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Democracy, Sustainability and the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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Abstract: In the context of the ongoing review of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and their possible replacement by a new framework in 2015, it is important to highlight the issues of democracy, ecologically sustainability and socio-economic equity as being central to such a framework. This article puts forth ideas towards a new vision of the future, with a framework that includes a set of universal principles and values, a set of nine Sustainable Well-being Goals to replace the current MDGs, and some key priorities in each of the Goals. It proposes a vision called Radical Ecological Democracy, with elements of direct political and economic democracy, localization embedded within ecoregional linkages and planning, sustainable and equitable provisioning of basic needs (water, food, shelter, energy, sanitation, learning and health), and other elements towards a sustainable and equitable future.

Keywords: Democracy, Sustainability, Environment, MDG, Governance, Equity.

The pace of preparations for the review and possible recasting of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015 is becoming frenetic. Dozens of national, regional and global meetings are taking place, and several committees and panels have been set up by the United Nations and related institutions to provide advice. While this is generating a lot of heat, it is not clear how much refreshingly new light is emerging. Quite a bit of the discussion is along the predictable and tired paths of building in some corrective measures into 'business as usual' scenarios, but at least a few brave voices from within civil society and some governments are pushing for more fundamental changes in economic and political structures.

The evidence that human beings are on a collision course with the earth is overwhelming, and need not be elaborated here. Equally evident is the fact that there are unacceptably high levels of poverty, hunger and undernourishment, disease, exploitation, conflict, and other injustices. Both unsustainability and inequity affect not only current generations, but those still to come ... and the rest of nature. The question is: what would it take to move away from this situation? The context of the post-2015 agenda provides us a platform to answer this.

This article puts forth a possible new framework and visions for the post-2015 agenda. It

- describes a set of principles and values such a framework needs to be based on.
- lays out nine Sustainable Well-being Goals to replace the current MDGs, and some key priorities in each.
- discusses a possible vision of the future with sustainability, equity, and meaningful prosperity.

Evolution of MDGs into a new framework¹

The outcome statement of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development (2012) centred around ecological sustainability.² If countries of the world are serious about the commitment made at Rio, then the MDGs need to evolve into a new framework; sustainability was not at their heart, and it is increasingly clear that without such an orientation, various 'development' goals are impossible to meet for both the current and future generations.³ As the report of the UN System Task Team on the post-2015 development agenda says, 'the proposed vision and framework for the post-2015 agenda must be fully aligned with that (Rio+20) outcome'.⁴ Accordingly, the theme of sustainability should be running through all the post-2015 goals (as should the themes on equity and human rights), even as more specific environmental targets such as halting the erosion of biodiversity could be specified in one of the goals. The post-2015 framework needs to explicitly and clearly build the linkages within all the goals.

The UN System Task Team referred to above has proposed that the four key dimensions of the post-2015

framework should be (1) inclusive social development, (2) inclusive economic development, (3) environmental sustainability, and (4) peace and security. The Team has justifiably left the task of working out the specific framework and the specific goals, targets, and other things to the international process underway leading up to 2015. A subsequent UNEP report ventures into this territory, noting that one key problem with the MDGs was the lack of integration amongst the various goals, with sustainability lacking from actions under several goals.⁵

Therefore, if Rio+20's message is to be heeded, sustainability needs to become not one specific goal, but a theme running across all goals. With this in mind, a suggested set of goals for the post-2015 framework, which links to but goes beyond the MDGs, is given below. But first, it is important to lay down some key principles and values that could form the base of the goals framework.

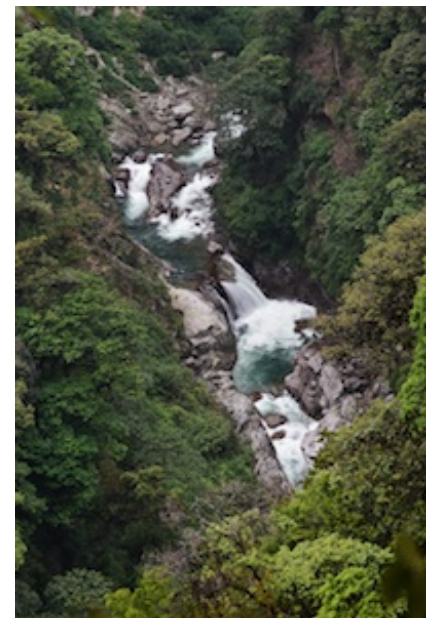
Principles for the post-2015 framework

Discussions on recasting of the current MDG framework, with the inclusion of perspectives from the 'sustainable development' processes (the Rio+20 outcome statement being the latest), are going on in various forums. Both governments and civil society are participating, and there is already a bewildering plethora of documents and discussion platforms. There is not, however, anywhere near adequate discussion, at least not with a focus on environmental sustainability and linked issues of equity and governance. In this section there is an attempt to delineate some basic principles. While these are listed as a number of different principles, it is important to note that they are inextricably linked to one another.⁶

Principle 1: Ecological integrity and limits

The functional integrity and resilience of the ecological processes, ecosystems, and biological diversity that is the basis of all life on earth, respecting which entails a realization of the ecological limits within which human economies and societies must restrict themselves.⁷

Indigenous peoples of the world have long realized that the earth places natural limits we cannot exceed.⁸ Modern science and experience is now confirming this in various ways, such as in the case of climate change, or the depletion of the oceans. The principle of ecological integrity and limits, also encompassing the space needed for other species to thrive, is therefore crucial.



Principle 2: Equity and justice

Equitable access of all human beings, in current and future generations, to the conditions needed for human well-being—socio-cultural, economic, political, ecological, and in particular food, water, shelter, clothing, energy, healthy living, and satisfying social and cultural relations—without endangering any other person's access; equity between humans and other elements of nature; and social, economic, and environmental justice for all.

Principle 3: Right to meaningful participation

The right of each person and community to meaningfully participate in crucial decisions affecting her/his/its life, and to the conditions that provide the ability for such participation, as part of a radical, participatory democracy.

Principle 4: Responsibility

The responsibility of each citizen and community to ensure meaningful decision-making that is based on the twin principles of ecological integrity and socio-economic equity, conditioned in the interim by a 'common but differentiated responsibility' in which those currently rich within the country take on a greater role and/or are incentivised or forced to give up their excessively consumptive lifestyles in order for the poor to have adequate levels of human security. This principle should also extend to the impact a country has on other countries, with a 'do no harm' component as a basic minimum component.

Principle 5: Diversity

Respect for the diversity of environments and ecologies, species and genes (wild and domesticated), cultures, ways of living, knowledge systems, values, economies and livelihoods, and polities (including those of indigenous peoples and local communities), in so far as they are in consonance with the principles of sustainability and equity.

Principle 6: Collective commons and solidarity

Collective and co-operative thinking and working founded on the socio-cultural, economic, and ecological commons, respecting both common custodianship and individual freedoms and innovations within such collectivities, with inter-personal and inter-community solidarity as a fulcrum.

Principle 7: Rights of nature

The right of non-human nature and all its species, wild or domesticated, to survive and thrive in the conditions in which they have evolved, along with respect for the 'community of life' as a whole.

Principle 8: Resilience and adaptability

The ability of communities and humanity as a whole, to respond, adapt, and sustain the resilience needed to maintain ecological sustainability and equity in the face of external and internal forces of change, including through respecting conditions, like diversity, enabling the resilience of nature.

Principle 9: Subsidiarity and ecoregionalism

Local rural and urban communities, small enough for all members to take part in face-to-face decision-making, as the fundamental unit of governance, linked with each other at bioregional, ecoregional and cultural levels into landscape/seascape institutions that are answerable to these basic units.

Principle 10: Interconnectedness

The inextricable connections amongst various aspects of human civilization, and therefore, amongst any set of 'development' or 'well-being' goals—environmental, economic, social, cultural, and political.

If this set of principles, and others along similar lines, are to be accepted and adhered to, humanity needs to reconceptualize and reconfigure economy, society, and polity. Ecological limits and socio-economic imperatives can be seen as two boundaries for human activity,⁹ leading to fairly major shifts in macroeconomic policy and practice, as also in political governance from local to global levels.¹⁰

Sustainable well-being goals

Based on the above principles and values, a new set of goals can be framed, for the post-2015 agenda. These Sustainable Well-being Goals (SWGs) are as follows:

Goal 1: Food for all

All persons to be ensured adequate and nutritious food, through production and distribution systems that are ecologically sustainable and equitable (currently part of MDG 1).

Important considerations here are that food security (and sovereignty) requires as much of the provisioning as possible to happen through localized production and consumption networks, that agriculture is based on organic, biologically diverse inputs, that the enormous waste of food characterizing the consumerist class is eliminated, and that for the extreme poor who do not have access to either the means of production or food itself, there needs to be rights-based schemes ensuring such access. In all this, highest priority should be given to regions and populations with starvation and extreme hunger/undernourishment.

Goal 2: Water for all

All persons and communities to be ensured adequate and safe water, through harvesting, distribution, and use systems that are ecologically sustainable and equitable (currently part of MDG7).

As in the case of food, important considerations are high priority to localized water harvesting and distribution systems, elimination of waste (especially in cities and industries), prioritization of essential uses like drinking and food production over industrial and luxury consumption uses, and guaranteeing a certain minimum for essential uses as a right for every person/community. Again, highest priority should be given to severely deprived regions and populations.

Goal 3: Health for all

All persons to be ensured conditions for prevention of disease and maintenance of good health, in ways that are ecologically sustainable and equitable (currently partly in MDG 6).

Priority should be given to preventive measures including clean air and water and adequate sanitation, and to affordable health care and medicines (including free provisioning to the poor), as far as possible empowering communities and individuals to manage these; and health care should combine various traditional and modern systems.

Goal 4: Energy for all

All persons and communities to be ensured equitable access to energy sources in ways that are ecologically sustainable, as much as technically and economically viable (currently missing from the MDGs).

Phasing out fossil fuels and nuclear energy should be set as a time-bound target, and their replacement by renewables, with high priority to decentralised sources and generation which can be built and managed locally. Highest priority should be given to regions/populations currently starved of clean energy.



BioSuisse farm, Biel, Switzerland, cropped @Ashish Kothari

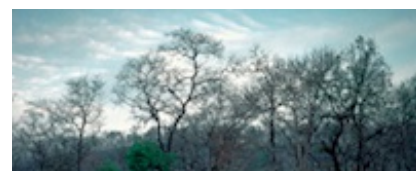
Goal 5: Ecological security

The conservation and resilience of ecosystems, ecological cycles and functions, and biodiversity to be ensured (an expansion of MDG7); and equitable access to nature and natural resources ensured to all peoples and communities.

Coverage of areas specially conserved for biodiversity and ecosystem functions should be increased (at least to the Aichi Target 11 of 17% terrestrial and 10% marine area), with systems of conservation being democratized and based on integration of rights and responsibilities; in all kinds of land/water uses, activities that are ecologically damaging need to be modified or replaced; high priority should also be given to the regeneration and restoration of degraded ecosystems and the revival of populations of threatened species; equitable access (including through territorial and resource tenure) must be accorded to natural resources, with special focus on populations with high and direct dependence on such resources for their survival and livelihoods.

Goal 6: Learning for all

All persons to be ensured equitable access to learning and education in ways that enhance ecological sensitivity and knowledge, as much as cultural, technical, technological, socio-economic, and other aspects (an expansion of MDG 2).



Education systems should incorporate multiple ways of learning, combining formal and non-formal, traditional and modern, local and outside languages, local and external teachers; high priority needs to be given to vocational learning, through community-based institutions; content should be focused on enhancing links with nature, culture, and society, encouraging community and collective thinking and working, respecting diversity, and other principles and values described in this section.

Goal 7: Secure settlements for all

Ensuring secure, safe, sustainable, and equitable settlements for all, including adequate and appropriate shelter, sanitation, civic facilities, and transportation (currently partly in MDG7, partly absent).

Dignified, adequate infrastructure and services should be prioritized for rural areas and poor parts of urban areas; the parasitic exploitation of villages by cities should be eliminated through measures for maximum urban self-sufficiency and sustainability; public transportation, walking and bicycling needs to be prioritized over private motorized transportation; adequate shelter/housing with land rights should be a high priority for urban slums.

Goal 8: Democratic governance

Ensuring that all people and communities have equal voice in decision-making, through institutions of direct democracy, and mechanisms of transparent, accountable governance.

Institutions of direct democracy, including decentralised decision-making powers in rural and urban areas, need to be set up or strengthened in all countries; where decision-making at larger levels requires representation, there should be robust mechanisms of transparency, accountability, and redressal (including recall) that are responsive to the institutions of direct grassroots democracy.

Goal 9: Special focus on women and children

The special needs of women and children in all other Goals to be met through rights-based and empowerment approaches (currently in MDGs 3, 4, and 5).

Cross-cutting all the other 8 goals should be the high priority to the needs, rights, and capabilities of women and children; mechanisms are needed that empower them to be central to decision-making and key beneficiaries of welfare programmes.



Village & civil society consultation on CFRs, Odisha, India. @Ashish Kothari

Targets, actions, indicators

Each of these goals can be further elaborated into targets, actions, and indicators; measures to monitor their achievement can be described; and periodic assessments scheduled. This is already underway in a number of institutions, and it is not the purpose of this paper to go into such detail.¹¹

Visions of the future

If human well-being is to be achieved without endangering the earth and ourselves, and without leaving behind half or more of humanity, the notion of well-being itself needs rethinking. It is not about market-led dreams of ever-increasing material accumulation, but rather about having secure ways of meeting basic needs, being healthy, having access to opportunities for learning, being employed in satisfactory and meaningful tasks, having good social relations, leading culturally and spiritually fulfilling lives, and being politically empowered to be part of decision-making.

Broadly, such a framework of human well-being could be called Radical Ecological Democracy (RED):

*a social, political and economic arrangement in which all citizens have the right and full opportunity to participate in decision-making, based on the twin fulcrums of ecological sustainability and human equity.*¹²

Taking the above principles together (and others to be added as practice and thought progresses), RED is a continuous and mutually respectful dialogue amongst human beings, and between humanity and the rest of nature. It is also not *one* solution or blueprint, but a great variety of them, linked through a common set of values such as those listed in Box 1 above. RED is at once a political, economic, ecological, cultural, and philosophical paradigm, or set of paradigms.

A number of crucial elements of RED can be described, emerging from practical and policy initiatives that are already visible in many parts of the world:

Decentralised and embedded governance

A crucial fulcrum of RED is decentralised, direct democratic governance. This starts from the smallest, most local unit (a village, an urban ward or colony) where face-to-face decision-making is possible. Larger level governance structures emanate from these basic units: clusters or federations of villages with common ecological features, larger landscape level institutions, and beyond ... with mechanisms to ensure the downward accountability of representative institutions.

Localisation

Localisation, a trend diametrically opposed to economic globalization, is based on the belief that those living closest to the resource to be managed would have the greatest stake, and often the best knowledge, to manage it. A move towards localization of essential production, consumption, and trade, and of health, education, and other services, is eminently possible if communities are sensitively assisted by civil society organizations and the government. Already there are thousands of such initiatives around the world. A crucial aspect of this is dealing with local inequities of class, gender, caste, ethnicity, and the tendency towards elite capture of powers and resources.

Working at the landscape level

The local and the small-scale are not by themselves adequate. For many of the problems we now face are at much larger scales, emanating from and affecting entire landscapes (and seascapes), countries, regions, and indeed the earth. Climate change, the spread of toxics, and desertification, are examples. Landscape and trans-boundary planning and governance (also called 'bioregionalism', or 'ecoregionalism', amongst other names), are exciting new approaches being tried out in several countries and regions. Building on decentralized and landscape level governance and management, and in turn providing it a solid backing, would be a rational land use plan for each bioregion within and between countries.

Meaningful learning, education and health

The artificial boundaries that western forms of education and learning have created, between the 'physical', 'natural', and 'social' sciences, between these sciences and the 'arts', and between science and other forms of knowing and knowledge, need to be dissolved. The more we can learn and teach and transmit knowledge in holistic ways, giving

respect not only to specialists but also to generalists, the more we can understand nature and our own place in it. A number of alternative education and learning initiatives across the world are already doing this.

Similarly, several groups are working on public health systems that empower communities to deal with most of their health issues, through combining traditional and modern systems, and through strengthening the links between safe food and water, nutrition, preventive health measures, and curative care.

Employment and livelihood

The combination of localization and landscape approaches also provides massive opportunities for livelihood generation, thus tackling one of the world's biggest problems: unemployment. The United Nations Environment Programme and the International Labour Organisation estimate that there is considerable employment opportunity in 'green jobs', defined as "decent work" that helps to tackle the ecological crises we face. For instance, organic, small-scale farming can employ more people than conventional chemical-based agriculture. Renewable energy generation, and energy efficiency, as yet in its infancy, could provide jobs to tens of millions. For both farming and energy (generation and efficiency), as also several other sectors, such as transportation, energy-efficient building, decentralized manufacture, recycling, forestry, and others, the potential is huge.

Ultimately as rural areas get re-vitalized through locally appropriate development initiatives, rural-urban migration which today seems inexorable, would also slow down and may even get reversed...as has happened with dozens of villages in India.

Economic democracy

A sustainable and equitable future requires not only a fundamental change in political governance, but also in economic relations of production and consumption. Globalized economies tend to emphasise the democratization of consumption (the consumer as 'king'...though even this hides the fact that in many cases there is only a mirage of choice), but not the democratization of production. This can only change with a fundamental reversal, towards decentralized production which is in the control of the producer, linked to predominantly local consumption which is in the control of the consumer. Many producer companies have been started by farmers and pastoralists, craftspersons, fishers, small-scale manufacturers in various parts of the world; and there are thousands of 'social enterprise' companies that are explicitly and predominantly oriented at reaching social and environmental benefits to poor people.

Money may remain an important medium of exchange, but would be much more locally controlled and managed rather than controlled anonymously by international financial institutions and the abstract forces of global capital operating through globally networked financial markets. Considerable local trade could revert to locally designed currencies or barter, and prices of products and services even when expressed in money terms could be decided between givers and receivers rather than by an impersonal, non-controllable distant 'market'. A huge diversity of local currencies and non-monetary ways of trading and providing/obtaining services are already being used around the world.

Financial management itself needs to be radically decentralized, away from the mega-concentrations that today's banks and financial institutions represent. These globalized institutions and the free rein given to their speculative tendencies, have been at the heart of the latest financial crisis. But simultaneously, across the world a host of localized, community-based banking and financing systems have also cropped up over the last couple of decades; several micro-credit programmes are exploitative and leave out the most marginalized sections, but many self-help programmes managed by communities themselves (with civil society facilitation) have really helped the very poor.

The role of the state

Though communities (rural and urban) will be the fulcrum of the alternative futures, the state will need to retain, or rather strengthen, its welfare role for the weak (human and non-human). It will assist communities in situations where local capacity is weak, such as in generating resources, providing entitlements, and ensuring tenurial security. It will rein in business elements or others who behave irresponsibly towards the environment or people. It will have to be held accountable to its role as guarantor of the various fundamental rights that each citizen is supposed to enjoy, and will retain a role in larger global relations between peoples and nations. It will not, however, be the sole or dominant player in all this, yielding equal space to peoples and communities that may represent themselves.

International relations

The reversal of economic globalization does not entail the end of global relations! Indeed there has always been a flow of ideas, persons, services and materials across the world, and this has often enriched human societies. RED,

with its focus on localized economies and ethical lifestyles, learning from each other, would actually make the *meaningful* flow of ideas and innovations at global levels much more possible than a situation where everything is dominated by finance and capital. Transboundary landscape and seascape management would include 'peace zones' oriented towards conservation where there are currently intense international conflicts (e.g. the Siachen glacier between India and Pakistan). More globally, strengthening various treaties on peace, rights, and the environment, and making treaties of trade, commerce, and finance subservient to these, are a key agenda.

Across the world, many visions and frameworks like RED are being discussed and promoted, as alternatives to the current dominant system. These include 'buen vivir' (with many variants) in south America, and 'degrowth' in Europe; alternative approaches to assessing and measuring progress include the accounts of well-being and the 'happy planet' approach promoted by the New Economics Foundation; at a national level there is Bhutan's experiment with Gross National Happiness; and so on¹³. Of course each of these is born out of or reflects cultural and ecological specificity, and each has its own strengths and weaknesses. But they all show the potential for positive and lasting change, and with greater sharing and exchange, could become powerful tools in the hands of indigenous peoples, local communities, other civil society organizations, and governments that are struggling to achieve a sustainable, equitable and just world.

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