



Book Review — Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing

*Report of the United Nations Secretary-General's High-Level Panel
on Global Sustainability. NY: United Nations, 30 Jan 2012, 94p
(download full report or 22p Overview at www.un.org/gsp)*

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This report is the latest UN vision of what must be done for a sustainable planet—essentially an update of the 1987 Brundtland report—featuring 56 proposals to empower people, to promote a sustainable economy, and to strengthen governance.

1. Prologue: The Panel's Vision

“Our planet and our world are experiencing the best of times and the worst of times”: unprecedented prosperity and unprecedented stress, with growing inequality and rising waves of protest in many countries. Due to an array of overlapping challenges, “it is more urgent than ever that we take action to embrace the principles of the sustainable development agenda.” It is time for “genuine global action” that integrates the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development. “That sustainable development is right is self-evident. Our challenge is to demonstrate that it is also rational—and that the cost of inaction far outweighs the cost of action.”

The challenges are great, but so are the new possibilities when we look at old problems with fresh eyes: new technologies, markets, growth, and jobs from “game-changing products and services,” and new approaches to public and private finance that can lift people out of poverty. But “democratic governance and full respect for human rights are key prerequisites for empowering people.”

Thus, “the long-term vision of the High-level Panel on Global Sustainability is to eradicate poverty, reduce inequality and make growth inclusive, and production and consumption more sustainable, while combating climate change and respecting a range of other planetary boundaries.” This reaffirms **Our Common Future**, the 1987 report by the World Commission on Environment and Development, a.k.a the Brundtland report. [Note: Gro Harlem Brundtland is one of the 22 members of the Panel chaired by Finnish President Tarja Halonen

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and South African President Jacob Zuma; Janos Pasztor served as Executive Secretary of the Panel.]

But what is to be done to make a real difference? We must grasp the dimensions of the challenge: unsustainable lifestyles, production and consumption patterns, and population growing from 7 billion to almost 9 billion people by 2040. “By 2030, the world will need at least 50% more food, 45% more energy, and 30% more water—all at a time when environmental boundaries are throwing up new limits to supply.” The current global development model is unsustainable. Sustainable Development (SD), introduced by the Brundtland report 25 years ago, remains a generally agreed concept, rather than a practical reality. This is so because it has “undoubtedly suffered from a failure of political will,” and it “has not yet been incorporated into the mainstream national and international economic policy debate.”

For too long, economists, social activists, and environmental scientists have talked past each other, almost speaking different languages. “The time has come to unify the disciplines, to develop a common language for sustainable development,” and to bring the sustainability paradigm into mainstream economics and the political process.

“The Panel presents 56 recommendations to advance its vision for a sustainable planet, a just society, and a growing economy.” They are briefly stated here as follows:

2. Proposals to Empower People to Make Sustainable Choices

“Real choice is only possible once human rights, basic needs, human security, and human resilience are assured.” Priority areas for action:

1. Achieve the Millennium Development Goals to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality;
2. Respect, protect, and provide human rights, as recognized in the 1948 Universal Declaration and the 1966 International Covenant;
3. Advance gender equality and women’s rights, including universal access to family planning and the right to inherit and own property;
4. Consider establishing a Global Fund for Education to close the primary school education gap by 2015;
5. Set a goal for universal access to quality post-primary and secondary education no later than 2030;
6. Provide vocational training, retraining, and professional development to fill skills shortages in sectors essential for sustainable development;
7. Adopt and promote “green jobs” and decent work policies;
8. Build business-government partnerships, and start-up services for young entrepreneurs;
9. Advance equality in the workplace;
10. Enable full participation of women in the economy by improving access to land and finance, supporting the rise of women leaders, etc.;
11. Promote open, transparent, science-based processes for labeling schemes that reflect the impact of production and consumption;

12. Make sustainable choices more easily available and affordable to consumers by setting sustainable product standards and applying price incentives and disincentives;
13. Integrate the concept of SD and sustainable consumption into primary and secondary school curricula;
14. Encourage discourse on the ethical dimensions of SD;
15. Create a new “ever-green revolution” for the 21st century that aims to at least double productivity while drastically reducing resource use and pollution;
16. Agree on global principles for sustainable and responsible land and water investment deals;
17. Establish and scale up integrated water resource management schemes;
18. Establish regional oceans and coastal management frameworks in major marine ecosystems;
19. Focus on an ecosystem-based approach to fisheries management;
20. Ensure universal access to affordable sustainable energy by 2030, while doubling the rate of improvement in energy efficiency;
21. Provide citizens with access to technologies, including universal telecoms and broadband networks by 2025;
22. Engage in international cooperation on innovation- and technology-oriented sustainable development on an enlarged scale;
23. Ensure that all citizens are provided with access to basic safety nets through appropriate national efforts;
24. Enhance resilience by managing the impacts of transition, especially by targeted social protection programs to deal with increasing environmental stress and potential shocks;
25. Accelerate efforts to assess regional exposure and vulnerability, and to take appropriate precautionary strategies;
26. Increase resources allocated to disaster risk reduction and adaptation.

3. Proposals for a Sustainable Economy

“Achieving sustainability requires us to transform the global economy. Tinkering on the margins will not do the job.” The current global economic crisis “offers an opportunity for significant reforms.” Needed policy action in key areas:

27. Establish price signals that value sustainability, so as to guide investment and consumption decisions; this includes:
 - a) Natural resource and externality pricing instruments, including carbon pricing;
 - b) Full consideration of women, youth, and the poor;
 - c) Reform national fiscal and credit systems to provide long-term incentives for sustainable practices, and disincentives for unsustainable behavior;
 - d) National and international schemes to pay for ecosystems services in water use, farming, fisheries and forestry;

- e) Address price signals that distort investment and consumption decisions (e.g., transparent disclosure of all subsidies);
 - f) Phase out fossil fuel subsidies by 2020, and reduce other perverse subsidies;
28. Shift to cost-effective sustainable procurement for public institutions over the next 10 years, issuing annual reports on progress;
 29. Develop sustainability standards for production and resource extraction;
 30. Develop a framework for sustainable development reporting, with mandatory reporting for corporations capitalized at >\$100 million;
 31. Align business practices with universally accepted principles, such as those in the Global Compact;
 32. Apply sustainable development criteria to the boards of sovereign wealth funds, public pension funds, stock exchanges and regulators, and credit rating agencies;
 33. Step up efforts of banks to promote SD;
 34. Build strategic partnerships between government, business, and local communities to implement SD investments;
 35. Create incentives for increased investments in sustainable technologies and infrastructures, including policies that reduce investor uncertainty and risk guarantee schemes;
 36. Use public investment for enabling frameworks that catalyse very substantial additional financing from the private sector;
 37. Shape investor calculations about the future through greater use of risk-sharing mechanisms, and enhancing certainty about the long-term policy and regulatory environment;
 38. Develop public/private partnerships for capacity-building and increased access to capital;
 39. Develop a Sustainable Development Index or similar set of indicators by 2014 to measure progress.

4. Proposals to Strengthen Institutional Governance

“We need to build an effective framework of institutions and decision-making processes at the local, national, regional, and global levels.” We must overcome the legacy of fragmented institutions established around single-issue ‘silos’; lack of flexibility in adaptation; and “a frequent failure to anticipate and plan.” Priority areas for action:

40. Ensure the rule of law, good governance, and citizens’ rights of access to official information and participation in decision-making;
41. Enable young people’s participation in decision-making at all levels, and support dialogue to encourage non-conventional voices;
42. Adopt “Whole-of-Government” approaches to SD issues, involving all relevant ministries;
43. Incorporate the SD perspective into legislation and budget processes, taking into

account the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of ending poverty, creating jobs, reducing inequality, energy, green growth, etc.

44. Strengthen the science/policymaking interface to facilitate informed political decision-making on SD issues;
45. Explore the concept and application of the critical issue of equity in relation to SD;
46. Step up efforts of bilateral donors and development banks to promote SD in a comprehensive way;
47. Strengthen UNEP, in that international SD policy is fragmented, especially the environmental pillar;
48. Develop a set of key universal SD goals to galvanize action, complement the MDGs, and promote a post-2015 framework;
49. Implement without delay the UN Secretary-General's "Sustainable Energy for All" initiative;
50. Prepare a regular and integrated SD Outlook report;
51. Launch a major global scientific initiative to strengthen the interface between policy and science, including regular assessments and digests of the science of "planetary boundaries," "tipping points," and "environmental thresholds" in the SD context;
52. Create a global SD council to improve integration of the three dimensions of SD, address emerging issues, and review SD progress;
53. Encourage States, in a constructive spirit, to explain their policies, share experiences and lessons learned, and fulfill their commitments;
54. Use the post-Rio+20 period of 2012-2015 for deliberate review and experimentation, incorporating tested solutions into any post-2015 development framework;
55. Expedite development of an SD strategy for the UN system, to better define responsibilities and to reduce duplication;
56. Make full use of the UN as the world's meeting place, convening periodic high-level exchanges on SD when leaders meet.

5. Comment

This long list of new, newish, and old proposals may be eye-glazing, but it is useful to present these ideas in a compact format, although many are overlapping, and the three basic categories are rather broad and fuzzy. Together, these proposals point to a new set of global goals to supersede the Millennium Development Goals for 2015—a "post-2015 framework" (#48).

Older and more familiar goals include gender equality (#3), green jobs (#7), integrated water management (#17), international cooperation on technology for sustainability (#22), price signals that value sustainability and ending fossil fuel subsidies (#27), sustainable public procurement (#28), and "whole-of-government" approaches (#42).

Notable proposals that seem new or relatively new include a Global Fund for Education by 2015 (#4), universal access to secondary education by 2030 (#5), an "ever-green revolu-

tion” to at least double productivity (#15), global principles for land and water investment deals (#16), universal access to affordable sustainable energy by 2030 (#20), a Sustainable Development Index by 2014 (#39), a set of universal sustainable development goals (#48), a regular SD Outlook report (#50), a strengthened science/policy interface to facilitate informed decisions (#44), and exploring the issue of equity as related to SD (#45).

This is a very ambitious agenda, but given the perilous economic situation at present (not mentioned), don’t get your hopes up too far, although positive surprises are always welcome! ALSO SEE similar reports from Canada’s Centre for International Governance Innovation (Post-2015 **Development Agenda: Goals, Targets and Indicators**; www.cigionline.org, Oct 2012, 63p), the Worldwatch Institute (**Moving Toward Sustainable Prosperity: State of the World 2012**; GFB Book of the Month, April 2012), OECD (**Towards Green Growth**; GFB Book of the Month, Aug 2011), and the Millennium Project’s 15 global challenges updated annually in its **State of the Future** reports; see GFB Book of the Month, Sept 2010. It would be valuable to examine all of these reports for similarities and differences, as well as the pile of more than 100 recent books on particular elements of sustainability (see GFB “Sustainability”). For example, although Worldwatch Institute has many proposals similar to the High-Level Panel, Worldwatch goes further in advocating “degrowth” in overdeveloped countries, limiting population growth, and discouraging livestock production.

A major omission of the High-Level Panel is the absence of any mention of academia, despite the Panel’s call to “overcome the legacy of fragmented institutions.” The fragmentation of knowledge in academia around fiefdoms and “silos” of perception is just as bad as the “single-issue silos” in government that the Panel criticizes; indeed, thinking systemically, academia may well be the major cause of this lack of systems thinking!

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