

Roles and Responsibilities in the Post-2015 Development Goals Process: Three Propositions

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Statement for the Conference

„Post-2015 – Global Goals, European Challenges and Solutions“

organized by the Deutsches Netzwerk Wirtschaftsethik, the German Development Institute and the Sustainable Development Solutions Network Germany

Berlin, June 12th, 2014

Proposition 1: A business-as-usual track will exacerbate all known problems and create new ones

The facts about the ecological, social, political and economic state of the world are known, evident and supported by broad scientific consensus:²

- The extent of anthropogenic environmental damage (climate change, degradation of biological diversity, acidification of marine ecosystems, etc.) and our current emission and consumption trends will limit the ability of future generations to meet their needs.
- The consumption of non-renewable resources continues to be much higher than the substitution through renewable ones.
- World population will grow from today's 7.2 billion people to approximately 10 billion by 2050.
- The growing global middle class, predominantly in today's emerging and low-income countries, seem to follow a "catching up development path"; i.e., in the coming years another 2 billion people will adopt a much more resource- and energy-intensive life style.
- Globalization and free market economies have improved living standards for billions and lowered inequality worldwide – at the price of concentrating billions among a few and producing pronounced inequality within most countries.

A *business as usual* track in the design and management of human development is likely to deepen income inequalities and overburden the Earth's carrying capacity. Therefore the challenges of ending poverty, increasing social inclusion, and sustaining the planet must be addressed in different ways than during the past 50 years.

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² See <http://unsdsn.org/resources/> and <http://www.ipcc.ch/report/ar5/>

Proposition 2: Towards a new development paradigm

Whatever will happen, development with a human face will continue to include

- *economic prosperity*, i.e. higher discretionary income and thus increasing personal choices – but above all the end of extreme poverty and hunger;
- *distributional fairness of available opportunities, social inclusion and fair access to social services*;
- *environmental stewardship*, i.e. respecting planetary boundaries in all investments, production and consumption decisions; and, last but not least
- *good governance* at the international level, in every country and in all sectors of society, including governments, businesses, and civil society organizations. The minimum criteria include the protection of human rights, a rational, responsible and transparent use of authority and of funds in the management of a country's or institution's economic, ecological, social and political resources.

The paradigm shift in the design and management of development is structural in nature and thus some fundamental changes will have to be introduced everywhere in the world: From a sustainability perspective, *all* countries are “developing countries”.

The challenges for the low-income part of the world will be different from those for OECD countries. The responsibilities of the wealthy on a global and local level will also differ from those of the poor: “Saving energy”, “using resources more efficiently” (“Faktor 5”) or “incentivizing innovation and technological progress in line with sustainability criteria” will be technical and moral imperatives for the rich knowledge societies. The same is true for the transfer of respective technologies. Those who have broader shoulders and a deeper ecological footprint must take the lead and exemplify sustainable modernization ideals through their own life. “Sophisticated modesty”, “voluntary simplicity” and “smart humility” must become a “chic” and attractive behavioral model to be adopted in a catching up development environment.

Proposition 3: From vision to action

Like with other complex challenges, we humans can easily agree to the general, visionary and values-related part of the sustainable development notion and yet reject the necessary coherent personal consequences: Visions are attractive, implementation is often not. There is a lack of incentives for individuals or institutions to

- pay for or invest in something today that might bring a return on investment in the *long term* and for *other* people,
- accept short-term changes in accustomed production and convenient consumption patterns for a long-term benefit,
- endure uncomfortable alterations due to different patterns of individual mobility in the short term for an infinitely small contribution to the prevention of problems developing over the long term,
- (of special importance for political decision makers:) to inflict short-term economic burdens on their constituencies (by whom they want to be re-elected) for a long-term ecological and social change.

Structural changes that we need to set in motion internationally and nationally must be approached on three levels³:

- As Albert Einstein reminds us: Problems cannot be solved by the same level of thinking that created them – and insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results. *Development must be understood and conceptually designed differently. And it must be underpinned by different values and normative rules.* The metaphor of the “impartial spectator” and the concept of the “Golden Rule” are better approaches than e.g. a utilitarian view of the world.
- New “*rules of the game*” are needed with regard to global standards, national and international law, tax and trade systems as well as development cooperation. These new rules must be aligned to facilitate and support the necessary changes of course.
- To spur *constructive action* within the “new game” a coherent set of incentives and disincentives must be put in place. “Business as usual” approaches must internalize the ecological and social costs to make non-sustainable social and business action more expensive. Human ingenuity – with proper economic signals and in a free society – is the single most important resource for sustainable development. Incentives for innovation is key – new ways of solving old problems can stretch the time it takes to change human behavior; the investor character of early adapters must be acknowledged and backed with incentives; media, educational facilities and political institutions must better explain what is at stake and how the existing challenges can be managed.

A new standard of practices for all

The precautionary principle accepted by the international community in 1992 with its support of the *Rio Declaration on Environment and Development* needs to be brought back to the public awareness: “In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.” This normative prescription ought to apply not only to environmental issues but to all others as well.

Our challenge to find and follow a sustainable development path is immense. There are a lot of vested economic and political interests in pursuing a business-as-usual approach, and there is no universal blueprint. Human development is always context-specific, and the result of the complex interaction of multiple economic, social, cultural, ecological, political, and legal factors. Diverse sets of goals have to be attained simultaneously on a global level: sustained economic development and technological change, a higher degree of social inclusion, and a reduction of the anthropogenic threats to the local and global environment. Differences in the initial conditions will result in greatly varying assignments of tasks within and among countries and segments of population.

³ I am grateful to Andreas Suchanek for his advice in this matter.

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Narrowing the gap between ethical theory and corporate practices

Similar to the aspiration articulated in the preamble of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, sustainable development necessitates a *new common standard of practices for all peoples and all nations*, to the end that every individual and every organ of society, keeping the necessity for a sustainable development path constantly in mind, shall promote coherent action and implement state-of-the-art national and international measures progressively, to secure universal and effective recognition and observance.

Given the scale and complexity of problems to be solved, single actors or institutions by themselves cannot make a decisive difference. Successful endeavors to change the development path necessitate a multi-stakeholder approach, whereby the international community, multilateral institutions, national governments, regional institutions, civil society, and the business sector as well as individual households share responsibility and commit resources, skills, and knowhow to achieve sustainable solutions in a fair way. In the same way that a nation's economic and social success is greatest when there is a fair division of labor and responsibility between different societal actors, sustainable development will benefit from shared values and common understanding over basic issues and opportunities.

The primary responsibility for human development undoubtedly continues to rest with national governments and their administrations to implement the decisions already taken by the international community since the 1992 Rio Conference. It is their duty to set the appropriate incentives and rules, allocate the resources available accordingly, and proceed without short-term political power considerations in the most cost effective way. The corporate sector – the single most efficient source of economic activity – has its share of responsibilities too – so have all other institutions of society.

Last but not least: Sustainability begins at home and the accumulation of the billions of small steps in the right direction will change the face of the Earth.