

## What is the purpose of the sustainable development goals?

Tancredi Voituriez (IDDRI)

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### MEETING THE CHALLENGES OF COHERENCE AND IMPLEMENTATION

The negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was one of the key outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference. What is their added value in relation to existing agreements, treaties and conventions? What can we reasonably expect of them? The retrospective analysis of the achievements and limitations of the first Rio conference in 1992 shows that the SDGs must help to address at least two challenges: that of the implementation and that of the coherence of sustainable development policies, in all countries regardless of their income level.

### FOSTERING EXPERIMENTATION AND LEARNING

Sustainable development is a political compromise between countries with different or even conflicting interests, which has not yet been translated into economic reality. The SDGs therefore need to make it happen by encouraging learning and experimentation processes, given the lack of solutions or recipes available to governments. The value of the SDGs is thus not only substantial (the “what” question) but also procedural (the “how” question).

### ABANDONING THE ILLUSION OF WIN-WIN SOLUTIONS

The translation of sustainable development into economic reality must now urgently follow on from its translation into political reality 20 years ago. Yet this process will create losers. Making sustainable development operational requires the creation of an internal political compromise in each country or region, and the rejection of the overly simplistic idea of win-win solutions.

### NO INTERNATIONAL COMPROMISE WITHOUT INTERNAL COMPROMISE... AND VICE VERSA

A compromise between countries made the concept of sustainable development viable in 1992; a compromise within countries will make it operational from 2015, providing the negotiations are not limited to deciding what is good for others—especially the developing and least developed countries—, but are instead an opportunity to answer the eminently less consensual question of what is good for oneself.

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<b>1. INTRODUCTION</b>	<b>5</b>
<b>2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT 20 YEARS AFTER RIO, OR WHAT PURPOSE <i>SHOULD</i> THE SDGS SERVE?</b>	<b>6</b>
2.1. Sustainable development: a concept with no <i>modus operandi</i>	6
2.2. The illusion of mutual supportiveness of the three “pillars” or “dimensions”	7
2.3. The limitations of intergovernmental cooperation	9
2.4. Initial implications for the post-2015 agenda	10
<b>3. THE NEED FOR COOPERATION</b>	<b>10</b>
3.1. Two rationales for cooperation	11
3.2. Learning from the Millennium Development Goals	12
3.3. Creating an international cooperation framework	13
3.4. Subsequent implications for the post-2015 agenda	16
<b>4. CONCLUSION</b>	<b>16</b>
<b>REFERENCES</b>	<b>17</b>



## 1. INTRODUCTION

The governance of sustainable development was supposed to reach a high point in 2012 in Rio with the 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary conference of the Earth Summit (Rio+20, Brazil). The final text fell short of expectations. The outcome document of the Conference, *The Future We Want*, contains very few decisions. By its length and its listing of commitments made over the last 20 years, it highlights the extent to which the political appetite for sustainable development has dwindled over time. Rio+20 sheds a harsh light on the state of international cooperation on this issue, seen as a constraint rather than as an opportunity for greater wellbeing of societies. The Rio Declaration of 1992 organised a negotiated transformation of State sovereignty in the management of common transboundary concerns, such as climate change, biodiversity loss and desertification.<sup>1</sup> Reversing this initial enthusiasm, the 2012 text establishes national sovereignty as an intangible, immutable principle, both the means and the end to the negotiations in a wide range of areas without any hierarchy between them.

In this difficult context, the signatories of *The Future We Want* undertook to define Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2015 aimed at pursuing “focused and coherent action on sustainable development”, highlighting the current dispersion of means and ends. The declaration goes on to say that the “SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries”.<sup>2</sup> These operational goals are developed and discussed within two official processes, which are fuelled by consultations conducted by

international organisations, NGOs and think tanks. First, the United Nations General Assembly created an intergovernmental open working group (OWG) tasked with proposing Sustainable Development Goals for the post-2015 period to the Assembly. Second, the Secretary-General of the United Nations appointed a high-level panel (HLP) to produce a report on the development agenda.<sup>3</sup> He also requested Jeffrey Sachs (Director of the Earth Institute, Columbia University, New York) to create a Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN), whose main goal is to mobilise the scientific and technical expertise available in order to identify and/or disseminate solutions to the problems of sustainability facing the planet<sup>4</sup> (Figure 1). These mechanisms are supplemented by initiatives and proposals launched outside the UN framework by networks of think tanks and NGOs.<sup>5</sup>

Between the high level of ambition required by the serious issues at stake and the reality check of the poor results at Rio+20, what exactly can we expect of the SDGs? To provide some answers to this question, which are an essential prerequisite for their negotiation, on October 9, 2012, IDDRI and FERDI (the Foundation for International Development Study and Research), in collaboration with the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, launched a series of workshops on the post-2015 development agenda.

1. See “Paradoxes of Sovereignty” (Lerin and Tubiana, 2012), an article in which the authors propose a typology of the different forms of sovereignty and demonstrate that the loss of one form may result in an excess of the other. We are not, therefore, suggesting that Rio 1992 marked a gradual renunciation of sovereignty, but rather a transformation of sovereignty.

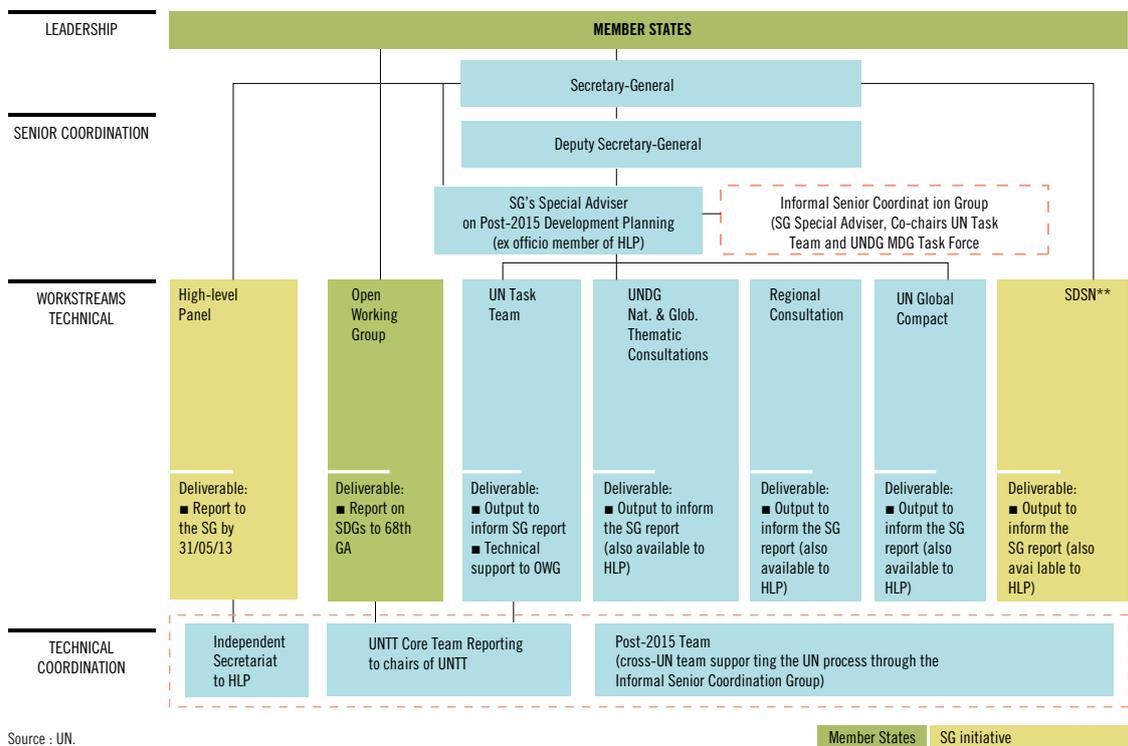
2. *The Future We Want*, §247.

3. *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development*, Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, UN. <http://www.post2015hlp.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/UN-Report.pdf>.

4. An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development, report delivered to the United Nations Secretary-General by the Leadership Council of the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN).

5. For example, the Independent Research Forum (IRF) which brings together think tanks from around the globe. <http://www.iied.org/think-tank-alliance-identifies-eight-shifts-needed-for-sustainability>. For an update of existing propositions on SDGs, see the very helpful Future Development Goals Trackers developed by ODI (<http://tracker.post2015.org/>).

Figure 1. Post-2015 UN process: actors and communications lines



Source : UN.

Bringing together think tanks, researchers, associations, high-level civil servants and businesses, its purpose is to connect the research communities and networks concerned by the integration of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SDGs around a common agenda.

The aim of this article is to present the key findings of these discussions and to integrate them into a critical analysis of the added value of the SDGs, in terms of both their substance and the drafting and implementation processes that will be attached to them. In the first section, we propose a series of outcomes established by a critical assessment of the achievements and limitations of the sustainable development agenda since Rio (1992). This part will lead us to answer the question: what *should* be the purpose of the SDGs? In the second section, we describe the conditions for the success of the SDGs in view of the outcomes listed in the previous section, focusing on the need for cooperation according to two different approaches. Finally, we outline a potential new cooperation regime that would meet the conditions and outcomes previously identified in this article.

## 2. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT 20 YEARS AFTER RIO, OR WHAT PURPOSE SHOULD THE SDGS SERVE?

### 2.1. Sustainable development: a concept with no *modus operandi*

“Sustainable development” describes a type of development that incorporates environmental considerations into decisions about development and into the routine of economic mechanisms (Godard, 2010). More than 20 years after the Rio Earth Summit, which established it as a political compromise between nations and included in its agenda actions for the coming decades (Agenda 21), sustainable development has gained an undeniable legal and political legitimacy. But at the same time, it has been insufficiently translated into reality or embodied in the real economy to be able to address the serious problems now facing humankind.

This situation would undoubtedly have been far worse without the Rio summit. But because there is no “counterfactual” available, it is now impossible to measure the impact of the Earth Summit and its repercussions on our environment and our societies. Moreover, there is no formal assessment of the objectives set by Agenda 21 during the Rio Earth Summit in 1992. The UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, which provides the secretariats

for the Rio+20 Conference and the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), proposes various series of indicators and sectoral analyses, but there are no systematic assessments giving a regularly updated, comprehensive view of achievements, similar to those that exist within the framework of the monitoring of the MDGs (Chabason, 2011).

The fifth edition of the *Global Environment Outlook* (GEO5) from the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), “Environment for the future we want”, which was published in June 2012 just before the Rio+20 conference, stresses that “the lack of reliable and consistent time-series data on the state of the environment is a major barrier to increasing the effectiveness of policies and programmes. Additionally, many of the most important drivers of environmental change or even their impacts are not systematically monitored. All countries should undertake to monitor and assess their own environment and integrate social, economic and environmental information to inform decision-making processes. As standardized approaches to data collection are needed, international cooperation and capacity building for collecting data must be strengthened. Improving access to information is also essential”.<sup>6</sup> However, based on 90 environmental indicators, it concludes that humanity must urgently change its development path. Two questions are raised by this observation: how, and in which specific direction?

To understand the difficulties posed by these two questions, it should be noted that comparing the development paths of different countries and measuring their relative “sustainability”—just as we would measure their GDP growth in order to compare their economic performances over time—still present major challenges. How, indeed, can we integrate economic, environmental and social indicators? This question is both technical and political. Numerous frameworks have been proposed by researchers and adopted by institutions, especially for assessing public policies and company performance. Yet there is no consensus as to a method of integration (de Ridder, Turnpenny, Nilsson *et al.*, 2007; Hacking and Guthrie, 2008; Singh, Murty, Gupta, Dikshit, 2009) capable of addressing the three dimensions of sustainable development without any arbitrary weighting or *ad hoc* metric (Beckerman, 1994; Ross, 2009). In addition, integration and weighting are exercises that raise serious political concerns when the collective preferences of the different communities remain difficult to assess for a series of “non-market” goods and services, which have no price.<sup>7</sup> In

this respect, the new prosperity measures proposed over the last 20 years do not—yet—provide a counterweight to gross domestic product (GDP) in public policy debates. The conflict over the concept and its measurement, launched by the Earth Summit, therefore remains largely unresolved, and steering the economy towards greater sustainability is still problematic for this reason.

The analogy with a compass may be useful here. The various sustainable development indicators produced by the UN agencies are like a compass that stubbornly points north, giving no clues as to which direction the economy should take. Indicators do not set a course any more than a compass gives a direction.

Based on this observation, one of the requirements and challenges of the post-2015 agenda lies in the construction of measurable and verifiable indicators capable of informing policy preferences and development paths—and ultimately their performance in terms of commitments made, without violating the principle of sovereignty. The negotiations still underway on the measurement and verification mechanism (MRV) for climate commitments remind us of just how difficult this is; China, for example, is still maintaining that the measurement of its greenhouse gas emissions can only be done and monitored by its own administration.

## 2.2. The illusion of mutual supportiveness of the three “pillars” or “dimensions”

The Rio compromise (1992) on sustainable development brought together countries advocating an environmental agenda and others that were more concerned with growth and development. It translated into the challenge of ensuring the simultaneous progression of the economic, social and environmental indicators, in other words an improvement in the three dimensions, the only means of securing an agreement between all stakeholders in the negotiations. Indeed, who could object to environmental progress if it is accompanied by higher growth and an improvement in social indicators, and especially in poverty indicators in other parts of the world—and vice versa? Twenty years after Rio, the challenge of ensuring the emergence and success of win-win-win solutions (improvements in all three dimensions) is reiterated in *The Future We Want*, but there is little evidence of these so far.

6. UNEP (2012) GEO-5. *Environment for the Future We Want*, UNEP, Nairobi, Kenya.

7. Le Cotty, T. and Voituriez, T. (2009). “The Potential

Role for Collective Preferences in Determining the Rules of the International Trading System”, in Ekins and Voituriez (eds), *Trade, Globalization and Sustainability Impact Assessment*, EarthScan, London, pp. 165-188.

Being cautious as we are regarding the measurement of the progress and performance of the different economies in terms of sustainable development, the most likely and realistic scenario, if we rule out this miraculous global win-win-win situation, is that sustainable development is made up of trade-offs between the economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as between the short and long term (Barbier, 1987). Halle, Najam and Beaton (2013) express this as follows: “Positive messages alone do not explain the urgent need for change. Too positive an outlook is damaging to credibility: there is no such thing as something for nothing, and people soon become suspicious of anyone claiming to offer “win-win-win” deals. (...) Ultimately, it is patronizing to believe that simply telling people ‘good news’ will be sufficient to drive support for highly difficult social and economic transformation”. We can also repeat the warning of Bannister and Thugge (1999) regarding trade policy: “even the best designed trade reform creates losers”.<sup>8</sup> The French experience of the attempt to establish a carbon tax highlights the difficulty, or even impossibility, of negotiating political compromises without prior agreement that there will *not* be only winners and that losers, to accept the agreement, must be given compensation and consent to this (Sénit, 2012; Hourcade, 2013). The assumptions of mutual supportiveness of the three pillars or dimensions, depending on the wording used, are therefore somewhat audacious.

The economic, social and even environmental consequences of a lower level of greenhouse gas emissions or of specific pollutants—for example a reduction in CO<sub>2</sub> and SO<sub>2</sub> emissions in Asian cities—are not positive in all three dimensions, including the environmental dimension considered more globally.<sup>9</sup> Reducing fossil-fuel electricity generation and the associated SO<sub>2</sub> emissions from coal-fired power stations and other factories in Asian megacities has positive health impacts in the short term; but there are negative economic effects if no substitute is available at comparable costs for power generation, and ambiguous effects on the climate. Reducing CO<sub>2</sub> emissions certainly decreases the atmospheric accumulation of greenhouse gases in the long term, but in the short term, the simultaneous reduction of SO<sub>2</sub> emissions results in higher global temperatures due to the

smaller number of reflective sulphur particles.<sup>10</sup> The impact of greater “sustainability”, even considered in terms of just one of these dimensions, is therefore an empirical issue.

We can attempt to understand this impact through computer simulations, but these are still questionable due to a lack of observable data, within a perfectly *ad hoc* framework of policy preferences (climate risk aversion, a preference for the present, and whether or not losers are compensated, for instance). Following the example of development economics, which shifted from macro-level theory to micro-scale experimentation at the turn of the century, sustainable development sciences are now moving to the micro-economic scale, using empiricism to make up for the lack of any theory capable of laying down the conditions for the expansion of an economy in its three dimensions.

Going against the normative, top-down approach of Rio (1992) embodied in its three conventions (climate, biodiversity and desertification), the positive, bottom-up approach is seen in the profusion of voluntary commitments recorded for example at Rio+20 (Ramstein, 2012), as well as in the dwindling level of intergovernmental commitments, even non-binding ones. This empirical perspective obliges us to see sustainable development no longer as a simple historical compromise or an abstract intellectual norm, but rather as an ideal type as described by Weber, in other words as a model of the intelligibility of different situations.<sup>11</sup> But this ideal type remains to be developed. “Capitalism” is an ideal type, but “sustainable development” is not as yet—far from it. In its absence, sustainable development, as it is being experimented at different scales and in different parts of the world, is the result of various trial and error processes that are unintelligible as a whole and whose achievements are unclear. This comprehensive view of what is sustainable and what is not is still necessary for the extra effort and commitment that may be required by the persistence or even escalation of the major common problems that have accumulated over the last 20 years. One of the highly important pending

8. Bannister, G. and Thugge, K. (2001). “International trade and poverty alleviation”. IMF Working Paper 01/54, International Monetary Fund, Washington D.C.

9. Even if one of the arguments in favour of mitigation is that the socioeconomic consequences of these will be less negative—or more positive—than those linked to a scenario without mitigation.

10. Closing coal-fired power stations overnight would thus result in an immediate temperature increase. This is the only point conceded by an author such as Hamilton to the advocates of geo-engineering (Hamilton, 2013).

11. “An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those onesidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct” (Max Weber, *The Methodology of the Social Sciences*, 1903-1917, translated by Edward A. Shils & Henry A. Finch, New York: Free Press, 1997).

issues results from this obligation to proceed on two levels: development projects for specific areas or sectors must be sustainable and relevant to their own scale, but must also contribute to the major global balances. The history of the fight against the greenhouse effect shows that combining the two is difficult: a top-down approach (national mitigation targets, for example) does not transform sectors and regions, since concerns persist that, on the contrary, a bottom-up approach—scattered mitigation efforts, to put it simply—will not meet the goal of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) to achieve a “stabilization of greenhouse gas concentrations in the atmosphere at a level that would prevent dangerous anthropogenic interference with the climate system”.

### 2.3. The limitations of intergovernmental cooperation

“Brazil wins and the planet loses” was the title of the newspaper *Le Monde* in its editorial of 22 June, at the closure of the Rio+20 conference.<sup>12</sup> The editorialist concluded that: “The outlook is grim: the major challenges of the environmental crisis have been dodged. And the Heads of States can heave a sigh of relief, as the international agenda has no plans for any further meetings on this issue. They are therefore unlikely to be challenged again about their inaction any time soon”. Yet it is the governments that are in charge of negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda. If a summit is incapable of concluding an agreement, will the inter-institutional mechanism described in Figure 1, at the heart of which we find an intergovernmental and inter-agency system that has remained unchanged for the last 20 years, be any more successful? Once again, a retrospective analysis is useful.

There are no international agreements, treaties or conventions on sustainable development as such, only “declarations” (Rio, 1992 and 2012), “plans” and “recommendations for action” (Agenda 21, Johannesburg, 2002). The legal status of sustainable development is better established at the national or EU level. The main virtue of the declarations and other plans of action at the international level undoubtedly being that they create laws at the lower levels, where these are more likely to be enforced. On the other hand, numerous multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs), conventions and treaties exist. Their breakdown

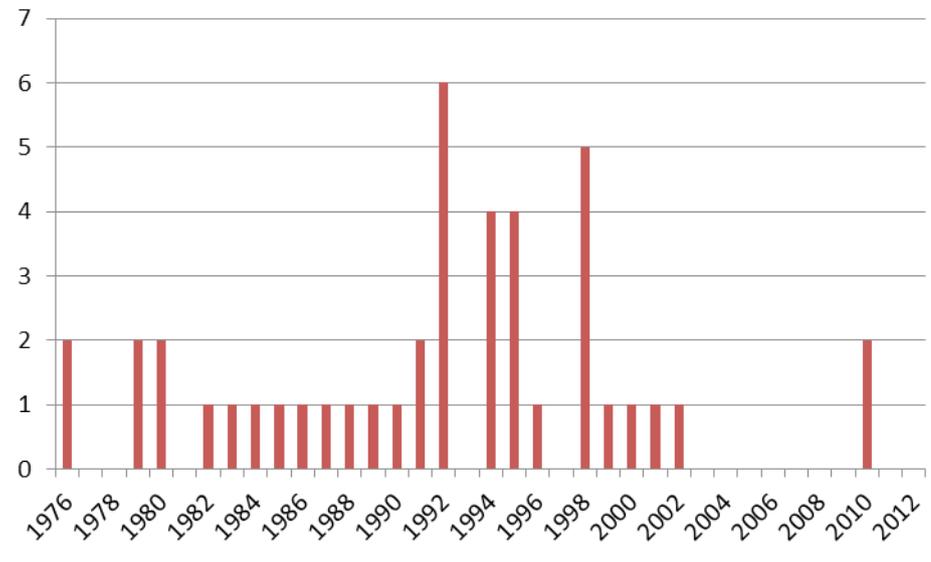
by the European Commission shows the progress made since the Stockholm Conference in 1972 (Figure 2) and the possibility of agreements on issues as diverse as marine protected areas, persistent organic pollutants, heavy metal pollution, SO<sub>2</sub> emissions, protection of the ozone layer, and access to genetic resources and the sharing of benefits arising from their use.

Qualifying the idea of an intergovernmental process that is inert and relatively sterile, the history of MEAs shows that the environment is negotiable by governments. Under certain conditions, however: a limited number of economic actors (ozone) and political actors (REACH) facilitate discussions and makes it easier to reach an agreement; a shared aversion to the same risk of failure motivates this, more so than a commitment driven by a common interest (the production of a particular global public good), according to the distinction made by Stein (1983); finally, the outcome will be all the more certain and positive if the “problem” being negotiated has little economic and social influence. In other words, the environment is negotiable, but sustainable development is far less so. The climate negotiations are an archetypal example of this: they are in no way comparable to the negotiations on SO<sub>2</sub> because of the sheer number of economic actors involved, and the amount and distribution of the opportunity cost of action.

Recalling Stein (1983), who differentiates between problems of collaboration prompted by common interests and the pursuit of efficiency, and problems of coordination motivated by a common aversion to a risk, we see a transformation of the rationality of cooperation over the last 20 years. The approach based on collaboration for the production of a common good or global public good, which was prevalent in Rio (1992) and affirmed by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) several years later (Kaul, Grunberg, Stern, 1999), appears to be replaced by an approach based on coordination for a number of risks that are unbearable to certain parties. There is no longer a common interest in a particular outcome of cooperation, but a common aversion to at least one situation—the *status quo*. The Copenhagen Accord of 2009 illustrates this change: the goal is no longer to meet the recommendations of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) and to reduce global emissions after a short-term peak, which has now been ruled out, but to change the BAU (Business as Usual) situation, which would result in a dangerous increase in temperatures. In short, avoiding the worst rather than achieving the best, due to a lack of agreement on what the best actually is.

12. [http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/06/22/rio-20-le-bresil-gagnant-la-planete-perdante\\_1723211\\_3232.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/idees/article/2012/06/22/rio-20-le-bresil-gagnant-la-planete-perdante_1723211_3232.html)

**Figure 2.** Evolution of the number of MEAs over time (1976-2012)



Source : European Commission [http://ec.europa.eu/environment/international\\_issues/pdf/agreements\\_en.pdf](http://ec.europa.eu/environment/international_issues/pdf/agreements_en.pdf)

## 2.4. Initial implications for the post-2015 agenda

- Our assessment of sustainable development 20 years after Rio (1992) stresses the urgent need for action. It shows that the challenges of sustainable development today are primarily those of implementation, with the difficulty of moving from rhetoric to reality highlighting the limitations of the proactive, simplistic discourse describing sustainable development as a process with no losers.
- Seen as *process* objectives or targets, the SDGs could address *ex ante* some of this need for action and implementation; only under certain conditions, however, particularly regarding measurement, monitoring and assessment. This would be a fundamental break with the spirit of the MDGs, which focused on very intangible outcome objectives—precisely to avoid being hampered by impossible negotiations on the means of meeting them, and in particular the policy choices offered to or imposed on the different countries.
- The state of cooperation that we have described also indicates that the political economy of sustainable development—in short, who loses, who wins, and why?—has been conspicuously absent from texts and commitments, meaning they ultimately derogate from the principle of reality over time, with the illusion of an ideal win-win world. Negotiations of goals broken down into national targets have the second virtue—*ex ante* once again since, as the saying goes, the devil is in the

detail—of encouraging and informing a political economy of sustainable development, without which the biggest loser in terms of public choices is likely to remain the environment.

- We have also seen that in addition to the need for action, there is a need for history and narrative<sup>13</sup>, as well as a need for knowledge, which will eventually give sustainable development the ideal type status it is lacking today. In addition, there is a need for a narrator, since the key figures of the Stockholm and Rio summits have not been replaced. The environment is here again suffering from a generational effect.
- Finally, the need for cooperation is unclear, with the exception of cooperation relating to the knowledge production mentioned above. We will now examine this in greater detail.

## 3. THE NEED FOR COOPERATION

Sceptics will point out that the UN files are bursting with texts, treaties and conventions which, if taken as a whole, cover the three dimensions of sustainable development. These texts assemble declarations and intentions, decisions and commitments, in a series of legal subtleties. What can the SDGs

13. Here we agree with Halle *et al.* (2013), who call for a “narrative of change [which] requires the skillful combination of both negative and positive messages. One provides the impetus for change while the other points to feasible, specific actions that can make change happen, amid broader opportunities”.

add to this maze of texts is the first question put to anyone wishing to measure their added value. Sceptics will also remind us that the SDGs emerged at the initiative of two developing countries—Colombia and Guatemala, which are neither least developed nor emerging countries—and that they thrived on the resignation and abulia that prevailed during the talks at Rio+20, to the point that they eventually appeared as a godsend at the end of the summit, since they provided it with a dignified outcome in the form of a consensual, tangible and new product. The composition and deliberation process of the intergovernmental group tasked, further to the summit, with negotiating the SDGs gives no substantial indication of what is expected of these universal goals, or of their added value, especially given the current state of texts and associated negotiations on biodiversity, climate, development funding and trade liberalisation, etc. We could even ask whether these negotiations might not in fact run the risk of upsetting the fragile political balances established in each of these conventions between developed, emerging and least developed countries. The negotiating positions at Rio+20, with the substantial divisions between North and South, came across as being strikingly outdated or even old-fashioned in comparison with what was seen in Cancun (Mexico, 2010), Durban (South Africa, 2011) or Nagoya (Japan, 2010) within the framework of more specific talks on climate and biodiversity. There is a real danger that all parties may become trapped once more in rhetorical discussions where environmental commitments are demanded of Northern countries that balk at the idea due to a lack of reciprocity from the emerging countries, and where the principle of common but differentiated responsibility is waved like a gavel to bring an end to the tedious, obsolete talks. What can therefore be expected of multilateral negotiations on the SDGs within the current cooperation framework?

### 3.1. Two rationales for cooperation

The post-2015 development agenda falls within these two possible approaches to cooperation; we differentiate them for intelligibility concerns, but they may of course be used simultaneously, as different rationalities overlap in the complex negotiation process. The first, somewhat idealistic approach is that of the production of global public goods motivated by shared interests; the second, more realistic approach is that of coordination based on a common aversion to certain agreed risks. Preferences converge towards the same result, which is the one most desired by all

parties in the first case. In the second case, preferences only converge towards avoidance of the worst case scenario, since the situations preferred by the different parties remain incompatible.

This second approach is not the one adopted by the Rio summit (1992), or by the Rio conference (2012). The very title of the declaration concluding the 2012 conference—*The Future We Want*—stresses the programmatic convergence of preferences towards a sustainable future that universal goals are meant to embody. The latter are milestones towards which the best interests of all concerned are supposed to be directed. The originality and added value of such goals then lies in their ability to alter the paths followed by economies and societies, beyond the commitments and actions undertaken within the framework of existing texts. To a certain extent, the SDGs thus highlight the shortcomings of current texts, in other words their inability to transform the present, either because they cannot be translated into reality (the implementation gap, see above), or because they ignore at least one of the three dimensions of sustainable development (the coherence gap) by concentrating on the environment<sup>14</sup>. These two gaps are in fact linked, since the implementation of sustainable development reduces coherence, or lessens its inclusiveness. The SDGs therefore need to fill these two gaps, which are acknowledged in *The Future We Want* when it states that the SDGs must contribute to “focused and coherent action on sustainable development”.

According to this first rationality or approach to collaboration, sustainable development can be reduced to a limited series of coherent and implementable goals, reflecting the harmonious preferences of nations. The preconditions are demanding, however, if we recall the state of the concept of sustainable development 20 years after the Earth Summit, which we presented in the previous point. The existence of a list of universal, implementable and coherent goals has not been established: the United Nations texts contain none, or very few; and attempts at defining such goals do not fulfil these three properties at the same time. This situation cannot be attributed to the unwillingness or inconsistency of the negotiators; instead, it seems to indicate an impossibility linking universal applicability, implementability and coherence like the points of a triangle. The difficulty of simultaneously filling both the coherence and implementation gaps is compounded by the problem of being both universal and implementable at the same time.

14. Or, for the MDGs, by concentrating on one of the dimensions of poverty reduction, without taking into account the environment and interdependencies between MDGs, linked for example to resource scarcity.

In practice, sustainable development reflects the tension between dimensions that is acceptable to a society at a given time; universal applicability and implementability then come into conflict. The SDGs are at risk of being either universal and “aspirational” but inapplicable, or implementable but not universal. This is the case of many goals put forward in the two reports by the HLG and the SDSN, which in fact apply first and foremost to the developing and least developed countries. The first goal proposed by the SDSN consists, for example, in ending “extreme poverty including hunger”, with extreme poverty defined as people living on less than \$1.25 per day. This goal, which is implementable in essence (providing leverage for action is associated with it, such as income transfer), is not exactly universal, as it does not apply to the writer or readers of these lines. The second goal is to “achieve development within planetary boundaries”. This is universal and aspirational, but the means of achieving it are unclear. Those mentioned in the targets are likely to be insufficient since, in a juxtaposition with no explicit link between such targets, they urge on the one hand the developing countries to become richer in terms of the classic definition of national income (target 2a) and recommend expanding the statistical measurement of GDP (target 2b) to include planetary boundaries on the other hand.

Why, at present, do the majority of targets concern the developing and least developed countries? To break the link between universal applicability and implementability, the countries seem to have come to an agreement on what they want for others—meaning for those less wealthy than themselves. The individual aspirations of the OECD countries in particular remain enigmatic and obscure in the two reports, probably because an implementable target (the right of access to energy, universal health coverage, relative poverty reduction) is a conflictual policy choice in the current state of our knowledge of its effects on the three pillars, which is not the case for the eradication of absolute poverty or illiteracy in the least developed countries. In a nutshell, everyone agrees that there should be fewer poor people in other countries, as well as guaranteed access to health services, education and energy; but no one has yet taken the step of applying such ambitions to themselves and subsequently accounting for their action, however mandatory when implementable targets are set. Targets unveil what is upsetting, and who is upset.

In a “positive” narrative of sustainable development, seen not as a problem or a risk to be avoided, but as a collective aspiration, an asymptote to be reached, a contradiction emerges, since the desire for sustainable development is shared by all, whereas the means of achieving it are confined to

the individual level. The same is true of happiness. It is a state that everyone hopes to reach, but individuals all have their own practical definition of happiness and hold the key to achieving it.

Continuing with this analogy, the alternative is not to reach the state of happiness, on whose definition and determinants there will never be agreement, but to avoid certain misfortunes and to address the risk factors that contribute to these. In this second approach or rationality, known as “coordination”, the SDGs will be organised like a series of constraints requiring a change of behaviour, whose natural path would lead to ruin. The ban on smoking in public places, mandatory use of helmets, speed limits, natural protected areas: the same applies to road safety as to sustainable development, in short. We cannot prevent people from dying on the roads, but we can limit the number and severity of accidents. To return to the climate, the goal here would no longer be to limit temperature rise to 2°C, contrary to the Copenhagen Accord, but in reality to avoid an increase of 4°C, 5°C, or 6°C with consequences so uncertain they constitute a threat to all countries, the only real reason for cooperation. This second “narrative” of sustainable development seems to be the one preferred by the two reports: avoiding the avoidable misfortunes while making a difference to people in the developing and least developed countries; and ensuring planetary boundaries and other tipping points are not reached, even though the means of achieving this are shrouded in silence.

From this second perspective, what exactly do the SDGs add to the existing situation? They have several virtues. First, they reset common aversions; second, they gather within a coherent framework agreed risks and the *process* objectives capable of reducing the intensity of these risks; and finally, they also provide the opportunity of extracting the drivers from texts, and of transforming them into targets. This is in fact the direction taken by certain recommendations of the HLP report.

### 3.2. Learning from the Millennium Development Goals

The precedent set by the MDGs provides additional answers to the question of the added value of the SDGs in the current cooperation framework. The MDGs clearly contributed to the emergence of the concept of the SDGs through a kind of analogy. Their analysis provides a series of lessons about their effects, which could also be expected of the SDGs.

The commitment of 147 Heads of State to provide “unstinting support” for the achievement of the MDGs has had a profound impact on the structure of aid, on the definition of the policies promoted

and on their implementation by the governments of the countries of the South for the last 10 years (Gastineau, Gubert, Robillard, Roubaud, 2010). The MDGs have helped to organise the academic “development” community, to stimulate its experimentation processes and research on measurement, to increase knowledge on the impact of the different development projects—and thus on the relevance of each one—, to channel public and private funding and to prioritise public policies, thereby modifying the policy preferences of the recipient countries. By raising awareness, the MDGs have also affected individual preferences, as shown by the support for the Make Poverty History campaigns and the evolution of different opinion polls on the relevance of official development assistance over the last 10 years.<sup>15</sup>

By analogy, the SDGs could attract coalitions of front runners (companies included) in the search for solutions to the common problems identified: decoupling energy and carbon, sustainable agriculture, etc. The potential candidates for the SDGs can only be selected through political discussions, and the administrative process to define these SDGs tells us nothing useful about their identity; leadership and coordination are therefore required in order to specify and distribute the associated responsibilities, risks, funding and profits. As long as they address all of these subjects (and not just the identification of goals in the strict sense), the SDGs can transform the international division of research, experimentation and assessment according to the capacities and preferences of each stakeholder, so as to improve the global efficiency of the cooperation system. Here another analogy springs to mind, that of fundamental research, and especially space research, which has been the subject of cooperation between countries for 20 years.

Second, and again by analogy with the virtuous effects of the MDGs, an important contribution of the SDGs should be to improve the measurement and monitoring of inertias and progress. Whichever approach we take to it, the post-2015 development regime is one of experimentation, without being limited to technical or technological experimentation, even if the latter aspect plays a leading role in many contributions (SDSN, 2010). Setting an objective implies measurement, which is proving essential to our understanding of sustainable development as it is currently being formulated in different

parts of the world. One example worth noting here is the bus rapid transit (BRT) system promoted by the development banks for its environmental effects, based on a technological, commercial and social innovation by the municipality of Quito (Ecuador)—which in fact had no explicit environmental driver. Chance and contingency will create solutions to the problem of sustainability; it is essential not only to instigate or generate discoveries and innovations, but also to observe them wherever they may occur, and whatever is driving them. This observation may be a second service—more indirect this time—provided by the SDGs.

### 3.3. Creating an international cooperation framework

Figure 1 lists the various components of what we might call the “Rio regime (1992)”, which we characterise by the constituent elements of a regime in the sense of international relations: the power structure prevailing during the period in question, policy preferences, consensual knowledge, institutions and principles.<sup>16</sup> The last line of the table describes the present period: shifting power relations, heterogeneous policy preferences, and weaker institutions and public actors, all in a context of principles that have remained unchanged since Rio. What contribution can the SDGs make in this apparent disorder? Can they provide the foundations for a new cooperation framework, one that is relieved in particular of the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) that has obstructed it for the last 20 years?

The novelty of the current situation (the first three columns) lies in the unprecedented dilution (at least since 1992) of power between countries and actors with heterogeneous preferences. The liberal compromise “for sustainable development” reached at the Rio Earth Summit (Bernstein, 2001) is no longer accessible today because of this growing gap between policy preferences and power (Berthaud and Voituriez, 2012). There is an urgent need to modify policy preferences in order to “match” them to changes in power and to produce a new compromise “for sustainable development” that is not a consensus for development for certain groups of countries, and a consensus for the environment for others. There is no indication that a change of preferences is underway within intergovernmental negotiations; if such a change is indeed taking place, then it is a slow, obscure process. It is worth recalling the exact title of one of the major topics for discussion at the Rio+20 conference: “Green economy

15. See the latest AFD press release on the subject: “72% of French people think that development assistance is not a waste of money” (November 26, 2012) <http://www.afd.fr/lang/en/home/presse-afd/communiqués?actuCtnId=89503>, and at the European level “Development aid in times of economic turmoil” Eurobarometer 318, 2009, European Commission.

16. For an application to agricultural markets, see Daviron and Voituriez (2006).

in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication”, a baffling heading. It seems to encompass a series of disjointed interests: the green economy is linked to the emergence of the private sector and to the need to embody sustainable development using a toolbox; poverty eradication is a bone thrown to the developing countries; and sustainability remains according to the demands of the developed countries, especially the EU. Here we have a collection of incoherent preferences, when taken as a whole.

At the same time, the consensual knowledge base has been transformed over the last 20 years (column 4 in Figure 1). Even without the Climategate episodes that undermined the legitimacy of the IPCC to produce consensual information, the period of the next two years leading up to 2015 will be one of doubt, humility and even ignorance, which may be exaggerated beyond reason in order to magnify the thirst for adventure of the well-known figures offering their services to save the planet.<sup>17</sup>

If a regime is defined by a series of interconnected goals (reflecting power relations), principles and rules, it is immediately clear and perfectly tautological that the first condition (interconnected goals) is met by the SDGs. The SDGs provide the opportunity of (re)building common problems (social objectives)—problems that are not set out by nature and science alone, but built socially on the basis of negotiations. What needs to be achieved at the global level as a matter of urgency and priority over the next 15 years in order to make the world more sustainable? Some choices will be subject to disagreement: this must be recognised. Can the reduction of inequalities be a sustainable development goal, for example?

An international political compromise on this subject seems virtually impossible today. The reasons for its inclusion in the SDGs, or for its exclusion, nevertheless deserve to be heard and discussed; each stakeholder must then attempt to move the line of conflict using all possible arguments—power, ideas, the reduction of perceived risks, and issue linking. A non-global agenda becomes a singular agenda. The SDGs facilitate policy making on a subject that has no universal solution—sustainable development, which is balancing on its three pillars. In this respect, the negotiation process would benefit from exposing all problem areas—trade, inequalities, and CBDR in particular, with each of these being interconnected subjects—

in that they are upsetting issues; this would provide possibilities for political resolution and preference revelation at a given time, precisely because they are problematic.

By definition, the SDGs, being universal, meet the preferences of all parties, whereas the targets that define these goals to the national level provide the opportunity for expressing sovereign and singular preferences. The goals are less important than the targets, as with the Copenhagen Accord on climate change, in which the 2°C goal is far less important than the list of national targets each State set itself—which, if necessary, may be completely inconsistent with the 2°C goal. In a sustainable development regime that is fragmented by and within national spaces in this manner, cooperation essentially concerns measurement, verification and learning between parties. Although the physical space is certainly that of the planet, the political space remains national. The only intrusion allowed into this space is that of statistics.

The conditions for the emergence and stability of a post-2015 development regime, seen as an experimentation regime that is fragmented within national spaces, are considerable. First, the issue linkages (column 5 in Figure 1) of interest to the different parties must be established, without which the headings of the goals are at risk of being ludicrously vague and the targets are likely to lack any coherence or relation to one another. The state of power relations shows that various agendas are overlapping or competing with one another: a post-MDG agenda, a “green” agenda, and an agenda for social inclusion/protection, but also, for example, an agenda for additional recognition of the rights of communities. The clearest tactical linkage established to date is the one between purely “environmental” MDGs and SDGs, but it may not be enough, since it does not concern the middle-income countries or, ultimately, the companies that see these countries as the emerging markets of the future. There is an obvious paradox in the fact that the SDGs were originally supported by these middle-income countries, but have since been removed from their agendas.

Second, an experimentation regime cannot emerge all other things being equal. Such a regime requires a secure space for experimentation—by default, we have assumed this to be the national space—within which public policies and private initiatives will be deployed. At present, these spaces are both national and globalised, in other words largely open to flows of goods, services and capital. The emergence and stability of a sustainable development experimentation regime implies re-considering investment and trade regimes and ensuring they are compatible, which is no easy task;

17. See, for example, the critical analysis of the Paris Appeal for the High Seas: Voituriez, B., Jacques, G., Geistforfer, P. (2013), “L’Appel de Paris pour la haute mer, ou l’Invention de l’ignorance”, <http://www.clubdesargonautes.org/opinion/appelparis.php>

**Table 1.** The rise and fall of the Rio (1992) regime

Time	collective situation			Issue linkages	regime CHaracteristics	
	Distribution of power	Social objectives	Consensual knowledge		Institutions	Principles and rules
1992-2000 <i>Rio regime</i>	Predominance of US and EU Rising power of firms	Environmental: climate change, biodiversity, desertification, Agenda 21	Global warming (IPCC) Universal solutions: internalization of environmental externalities (market based instruments)	Poverty and environment (Brundtland report) Globalization and sustainable development (WTO Preamble)	Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) UNFCCC Kyoto Protocol (KP) Convention on Biodiversity (CBD) UNCCD	Common but differentiated responsibility  Polluter-pay principle
2000-2002 Erosion	Predominance of US and EU Rising power of firms	Environmental: climate change, biodiversity, Agenda 21 + Millenium development goals (MDGs)	Global warming (IPCC) Sustainable development recipes: .internalization of environmental externalities (market based instruments) + Public private partnerships (PPP), Corporate social responsibility (CSR), private standards	Poverty reduction as development	CSD UNFCCC KP CBD + Foundations	Common but differentiated responsibility  Polluter-pay principle
2002-2012 Contestation	US and EU contested by the BASIC Private actors (donors & investors)	Environmental: climate change, biodiversity, Agenda 21 + MDGs + Green growth	Climate gate Stern report Sukhdev report No development recipes ( <i>we all know we don't know</i> )  Policy experiments: Randomized controlled trial (MDGs) Millenium villages (MDGs) Emission trading schemes (KP) Payments for environmental services (CBD)	Green economy and social inclusion	Un-institutionalization (Learning platforms/networks) Un-statization (voluntary commitments) Un-UNisation (Copenhagen climate change accord)	Common but differentiated responsibility  Polluter-pay principle Consumer-pay principle
2012-2015 Refoundation ?	A large spectrum of active players without clear hierarchy: US EU BASIC Middle income Least developed countries Firms	A large spectrum of unsolved problems: Environmental: climate change, biodiversity, Agenda 21 + MDGs + Green growth + Social inclusion/ equity	Sustaining the momentum (Stern Report 2.0, IPCC report AR5) No sustainable development recipes ( <i>we all know we don't know</i> )	MDGs and Sustainable development through Sustainable development goals (SDGs)?	Re-institutionalization ? Re-statization? Re-UNisation?	Common but differentiated responsibility : transformed ?  Polluter-pay principle Consumer-pay principle

Source: Author.

proposals for WTO reform by scholars and think tanks are a step in this direction (Mattoo and Subramanian, 2013). The internal coherence of the post-2015 regime cannot be achieved without external coherence, in other words without coherence with the economic (investment and finance) and trade regimes.

### 3.4. Subsequent implications for the post-2015 agenda

- We have seen that there are at least two possible approaches to cooperation, depending on whether or not individual preferences and interests converge; at the end of our description of the current state of intergovernmental cooperation, a misunderstanding persists concerning the pre-eminence of one over the other. Under the pretext of negotiating according to the common interest (the future we want), the negotiations actually seem to be focusing on avoiding the worst case scenario.
- The examination of the shortcomings of the existing texts on sustainable development, as well as of the hopes pinned on the SDGs, suggests the existence of a trilemma: the SDGs cannot be simultaneously universal, coherent across the three dimensions and implementable. The conditions for the implementation of sustainable development contradict the desire for coherence and universal applicability. The SDGs nevertheless provide a certain level of flexibility, by distinguishing between universal goals and national targets—in other words by acknowledging this impossibility.
- This flexibility carries with it demanding conditions for monitoring and assessment: the relative ease of negotiating *ad hoc* targets should not mask the corresponding difficulty of negotiating reliable and effective reporting and assessment mechanisms.
- Providing substantial or tactical linkages are established between issues, some of which are currently missing from the debate, the SDG negotiations may give rise to the emergence of an international regime that is fragmented by and within national spaces—a multi-stakeholder experimentation regime whose purpose is to stimulate, encourage, generate, reorientate, measure and assess national public policies and private investments with a view to greater sustainability.

- Another condition for the emergence and stability of such a regime—one that is admittedly particularly demanding—is the compatibility of the associated investment and trade regimes, which are subject to the same goals of sustainability beyond existing commitments.

## 4. CONCLUSION

The negotiation of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) was one of the key outcomes of Rio+20. We have seen in this article, after a retrospective analysis of the achievements and limitations of the first Rio conference in 1992, that the SDGs *should* help to address two challenges: that of the implementation and that of the coherence of sustainable development policies, in all countries regardless of their income level. Sustainable development is a political compromise between countries with different or even conflicting interests, which has not yet been translated into economic reality. “It’s economy, stupid!”, said Bill Clinton before defeating George Bush in the American presidential election of 1992. We could all make the same observation today.

The SDGs therefore need to embed sustainable development into economic reality, to encourage learning and experimentation processes, given the lack of “solutions” and recipes, and in so doing, to restore the virtues of cooperation.

The conditions for success are nevertheless demanding. The translation of sustainable development into economic reality, which follows on from its translation into political reality, creates losers; its added value is uncertain, as uncertainty about the benefits may exceed uncertainty about the costs of action. Making sustainable development operational therefore requires the creation of an *internal* political compromise in each country or region, and the rejection of the overly simplistic idea of win-win solutions. A compromise between countries made the concept of sustainable development viable in 1992; a compromise within countries will make it operational from 2015, as long as the negotiations are not limited to deciding what is good for others—especially the developing and least developed countries—, but are instead an opportunity to answer the eminently less consensual question of what is good for oneself. ■

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# What is the purpose of the sustainable development goals?

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