

Perspectives

An Overarching Goal for the UN Sustainable Development Goals

by Robert Costanza, Jacqueline McGlade, Hunter Lovins, and Ida Kubiszewski

Communities, countries, and the planet as a whole need to articulate shared goals, and create ways to track progress in meeting them. This is the essence of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) process currently underway at the UN. The SDGs are the follow-up to the UN's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), due to expire in 2015. They represent a substantial commitment on the part of UN member states to achieve truly sustainable development over the next 15 years.

The SDG process is building consensus on what these shared goals are and how to measure progress towards meeting them. While discussion continues on a list of SDGs due to be announced in 2015 (currently 17—see Table 1), there is a critical missing element in the process: articulation and measurement of the overarching goal or “ultimate end” of the SDGs and how the list of sub-goals and targets contribute to achieving that larger goal. The goals are being discussed as separate elements in isolation from each other and from any overarching goal to which they might contribute.

In fact, there is broad emerging agreement about this overarching goal. There are many ways of expressing it, but the essence is “a prosperous, high quality of life that is equitably shared and sustainable.”¹

There are three elements to this goal that cover the usual three components of sustainable development: economy (a high quality of life or well-being), society (equitably shared), and the environment (sustainable, staying within planetary boundaries). There is also the understanding that all three of these elements are



United Nations Information Centre / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

The UN Sustainable Development Goals will further extend the mission of the organization's Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which are due to expire in 2015.

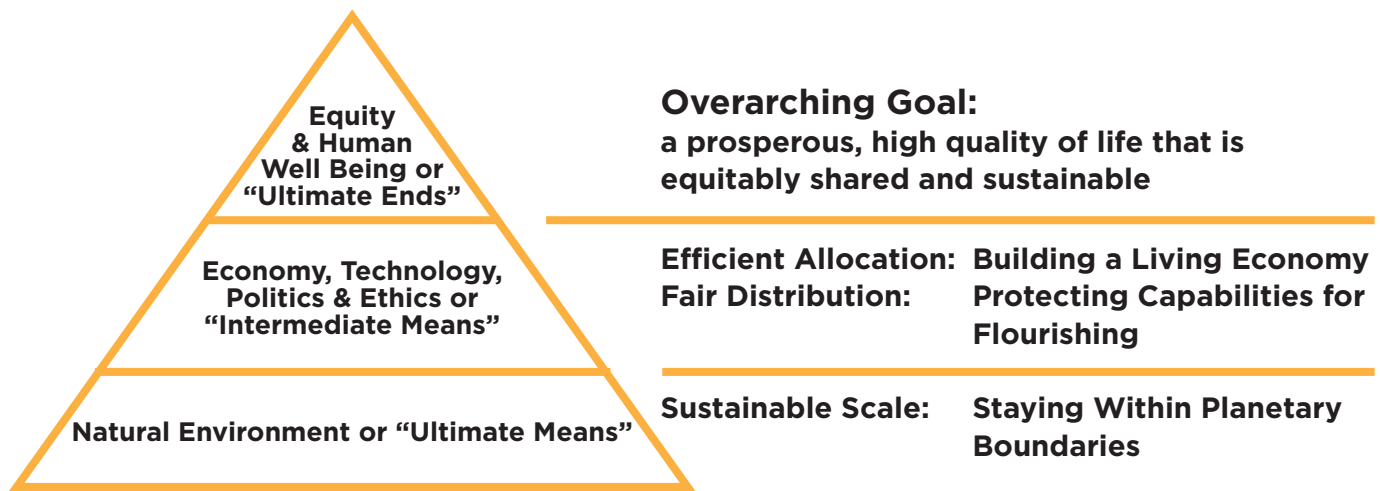


Figure 1. A hierarchy of goals along the Ends-Means spectrum⁹

interdependent and must be satisfied jointly. It is no good to have a high quality of life for an elite few that is not equitably shared or sustainable, or a sustainable but low quality of life where everyone suffers equally, or a high quality of life for everyone that will collapse in the future. We want all three together in an integrated and balanced way and any one or two without the others is not sufficient.

It is also important to recognize that the economy is embedded in society, which is embedded in the rest of nature.^{2,3} These three elements are nested in a way that means that they are extremely interdependent. We can no longer treat the economy separately, without considering its strong interdependence with society and the rest of nature.

This goal as stated above can be seen as the ‘ultimate end’ in the spectrum of means and ends shown in Figure 1. The SDGs are ‘intermediate means’ or ‘ultimate means’ on the diagram that contribute to achieving the ultimate end or overarching goal. The SDGs can therefore best be considered as ‘sub-goals’ contributing in different ways, in different times and places to the overarching goal or ultimate end.

For simplicity we will refer to this overarching goal as ‘sustainable well-being’, recognizing that this well-being or quality of life must be equitably shared, both within and among nations, and that it is interdependent with the well-being of the rest of nature.

Another way of describing the three elements of sustainable well-being^{4,5,6} is as the integrated provision of:

1. **Efficient Allocation:** Building a Living Economy
2. **Fair Distribution:** Ensuring Capabilities for Flourishing
3. **Sustainable Scale:** Staying Within Planetary Boundaries

Table 1 shows how the current draft list of 17 SDGs cluster under these three headings as sub-goals.

Major challenges in achieving the sustainable well-being include improved understanding of: (1) all the aspects of sustainable well-being; (2) how the intermediate and ultimate means contribute to it; and (3) how to measure progress toward a world in which all people can achieve it.

There are several alternative measures of progress toward sustainable well-being currently being developed and tested’ (see also www.wiki-progress.org). They can be divided into three broad groups: 1) those that adjust economic measures to reflect social and environmental factors; 2) those that depend on subjective measures of well-being drawn from surveys; and 3) those that use weighted composite indicators of well-being including factors such as housing, life expectancy, leisure time, and democratic engagement.⁸

None of these measures are perfect, but collectively, they offer the building blocks for the integrated measures of sustainable well-being that we sorely need. Creating a viable and broadly accepted measure of sustainable well-being will require a sustained, transdisciplinary effort to integrate metrics and build a broad consensus. This process of developing measures is underway, but can be accelerated by connecting it with the ongoing SDG process, either as an integral part of the process or as a follow-on.

The SDG process represents a huge global opportunity to recalibrate our shared goals and commit ourselves

Perspectives

Efficient Allocation: Building a Living Economy

Proposed goal 7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
Proposed goal 8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
Proposed goal 9	Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
Proposed goal 11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
Proposed goal 12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Fair Distribution: Protecting Capabilities for Flourishing

Proposed goal 1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
Proposed goal 2	End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
Proposed goal 3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
Proposed goal 4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
Proposed goal 5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
Proposed goal 10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
Proposed goal 16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable, and inclusive institutions at all levels
Proposed goal 17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development

Sustainable Scale: Staying within Planetary Boundaries

Proposed goal 6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
Proposed goal 13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
Proposed goal 14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas, and marine resources for sustainable development
Proposed goal 15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation, and halt biodiversity loss

Table 1. The three elements of Sustainable Well-Being and the current list of 17 SDG sub-goals that most directly contribute to them as a way of organizing the SDGs.

Perspectives

to the path toward a sustainable and desirable future. Some will argue that building this kind of consensus is unnecessary or impossible, but the history of the MDGs shows that broad consensus around shared goals is possible and it can drive significant positive change. This needs to be accelerated and integrated into the SDG process. The overarching goal of sustainable well-being should be clearly articulated as the integrating element. Time is clearly running out and missing this opportunity would be a global disaster.

It is often said that you get what you measure. To build a sustainable and desirable future we need to measure what we want—sustainable well-being—remembering that it is better to be approximately right than precisely wrong. **S**

REFERENCES

1. Costanza, R et al. Time to leave GDP behind. *Nature* 505: 283–285 (2014).
2. Griggs, D et al. Sustainable Development Goals for People and Planet. *Nature* 495: 305–307 (2013).
3. Costanza R et al. Building a Sustainable and Desirable Economy-in-Society-in-Nature. United Nations Division for Sustainable Development (2012).
4. Ibid.
5. Daly, HE. Allocation, Distribution, and Scale: Towards an Economics that is Efficient, Just, and Sustainable. *Ecological Economics* 6: 185–193 (1992).
6. Costanza, R, Cumberland, JC, Daly HE, Goodland, R & Norgaard, R. *An Introduction to Ecological Economics* (St. Lucie Press, Boca Raton, Florida, 1997).
7. Costanza, R et al. Time to leave GDP behind. *Nature* 505: 283–285 (2014).
8. Costanza, R et al. Time to leave GDP behind. *Nature* 505: 283–285 (2014).
9. Daly, HE & Farley, J. *Ecological economics: Principles and Applications* (Island Press, Washington DC, 2004).



MT_bulli / CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

UN staff in Bonn bring awareness to the 2015 deadline for the Millennium Development Goals, marking the same year that the list of Sustainable Development Goals will be announced in the next step toward global equity and sustainability.