The Global Governance of Sustainable Development

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In 2008 we were reminded forcefully of the pertinence of sustainable development as rapidly rising food prices threatened the social cohesion and political stability of a number of countries. Were the old doomsayers right after all? The Malthusian thesis has always been as popular as it was simple: the world cannot sustain an ever-ascending growth in both population and food supply. The sustainability problems of industrial societies include ageing populations, level and mix of immigrants, consumer lifestyles, and institutional adjustments. Those of developing countries include managing economic growth without destroying the resource base, adjusting to pressures of population growth, and sustaining patterns of production in agriculture while striving for rapid industrialization. The most recent manifestations of the problem of sustainability include the challenge of climate change that cuts across the global North-South divide, growing water and energy scarcity, spreading desertification, and loss of nature's life support services for a variety of life forms.

Global governance is the sum of laws, norms, policies, and institutions that define, constitute and mediate relations between citizens, societies, markets and states in the international system – the wielders and objects of the exercise of international public power. It entails multilevel and networked relations and interactions in order to deal with the linkages across policy levels and domains. As the planet's most representative organization, the UN has unique legitimacy. Even if it cannot displace the responsibility of local, state and national governments, it can and should be the locus of multilateral diplomacy and collective action to solve problems shared in common by many countries.

One way to comprehend the relevance of using the lens of global governance is by examining what we dub the five "gaps" between concrete global problems and feeble global solutions: knowledge (empirical and theoretical), normative, policy, institutional and compliance (both implementation and enforcement).[1]

Antecedents: From Development through Conservation to Sustainability

In 1945, threats of environmental degradation and resource exhaustion were not seriously apprehended. The dominant paradigm was self-sustaining economic growth through industrialization-led development. Since at least 1798, when the Reverend Thomas R.

[1] This paper is a summary of Chapter 6, "Sustainable development," in Thomas G. Weiss and Ramesh Thakur, *The United Nations and Global Governance: An Unfinished Journey* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).

Malthus first wrote his "Essay on the Principle of Population,"[2] people have worried about the "carrying capacity" of the planet. For the first half of the twentieth century, the most evident concerns about the quality of the human environment centered around the concept of "conservation," which refers to husbanding natural resources for future use, rather than using them up indiscriminately. The conservation movement started in the United States, hard on the heels of Frederick Turner Jackson's 1893 thesis that there was no longer a "frontier" of free land in which settlements could expand, and from which resources could be extracted.[3]

President Theodore Roosevelt made conservation a cornerstone of his presidency: creating national parks, stopping the sale of public lands and pushing for the creation of a new cabinet-level Department of the Interior for the purpose of resource management. One of the most influential early books was Rachel Carson's 1962 *Silent Spring*, evoking a world in which the increasing use of chemicals and pesticide was killing nature and wildlife to the point where one day we would witness spring without the song of birds. Space-based photographs of Earth emphasized unity and interconnectedness, not separateness and disconnectedness. They also communicated fragility and vulnerability in a way that words could not.

By the 1970s, the tide had turned. Secretary-General U Thant's *Man and His Environment* in 1969 not only addressed serious issues of pollution, erosion, and waste, but it was among the world organization's first visible documents to explicitly call for action at all levels: local, national, and global.[4] On 22 April 1970, twenty million Americans took part in a rally for Earth Day. That same year the federal government set up the Environment Protection Agency.

Knowledge Gaps: A Clear UN Contribution

Perhaps the most visible volume in both analytical and policy circles was the Club of Rome's 1972 *Limits to Growth*.[5] The volume was a sophisticated modeling exercise that extrapolated trends and reached the conclusion that planetary limits would be met within a hundred years – in short, past patterns of development were unsustainable. The 1973 oil crisis following the Yom Kippur War seemed to validate the gloomy prognosis and heightened public concern about the underlying sustainability problem. The alarm on the finite resources and the seemingly infinite thirst for consumption that threatened to exhaust the resource base began to be sounded by small but increasingly influential individuals and groups.

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[2] Thomas R. Malthus, *An Essay on the Principle of Population* (London: Printed for J. Johnson in St. Paul's Churchyard, 1798).

[3] Frederick Turner Jackson, "The Significance of the Frontier in American History," *Annual Report of the American Historical Association for 1893*, 199–227.

[4] U Thant, *Man and His Environment,* Report of the Secretary-General, 26 May 1969.

[5] Donella H. Meadows, Jørgen Randers, and Dennis Meadows, *The Limits to Growth: A Report to the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind* (London: Pan, 1972).

The Brundtland Commission published *Our Common Future* in 1987.[6] This report put environmental issues back at the top of the agenda but in a new context. The book noted three dimensions of "interlocking crises." First, the environmental crisis, the development crisis, and the energy crisis are all aspects of the same problem. Second, this crisis knows no compartmentalized national boundaries. And third, the crisis is driven by growing inequality between the rich and the poor.

The first sentence of the Brundtland report was memorable: "The Earth is one but the world is not."[7] This singular UN achievement has framed the dominant approach to development since then. Economic and ecological, international and national policymakers and institutions are independent from one other; however, the effects of their policies are not.

The Stockholm Conference

The 1972 Stockholm Conference was the first single-issue global conference. In her opening speech, Prime Minister Indira Gandhi uttered a memorable sound-bite: "Poverty is the greatest polluter." [8] Developing countries expressed fears of environmental standards being used as a pretext for discriminatory trade practices, part of a growing trend toward non-tariff barriers to market access. Pakistan's Mahbub-ul-Haq pointed out:

> …industrialization had given developed countries disproportionate benefits and huge reservoirs of wealth and at the same time had caused the very environmental problems we were now asking developing countries to join in resolving. The cost of cleaning up the mess, therefore, should be borne by the countries that had caused it in the first place. If they wanted developing countries to go along, they'd have to provide the financial resources to enable them to do so.[9]

The threefold argument – of the developed countries' responsibility for having created the problem, for solving it and for providing financial assistance to developing countries for their efforts – has been carried over into the contemporary debate over climate change.

Bridging this North-South division required reframing the argument. In June 1971 Maurice Strong, Secretary-General of the Stockholm Conference, gathered twenty-seven "gurus" for a brainstorming session in Founex, Switzerland to probe the interconnectedness of environment and development from a third world perspective. This meeting produced a report which argued that pollution sprang from two causes. In the industrial world, it was production and consumption patterns; in the developing world, it was underdevelopment and poverty. The conclusions of Founex were reiterated in

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[6] Gro Harlem Brundtland, et al., *Our Common Future*, Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1987).

[7] Ibid., 27.

[8] Quoted by Maurice Strong, "Policy Lessons Learned in a Thirty Years' Perspective," Ministry of the Environment, *Stockholm Thirty Years On* (Stockholm: Ministry of the Environment, 2003), 16.

[9] Strong, *Where on Earth Are We Going?*, 123

Stockholm and in subsequent UN publications.

The conference itself was precedent-setting for its involvement of NGOs. They were allowed to observe and speak at open plenary and committee sessions. Furthermore, there were alternative NGO forums involving around 200 groups held concurrently, which influenced both the media coverage and ultimately the policymaking process.[10] The inclusion of nongovernmental and dissenting voices in the United Nations, once an exclusive club of governmental representatives, is of course by now one of the essential components of global governance, and an expected and often most entertaining part of UN global conferences.

The Stockholm Declaration on the Human Environment contained 26 "principles," an "action plan" with 109 recommendations, and a resolution on institutional and financial arrangements. It initiated profound changes in attitude, values, and behavior toward the ecosphere.

Poverty was linked to the growing conservation and environmental movements in further ways in the following years. Accelerated exploitation of the extractive resources in developing countries to pay for the consumption lifestyle of the rich countries often led to loss of livelihoods and traditional grazing and habitation rights for peasants under the inter-linked pressures of deforestation, expanding branch plantation, and urbanization. This intriguing journey toward understanding the nature of sustainability really began in Stockholm.

The Brundtland Commission Report

The World Commission on Environment and Development, chaired by Prime Minister Gro Harlem Brundtland of Norway, was established by the General Assembly in1983 and its report published in 1987. It changed international discourse by reconciling the seemingly opposed concepts of economic development, which is exploitative, and environmental protection, which is conservationist.[11] It sided with developing countries in arguing that poverty itself was harmful to the environmental cause; it rejected the arguments for limits to growth; and it concluded that the key was environmentally sustainable growth. It popularized and mainstreamed the concept of sustainable development: development that "meets the need of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs."[12] Moreover, developing countries would need transfers of economic assistance and environmental technologies in order to be able to pursue strategies of sustainable development.

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[10] Ibid., 30-31.

[11] See Heather A. Smith, "The World Commission on Environment and Development: Ideas and institutions intersect," in *International Commissions and the Power of Ideas*, ed. Ramesh Thakur, Andrew F. Cooper, and John English (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2005), 76–98.

[12] Brundtland, et al., *Our Common Future*, 8.

Rio and Johannesburg

Following the Brundtland Report, in 1989 the General Assembly called for another UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro in 1992, the twentieth anniversary of Stockholm. The most important political backdrop, of course, was the ending of the Cold War. But there was also the scientific backdrop of accumulating evidence of unsustainable practices, the fragility of the ecosystem, the damage to the environment (for example the hole in the ozone layer), the depletion of fish stocks, and the loss of biodiversity. More than any other conference or discrete event, Rio brought together the dynamic relationship between agricultural practices, industrial processes and products, consumption patterns, and the human environment. And it highlighted the tension between the sovereign prerogative of states to exploit, utilize and develop resources within their jurisdiction as they saw fit, and the global impacts of deforestation, stock depletions, desertification and atmospheric pollution.

The Brundtland recommendations, palatable to all sides with its twin emphasis on growth and sustainability, framed the substantive agenda of Rio. Foreshadowing the divide that became far more acute over climate change, developing countries demanded – and industrialized countries resisted – compensatory financial transfers for “green growth,” on the argument that most of the world’s pollution had been caused by the process of industrialization in the rich countries.

The Rio Declaration consisted of 27 principles describing the rights and responsibilities on development and the environment; a 300-page action program to promote sustainable development known as Agenda 21, most of which had been negotiated in the two-three years leading up to the 1992 Earth Summit; and two legally binding conventions, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Convention on Biological Diversity. The conference also initiated discussions on a treaty on desertification.

A significant part of the NGO constituency was disenchanted with Rio, believing that growth had been prioritized at the cost of conservation; that the harmful consequences of continuing industrialization, such as rising inequality and over-consumption, were being ignored to the earth’s greater peril; and that a top-down managerial approach was being imposed instead of heeding voices from the field and adopting local solutions.

A review in 1997 established that most of the Agenda 21 goals were not being met. Even as the high priests of trade and investment-led globalization commanded the attention of policymakers in the decade after Rio, an anti-globalization coalition gathered pace as a social protest movement that was itself globalized in orientation, networking, methods, operations, and meeting venues. Alleged environmental damage, growing inequality, and social dislocation and marginalization of the weakest and most vulnerable groups drew their greatest ire.

Ten years after Rio, the UN organized the World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg to evaluate progress and set targets for implementation. The two additional international milestones en route to Johannesburg were the Millennium Development

Goals adopted in 2000, and the Monterrey Conference on Financing and Development held in Mexico in 2002. The Johannesburg action plan was both shorter and more concrete than Rio's, including measurable targets on water, health, agriculture, and energy. Its emphasis on public-private partnerships, including calls for corporate social responsibility, also marked a point of departure from Rio. Yet, compared to Rio, the importance of environmental protection was relatively downgraded and under-stated.

One possible explanation for the disappointing results of Johannesburg is the growing disillusionment among environmental activists that "sustainable development" had been hijacked by the developers at the cost of conservation. It had come to mean in practice "sustainable growth." To many concerned environmentalists, "sustainable development" had become a "buzzword largely devoid of content."[13]

Millennium Ecosystem Assessment

The Millennium Ecosystem Assessment was launched by Secretary-General Kofi Annan in 2001 and completed in 2005. Its dual purpose was to assess the consequences of ecosystem for human well-being and establish the scientific basis for actions needed to enhance the conservation and sustainable use of ecosystems.

It came to four main findings:

1. Ecosystems have changed more rapidly and extensively over the last half century than in any other 50-year period in human history, largely in order to meet growing demands for food, fresh water, timber, fiber, and fuel;
2. The changes to ecosystems have contributed to and underpinned major gains in human wellbeing and economic development, but only at the cost of substantial degradation of ecosystem services that will significantly degrade the ability of future generations to obtain comparable benefits from ecosystems;
3. At present rates of use and exploitation, the degradation of ecosystems will worsen dramatically in the next fifty years;
4. The challenge of reversing the degradation of ecosystems while meeting increasing demands for their services requires significant change in practices, policies, and institutions.

One of the most important conclusions of the assessment is that poverty cannot be measured by income alone. Living on one dollar a day, or even on five, will make little difference to the poor if there is no fertile soil to grow crops, or if the fisheries or forests on which they depend for subsistence are so depleted that they cannot supplement their existence. The dynamics of poverty cannot be delinked from the natural environment in which people live. Their natural environment, more than the feted dollar a day, is in many cases the foundation of their livelihood. For this reason, environmental issues cannot just be tucked away in a neat, separable closet and dealt with singly. Environment

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13 Karen A. Mingst and Margaret P. Karns, *The United Nations in the 21st Century*, 3rd edn. (Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 2006), 219.

underpins all aspects of development and it must be mainstreamed into finance and planning ministries to have a chance of eradicating extreme poverty and disease.

The assessment found that two-thirds of the services that ecosystems provide to humankind are in decline. Many of them, such as global fisheries, have been weakened beyond repair. But while these ecosystem services are already in a state of stress, the eradication of hunger and poverty requires significant increases in the supply of the very same services.

Sustainable Development as *the* Norm

The Brundtland Commission popularized the notion of sustainable development which is now the normative point of departure for virtually all policy documents. Yet the term was conceptually contested and politically fraught from the start and has become only somewhat less so. For example, how can we know the needs, wants, expectations, and demands of future generations? In particular, will they aspire to match the affluent and extravagant lifestyles and consumption patterns of today's generation, or will they accept sacrifices in these in order to promote a better balance between consumption, conservation and environmental protection? And what of *intra*-generational equity and needs? In the absence of precise and measurable answers to these questions, the Brundtland definition is reduced to a slogan, not a policy. Yet it has been mainstreamed, validated, legitimized, and reinforced by governments, international organizations, and development agendas that adopted it as their primary guiding principle.

Part of the explanation for the enduring popularity of the norm is that it satisfied the calls from the South for recognition of their special needs of development without sacrificing the stated objective of the industrialized countries of the North for sustained growth and protection of the ecosystem.[14] By the time of Rio's Agenda 21, sustainable development had elided into sustainable growth; even the pretence of a boundary between them had seemingly been abandoned.[15] The original insight and impulse – that the natural environment will be increasingly stressed with sustained economic growth and consumption patterns – was forgotten until the global warming crisis brought it back to the center of the debate again in the 2000s. Once again the world finds itself grappling with the same conundrum: policy interventions by national governments and the international community as a whole to structure the development choices in favor of ecological integrity, with some cost to consumer lifestyles.

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[14] Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development, *Institutionalising Sustainable Development: Implementing National Sustainable Development Strategies* (Paris: OECD Publishing, 2007); Georgina Ayre and Rosalie Callway, *Governance for Sustainable Development: AFoundation for the Future* (London: Earthscan, 2005); and Alan Boyle and David Freestone, *International Law and Sustainable Development: Past Achievements and Future Challenges (Oxford:* Oxford University Press, 2001).

[15] One of the most trenchant critics of "sustainable development" is Wolfgang Sachs, *Planet Dialectics: Explorations in Environment and Development* (London: Zed Books, 1999).

Policy Gaps: Déjà Vu All Over Again

Agenda 21 "set international and national objectives and provided programmatic suggestions on how to fulfill those objectives." With more than 1,000 specific policy recommendations in areas as widely diverse as desertification and poverty eradication, Agenda 21 also led to the more systematic consideration of sustainable development within the UN system. However, it has not been used as such by national governments: it has "failed to serve as a useful guide to action."[16]

The most recent consolidation of attempts to frame and pursue sustainable development policies are found in the Millennium Development Goals. The review of these policy goals at the 2005 World Summit indicated, however, that five years had passed without substantial progress. Clearly, policies are not what are lacking but rather political will, institutions with teeth, and compliance.

Institutional Gaps

The arena of environment and sustainability demonstrates a chasm between the size and nature of global problems, on the one hand, and feeble global institutions and their derisory budgets, on the other hand. The General Assembly established UNEP in 1972 as "the lynchpin and environmental conscience of the UN system…The hub from which spokes of policy networks extend to deal with a wide array of global environmental threats."[17] On the one hand, UNEP has under-performed owing to a modest budget, low profile within the UN system, and the rise of environmental concerns to the top of the agenda of the heavyweight international organizations like the World Bank. Its small budget reflects its soft political constituency of environment ministers who themselves have traditionally been among the more lightweight members of national cabinets, plus largely northern NGOs because many southern NGOs remain suspicious of UNEP's northern-influenced agenda.[18] At the same time, it may be said to have fallen victim to its success in persuading all the other influential international organizations to upgrade the importance of the environment in their policy priorities.

Following Rio, the General Assembly created the Commission on Sustainable Development, reporting to ECOSOC, to monitor and evaluate progress under Agenda 21. Repeated calls for a new UN environmental council or organization as a high-powered umbrella body that integrates the fragmentary efforts of many entities dispersed across the UN system, combined with a devolution of environmental governance to the regional level, reflect a basic level of dissatisfaction with the institutional architecture of the UN's environmental agenda. UNEP today is an organization struggling to reconcile an ambitious, critical and ever-expanding mandate with an inadequate budget, a blurred

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[16] Ibid., 121, 157.

[17] Peter M. Haas, "Turning Up the Heat on Global Environmental Governance," *The Forum* 5:2 (2007), Article 8 (Berkeley Electronic Press, 2007), 1. On environmental governance more generally, see W. Bradnee Chambers and Jessica F. Green, eds., *Reforming Environmental Governance* (Tokyo: UN University Press, 2005).

[18] A perception reinforced by the succession of one German Executive Director by another in 2006.

profile, and a weak political position. While budgets do not tell everything, it is significant that the WWF has a budget that is three times that of UNEP.[19]

Compliance Gaps

The biggest gap in the current system for sustainable development – as for other issue areas – remains that of compliance. Many of the international conferences and commissions repeat the same familiar themes and refrains of persisting poverty, widening inequality among and within countries, the need for matching actual aid flows to the rhetoric of development assistance and for debt relief, the role of science and technology transfers as development enablers, the threats posed by degradation of arable land, loss of soil fertility, deforestation, over-fishing of coastal waters and deep oceans, and loss of biodiversity. They all provide a comprehensive catalogue of the ills of poverty, hunger, and disease and issue clarion calls for their reduction and eventual elimination. They all affirm the special claims on the conscience of the rich in alleviating the sufferings of the poor.

The total costs of mega-conferences would be difficult, perhaps impossible, to compute. Moreover, the leaders come to deliver their respective speeches, not to listen to those of others; the conferences are dominated by the talkers to the exclusion of the doers; and the consensus outcome documents are restatements of lofty rhetoric and grandiose ambitions disconnected from the resources, capacity, and authority to convert them into feasible, achievable, and measurable targets. Given all this, what is the opportunity cost of investing the vast resources in actual policies and programs of poverty alleviation, environmental protection and resource conservation?

Over time, the series of conferences and commissions, convened by or addressed to the UN system, have served to erode its legitimacy and dilute its brand value because of the persisting gaps between rhetoric, commitments and implementation. Most documents end up trying to solve all of the world's ills, with little or no effort to define contested terms, assign priorities, specify realistic timeframes, and identify the sources of funding and other resources necessary for their implementation.

Conclusion

One of our central themes is that the UN's unique legitimacy derives from its universal membership. In turn, universal membership and international legitimacy give the UN unmatched convening and mobilizing power. That power has been used to organize a large number of global conferences on a diverse range of topics as a characteristic mode of filling various gaps in global governance: knowledge, normative, policy, institutional and implementation-cum-compliance. Moreover, they typically involve all the actors of global governance – states, NGOs, private sector firms (to a lesser degree) – while

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[19] Jennifer Clapp and Peter Dauvergne, *Paths to a Green World: The Political Economy of the Global Environment* (Cambridge, Mass: MIT Press, 2005), 73, 78.

highlighting the role of individual leadership, for example of Maurice Strong on environment.

The continuing frictions between the global North and South with respect to the responsibility for having caused and for ameliorating the effects of climate change suggest that efforts to combat climate change will have to be integrated into the broader context of sustainable social and economic development.[20] For the causes of global warming span most sectors of modern social and economic activity: power production and distribution, heating and air conditioning, industrial processes and agricultural production, and transportation and waste management.

[20] See Freidrich Soltau, "Climate Change and Sustainable Development: Understanding the Linkages," *Natural Resources Forum* 30, no. 4 (2006): 253–55.