Institutionally, the event created a new platform for integrating economic prosperity, social inclusion, and environmental stewardship through the reorganization of relevant UN structures. Operationally, it stimulated a slew of voluntary commitments from governments and other actors, with pledges exceeding \$513 billion. Countries also agreed to create a set of Sustainable Development Goals that will guide action in the coming decades.

### Conceptual Outcomes: The Evolving Sustainable Development Narrative

Global narratives about the environment and sustainable development play an important role in shaping country priorities at the national level. Before the groundbreaking Stockholm Conference in 1972, for example, environmental ministries existed in only a handful of countries. The creation that year of the UN Environment Programme (UNEP) as the anchor institution for the global environment provided the conceptual vision and the support mechanism that enabled countries around the world to establish and equip such ministries.

Importantly, the prevailing view at the time saw protection of the environment as a precondition for development. Even though development was a clear priority for many countries, especially those that had recently gained independence, governments agreed that “the protection and improvement of the human environment is a major issue which affects the well-being of peoples and economic development throughout the world; it is the urgent desire of the peoples of the whole world and the duty of all governments.” Over the ensuing decades, however, the focus shifted from environment as a precondition for development to development as a precondition for environmental protection.<sup>3</sup>

The Rio Earth Summit in 1992 confirmed sustainable development as the new aspiration, moving the needle of political priorities to the development dimension. Subsequent international summits—the Millennium Summit in 2000 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002—shifted the focus further in the direction of development as a precursor to environmental protection. At Rio+20, in 2012, governments stated that “eradicating poverty [is] the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development,” rather than poverty alleviation being an outcome of sustainable development. They also com-

mitted, however, to a new set of Sustainable Development Goals, opening the door to a rethinking of priorities.<sup>4</sup>

The Sustainable Development Goals will likely enter into force at the end of the 15-year period of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which governments adopted in 2000 and which have shaped the human development agenda in the UN system. The eight MDGs address multiple dimensions of human well-being—with the main goal to eradicate extreme poverty and hunger—and incorporate policy areas ranging from education and health to gender equality, environmental sustainability, and the creation of a global partnership. (See Table 13–1.) One of the eight goals (#7) is related to environment; however, because it is articulated separately from the rest and in very broad terms that are difficult to monitor and measure, it reinforces the false dichotomy of environment versus development rather than promoting an integrated, holistic approach to sustainable development.<sup>5</sup>

The MDGs illustrate the power of global goals to provide meaning, purpose, and guidance, which can then translate into political attention and action. By offering a structure to focus advocacy, spur motivation, and target investment, the MDGs have improved the ability of countries to meet many of the targets. For example, extreme poverty has been reduced across all regions, including sub-Saharan Africa; worldwide, the share of people living on less than \$1.25 a day dropped from 47 percent in 1990 to 24 percent in 2008, reflecting improved economic conditions for some 800 million people. The share of people with access to improved sources of water increased from 76 percent in 1990 to 89 percent in 2010, achieving the MDG target of halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water.<sup>6</sup>

Yet the MDGs also highlight the challenges that global goals present. The narrow focus on a limited set of goals restricts attention to only a select few issues and might distort risk and investment preferences. For example, the main focus of the MDGs is on traditional socioeconomic development, and the goals do not explicitly recognize the interconnections among the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, and environmental). The environmental goal, #7—to “ensure environmental sustainability”—is not only distinctly separate from the other goals, but it includes only three environmental issues as targets—biodiversity, water, and urbanization.

The MDGs also have become the overarching development strategy steering investment (through official development assistance or other funds) into sectors identified as important in these eight global goals. Other country priorities therefore might be neglected. Moreover, because the MDGs apply only to developing countries, they do not recognize the monetary and

**Table 13–1. UN Millennium Development Goals and Targets**

<b>Goal</b>	<b>Target(s)</b>
1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1 a day.</li> <li>• Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people.</li> <li>• Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger.</li> </ul>
2. Achieve universal primary education	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ensure that, by 2015, children everywhere, boys and girls alike, will be able to complete a full course of primary schooling.</li> </ul>
3. Promote gender equality and empower women	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Eliminate gender disparity in primary and secondary education, preferably by 2005, and in all levels of education no later than 2015.</li> </ul>
4. Reduce child mortality	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.</li> </ul>
5. Improve maternal health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reduce by three-quarters the maternal mortality ratio.</li> <li>• Achieve universal access to reproductive health.</li> </ul>
6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the spread of HIV/AIDS.</li> <li>• Achieve, by 2010, universal access to treatment for HIV/AIDS for all those who need it.</li> <li>• Have halted by 2015 and begun to reverse the incidence of malaria and other major diseases.</li> </ul>
7. Ensure environmental sustainability	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources.</li> <li>• Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss.</li> <li>• Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation.</li> <li>• By 2020, to have achieved a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.</li> </ul>
8. Develop a global partnership for development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Develop further an open, rule-based, predictable, non-discriminatory trading and financial system.</li> <li>• Address the special needs of least-developed countries.</li> <li>• Address the special needs of landlocked developing countries and small island developing states.</li> <li>• Deal comprehensively with the debt problems of developing countries.</li> <li>• In cooperation with pharmaceutical companies, provide access to affordable essential drugs in developing countries.</li> <li>• In cooperation with the private sector, make available benefits of new technologies, especially information and communications.</li> </ul>

Source: See endnote 5.

moral responsibility of industrialized countries and offer a weak approach to addressing issues of social justice, equality, vulnerability, and exclusion.<sup>7</sup>

With the MDGs set to expire in 2015, the Rio+20 conference engaged governments in debates about the post-2015 development agenda. Governments reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable development as the overarching goal but, in a positive step, shifted to a more integrated vision of what this entails. The Rio+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*, substituted the traditional definition of sustainable development as having three distinct “pillars”—environmental, economic, and social—with a new narrative of the three “dimensions” of sustainable development. This change recognizes the fluidity and interconnectedness among these aspects, and opens up opportunities for more integrative forms of governance.

Still, there are problems. Close analysis of the text of *The Future We Want* reveals that the environment has almost disappeared as an independent concept. The term “environment” (and its multiple variants) is mentioned 70 times in the 50-page document, and 21 of those mentions occur in the catch-all descriptor “social, economic, environmental.” “Development,” on the other hand, appears 635 times, 239 of those in the phrase “sustainable development.” The environmental discourse is therefore absorbed by, rather than integrated into, the development narrative.

The “green economy,” one of the framework themes of Rio+20, fueled expectations for a radical restructuring of the global political economy that would reconcile economic growth with planetary boundaries, account for natural capital, and ensure planetary stewardship. The concept, however, elicited criticism both from countries striving toward capitalism (which regarded the “green economy” mandate as a threat to their national development strategies) and from countries rejecting capitalism (which saw it as the commodification of nature). While *The Future We Want* mentions the green economy as one tool among many in the quest for sustainability, it also acknowledges the need to move beyond gross domestic product (GDP) as a measure of human well-being. Thus, ideas about new indicators of progress and prosperity gained ground and legitimacy.

## **Institutional Outcomes: Reforming the Institutions for Environment and Sustainable Development**

The United Nations was created in 1945 without an environmental body. Almost 30 years later, in Stockholm, governments established UNEP as the anchor institution for the global environment, and, another 20 years later, they created the UN Commission on Sustainable Development. Ultimately, however, the need to reform the institutional architecture for environment and sustainable development became a political priority, as “ever-growing concern over sustainable development and the prolifera-



tion and fragmentation of environmental initiatives eroded the embracing mandate of UNEP for environmental governance.” Institutional reform was one of two top agenda items at Rio+20 and one of the conference’s most significant outcomes.<sup>8</sup>

Rio+20 concluded a 15-year reform effort that had contemplated the need to change UNEP’s institutional status from being a subsidiary organ of the UN General Assembly to being a specialized agency. UN specialized agencies—such as the World Health Organization, the International Labour Organization, and the Food and Agriculture Organization—are autonomous bodies set up independently and linked to the United Nations through special agreements in accordance with Articles 57 and 63 of the UN Charter. They are established through the adoption and ratification of intergovernmental treaties, and membership is universal, meaning that any country can join. Specialized agencies do not receive any funding from the UN regular budget, and their budgets instead include mandatory financial contributions assessed according to a particular scale.

In contrast, subsidiary organs are created under Article 22 of the UN Charter to address emerging problems and issues in international economic, social, and humanitarian fields. They have various formal designations—programmes, funds, boards, committees, commissions—and governance structures. They are created through a UN General Assembly resolution, and membership is limited and geographically representative. Funding comes exclusively from voluntary contributions, although some subsidiary organs may receive a small portion of funding from the UN regular budget. Subsidiary organs work directly through the United Nations, which gives them access to UN administrative and security services as well as a direct relationship with other UN offices and subsidiary organs.<sup>9</sup>

Although governments decided at Rio+20 to retain UNEP’s formal status as a subsidiary organ, they did create a new institutional structure that combines some key attributes of a specialized agency while preserving the flexibility and advantages of a subsidiary organ. This approach offers several key advantages with regard to membership, mandate, financing, and delivery of services to stakeholders:

**First, changing UNEP’s governance structure gave it greater formal authority.** With the creation of a new governing body comprising all UN member states—the United Nations Environment Assembly—UNEP became the only subsidiary organ in the United Nations with universal membership. Although, legally, UNEP always had the authority to engage with the UN system, governments, and civil society on environmental issues, in practice it had not always marshaled the clout necessary to command political attention and financial support, due in part to a legal mismatch in membership. With a limited membership of 58 states, UNEP faced chal-

lenges in claiming authority over global environmental conventions related to climate, biodiversity, etc. whose legal bodies, the Conferences of the Parties, comprised nearly all UN member states. Expanding UNEP's membership was a logical, feasible, and potentially effective legal measure to upgrade UNEP's institutional structure and authority.

**Second, preserving UNEP's status as a subsidiary body allowed it to access greater, and more predictable, resources from the UN regular budget.** One of the main arguments for transforming UNEP into a specialized agency was that this would help bring greater stability and predictability of financial resources. Rio+20, however, resulted in an innovative use of an existing financing source to serve the same function. Affirming the need for "secure, stable, adequate and predictable financial resources for UNEP," the Rio+20 outcome document and subsequent General Assembly resolutions committed contributions from the UN regular budget to UNEP's core operational needs, in a manner that adequately reflects UNEP's administrative and management costs. Governments also acknowledged that the budgetary resources that UNEP receives should correspond to the scope of its program of work and pledged to increase their voluntary contributions.<sup>10</sup>

**Third, the review of UNEP's functions and mandate led to a recognition of the need to expand UNEP's role.** Governments recognized that UNEP's engagement on the ground needed to be expanded so that it can play a greater role in helping countries build capacity and implement environmental commitments. Through these reforms, UNEP's role in global environmental governance evolved from a primarily normative role to an implementation role, as countries requested more comprehensive on-the-ground programs and greater regional and sub-regional presence from UNEP.<sup>11</sup>

**Fourth, UNEP was mandated to improve its delivery of a range of measures beneficial to diverse stakeholders.** These measures, as outlined in the outcome document, included: promotion of a "strong science-policy interface" in order to allow for scientific input and assistance during global decision-making processes; dissemination of environmental information and raising of public awareness; delivery of capacity-building and technology access to developing countries; and engagement with nongovernmental actors (called "major groups and stakeholders" in the UN context) in a more effective, meaningful way.<sup>12</sup>

All of this was accomplished without a lengthy treaty negotiation process that would have been required for changing UNEP's status to a specialized agency. Although a fair assessment of the effectiveness of these reforms can be undertaken only in the future, the reinforcement of UNEP's role as the leading global authority for the environment, and the political le-

gitimacy conferred by all member states, are indicators of an improved, revitalized institution.

In the sustainable development field, institutional reform resulted in the abolishment of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The CSD fell short in fulfilling its mandate to review national plans for sustainable development and to set an integrated agenda for the UN system, and it was unable to engage all UN agencies and bodies in considering environment and economic issues, as was envisioned at the 1992 Rio Summit. Analysts criticized the CSD as a “talk shop” that delivered few sustainable development outcomes. UN agencies and civil society observers noted that “the Commission progressively lost its lustre and its effectiveness” and that the CSD itself was unable to follow up and implement its own decisions.<sup>13</sup>

Ultimately, the CSD failed in its core mission of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development and did not produce the effective and timely global responses that were necessary. Through the CSD, however, multi-stakeholder dialogues became accepted UN practice, as the annual two-week sessions in New York brought together government officials and numerous other stakeholders to deliberate on issues such as forests, energy, water, and oceans. Although these sessions attracted mostly environmental officials rather than the envisioned cross-section of development, trade, environment, agriculture, energy, and foreign affairs ministers, they created a culture of engagement with civil society. As some observers point out, “without the Commission, sustainable development would not be at the stage of maturity where it is today” and the CSD was “instrumental in launching initiatives and introducing new topics into the intergovernmental debates.”<sup>14</sup>

At Rio+20, governments decided to replace the CSD with a High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development. The purpose of this new entity is to build on the work of the CSD and to follow up on the implementation of sustainable development. Starting in September 2013, the Forum aims to convene heads of state and government every four years at the UN General Assembly, as well as to convene ministers annually under the aegis of the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). The Forum’s main goal is to provide political leadership for the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. To this end, it is intended to work with UN agencies to support implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and to productively engage major groups and stakeholders.<sup>15</sup>

Three main innovations characterize the new High-Level Political Forum: universal membership, greater visibility, and improved accountability. The Forum involves heads of state and government of all countries in the design and approval of sustainable development policies across governance

levels. Starting in 2016, the Forum will conduct regular reviews of implementation of sustainable development commitments taken by states and UN agencies. Given that it is a newly established institution, the Forum's effectiveness and relevance will become apparent only in the next few years as it demonstrates its ability to engage member states to take action nationally and sister UN entities to take more coherent action internationally. Ultimately, the Forum will be judged by its successes in reducing the UN system's current fragmentation of environmental governance and in avoiding duplication of effort. More importantly, the Forum will have the important task of turning the principle of sustainable development into an actionable, concrete, and specific policy agenda.

The close relationship between the High-Level Political Forum and ECOSOC is not an accident: ECOSOC is one of the main bodies in the UN system tasked with shaping the economic and social development agenda and coordinating the activities of numerous agencies and funds. Although ECOSOC's involvement in the environmental field has not been very clear, at Rio+20, governments committed to strengthening its role in coordinating social, economic, and environmental policies across different institutions, thereby making it an important environmental player. The end result of the strengthening process of ECOSOC and the role of the Forum in helping it to advance the sustainable development agenda is not yet clear, and cooperation with environmental institutions such as UNEP will be key to providing a more coherent set of objectives and policies in the future.<sup>16</sup>

## Operational Outcomes: Voluntary Commitments and Sustainable Development Goals

At the operational level, Rio+20 had two main outcomes. First, countries, companies, and citizens articulated a series of voluntary commitments to promote action around sustainable development. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon described the negotiated intergovernmental agreements as the “foundation” and the voluntary commitments as the “bricks and cement” in the global governance architecture, emphasizing the importance of both. Second, governments committed to create a set of Sustainable Development Goals to “address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages.” Governments did not articulate the specific set of goals during the conference, but they stated in the outcome document the broad principles for global goal development. The challenge is to connect the articulation of the SDGs with the vision for followup to the MDGs after they expire in 2015.

Inspired by the system of partnerships that emerged from the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, Rio+20 introduced a new mechanism—voluntary commitments by governments, corporations, NGOs, and

citizens—to encourage the implementation of sustainable development policies. The UN has begun to provide greater structure around this new set of unilateral pledges to action by launching the Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform and the Sustainable Development in Action Registry. Close to 700 commitments totaling more than \$513 billion were made at Rio, and, as of September 1, 2013, the Action Registry included 1,412 voluntary commitments, partnerships, initiatives, and networks for sustainable development created since the 2002 World Summit.<sup>17</sup>

In a comprehensive report assessing progress on these commitments, the Natural Resources Defense Council notes that about 58 percent were made by the private sector and civil society, 30 percent by governments, and 12 percent by UN organizations—with a total value estimated at \$637 billion, nearly 1 percent of annual global GDP. This sum encompasses investments pledged in projects that are both internal and external to the actors making the commitments. For example, Microsoft committed to becoming carbon neutral by the end of 2013, an outcome it claims to have achieved. Bank of America pledged \$50 billion in investments in renewable energy, energy access, and energy efficiency projects over a decade. The timelines for the commitments vary, but the majority—51 percent of the 1,412 commitments—aim to deliver results by 2015 or earlier, reflecting the goal of meeting the MDGs. The target deadline for another 16 percent of the commitments is 2022, a decade after Rio+20.<sup>18</sup>

The highest number of voluntary commitments, close to 300, is in the area of education. This reflects the launch at Rio+20 of the UN's Higher Education Sustainability Initiative, which aims “to get institutions of higher education to commit to teach sustainable development concepts, encourage research on sustainable development issues, green their campuses, and support sustainability efforts in their communities.” The second most popular area for voluntary commitments is the green economy, where primarily governments have made pledges to action. In terms of resources, the most significant Rio+20 commitment was for sustainable transportation, where eight multilateral development banks pledged \$175 billion in loans and grants to developing countries over 10 years to enhance sustainable transport in urban areas. A year after this commitment, some \$17 billion, or 10 percent of the pledge amount, had been approved for projects.<sup>19</sup>

Among the major challenges for voluntary commitments, both by governments and by other actors, are accountability and the assessment of results. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs has proposed a voluntary accountability framework based on three pillars: 1) annual reporting, 2) updated registry, and 3) third-party independent review. Functional institutional arrangements will be critical. Moreover, an engaging public discussion about the voluntary commitments will make them more

visible, likely leading to greater pressure for regular reporting and reviews and, ultimately, to their fulfillment at various levels of governance.

In another key outcome, Rio+20 resolved to establish an intergovernmental process to define a new set of Sustainable Development Goals, taking into account basic human needs, environmental sustainability, social equity, and governance tools. In doing so, governments recognized the relevance of development goals as useful instruments to frame action toward sustainable development. Although they did not elaborate on the specific goals, they agreed on a set of general characteristics—specifically, that the SDGs be comprehensive, universal, limited in number, ambitious, and easy to communicate.<sup>20</sup>



A major point of contention, however, was the mechanism for goal formulation, with governments debating the need for an expert-driven or a political, intergovernmental process. To implement this mandate, the UN General Assembly established a 30-member Open Working Group to articulate a proposal for the SDGs and guarantee the opportunity for international organizations, stakeholders, civil society, and UN agencies to provide input during the process. Governments participating in the Open Working Group and analysts have suggested multiple topics around which the goals could be constructed. The concurrence with the UN's Post-2015 Development Process, however, raises the challenge of integrating the two agendas. Ultimately, the global goal is “to end extreme poverty in all its forms in the context of sustainable development and to have in place the building blocks of sustained prosperity for all.”<sup>21</sup>

In this context, the SDGs emphasize explicitly that such prosperity cannot be achieved without safeguarding the ability of the planet to maintain

the conditions critical to human well-being. An innovative proposal from Colombia suggests that governments should focus on defining adequate targets and indicators across issues and subsequently cluster them to arrive at common goals. Some targets could appear in various goals, even if the overall number of goals is low. As governments negotiate the nature and number of goals, it is critical to set up systems for measuring progress as well as support for implementation. Concrete measurement strategies and mechanisms provide governments and international organizations with the necessary data and science-based information to evaluate progress and take corrective measures as required. (See Box 13–1.) Implementation support systems would ensure that countries develop adequate baselines for measurement and adequate methodologies for data gathering, create the necessary policies to integrate the goals into national planning and strategies, and provide the necessary financial and personnel backing.<sup>22</sup>

Importantly, obligations under the SDGs will be universal—they will extend to all countries, regardless of their level of development, unlike the MDGs, which apply only to developing countries. Contextualized, specific national and regional targets can be used to measure progress at the different levels, to complement the general approach of global goals. Ultimately, the definition and application of the new framework will require transparency, participation, and engagement from all groups.<sup>23</sup>

## Conclusion

Implementing the outcome document of the Rio+20 conference, *The Future We Want*, presents different challenges for governments, international organizations, and other stakeholders. At the conceptual level, the acceptance of sustainable development as a core organizing principle in the UN system is the result of a long political process that started in the 1980s. At the institutional level, Rio+20 completed the years-long process of reforming the system of global environmental governance. Reform measures for UNEP and the new institutional architecture for sustainable development are now being implemented and will require regular and systematic monitoring, reporting, and assessment.

At the operational level, the United Nations system will face coordination issues if the SDGs and the post-2015 processes remain disconnected. Mechanisms to connect the two agendas are necessary in order to ensure a comprehensive approach to a global development agenda. Ultimately, the goal of these two processes is the same: the attainment of long-term human prosperity. In this context, the SDGs recognize explicitly that such prosperity cannot be achieved without safeguarding the ability of the planet to maintain the conditions critical to the well-being of humans and the other species with which we share the planet.

### Box 13–1. A Policy Mechanism for Ensuring Sustainable Development: National Resource Sufficiency Evaluation

Recognition is growing globally that strong action is needed immediately to move toward environmental sustainability. A global high-level panel recently warned that, “We must act *now* to halt the alarming pace of climate change and environmental degradation, which pose unprecedented threats to humanity.” But that sense of global urgency needs to be translated into global action. The gap between what political leaders want in terms of development (the “political mandate”) and the resources that are realistically available to accommodate that development (the “reality mandate” often put forth by the scientific community) appears to be wide. Although most concrete efforts to promote sustainability have focused on technological evolution and resilience in the face of a changing environment, a strong case exists that bridging the gap will require absolute reductions in consumption and a reversal of population growth, or else measurable progress toward global sustainability may never occur.

The current debate on the United Nations’ post-2015 development agenda, including the work of the Open Working Group (OWG) on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), offers an opportunity to begin to close the gap between politics and the reality of the human predicament. The SDGs are expected to set goals and targets needed to facilitate and ensure progress in human development, while at the same time fostering a global transition to an “inclusive green economy” and “a sustainable century.” The “S” (or sustainability) factor implicitly acknowledges the need to conduct humanity’s future global development programs in balance with planetary limits. The OWG process, which is expected to be completed by September 2014, will play a key role in determining if the next human development agenda will represent economic development “as usual,” or whether the SDGs will form

a new point of departure that leads to a more sustainable world.

Much depends on whether the proposed SDGs recognize the biophysical limitations to economic growth and the need for governance at all levels to consider the implications of such limits for efforts to eradicate poverty and reduce income inequality. Although it is implicitly understood (and sometimes even explicitly stated) that long-term human prosperity can be attained only by safeguarding environmental assets, the operational mechanism needed to accomplish this task—especially at the scale of the global socioecologic system—has not been proposed nor agreed upon.

One idea being offered to the OWG is Resource Sufficiency Evaluation (RSE), the use of established metrics to determine whether the current and projected demand for natural resources is sustainable. Scientifically based accounting methodologies such as life-cycle assessment (LCA) or input-output (I-O) modeling are already available to conduct resource sufficiency evaluations in a universally applicable manner. These methodologies, and the biophysical “balance sheets” that are generated, offer policy makers and the public a clearer understanding of ecological sustainability and what is needed to achieve it.

In contrast to the end of the twentieth century, natural resource scarcities and costs are now becoming an increasingly significant economic factor for most countries, and this significance will only grow as resource demands increase. By adopting RSE, countries can proactively address resource constraints and better plan for their economic future. Countries that understand their natural resource assets and limitations, and reduce their reliance on scarce resources, acquire a competitive edge in a now globalized world.

RSE provides an appropriate analytical



**Box 13–1. continued**

framework and policy response to the growing global imperative to better manage the balance between human activity and the natural resources required for long-term well-being. The Sustainable World Initiative, a nonprofit project associated with the Population Institute in Washington, D.C., is working with United Nations, governmental, and civil-society leaders to stimulate a discussion of RSE in the context of environmental governance. If that governance is ever to succeed in achieving true sustainability, it must begin with recognition of planetary limits—and efforts to reconcile them into economic development plans.

Countries will never know if they have

enough resources to maintain human development—or can realistically expect these resources to be available externally—unless they first evaluate their resource demands and compare them to what is available. No one would think of driving a car or flying a plane without a fuel gauge. By the same token, policy makers at all levels of governance cannot adequately plan for the future without knowing whether they have the natural resources needed to realize their development agendas.

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*Source: See endnote 22.*

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