



globalvoices

# **Cooperative institutionalism as a framework for sustainable development**

---

**Sarah Douglass  
National Scholarship Recipient  
June 2012**

**Prepared for the 2012  
United Nations Rio+20 Summit**

## GLOBAL VOICES

Global Voices is a non-profit organisation seeking to promote an understanding of and participation in international diplomacy by young Australians.

We do this through regular events and research & development opportunities in Australia, and the coordination of youth delegations to important diplomatic forums abroad.

***Our mission*** is to provide opportunities to young Australians to research, discuss and contribute to foreign policy both at home and abroad.

***Our vision*** is for young Australians to be heard and engaged on the world stage.

## RIO+20

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, also referred to as Rio+20, is an important step in ongoing international efforts to accelerate progress towards achieving sustainable development globally. The conference will mark the 20th anniversary of the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development in Rio de Janeiro (the Earth Summit). It will also mark the 10th anniversary of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development in Johannesburg.

The 1992 and 2002 summits were headline international events and key drivers of the sustainable development agenda. Similarly, Rio+20 presents an opportunity to re-direct and re-energise political commitment to the three pillars of sustainable development: economic growth, social improvement and environmental protection. The conference is expected to be attended by a significant number of Heads of State and Government.

## SARAH DOUGLASS

Sarah Douglass, 23, is the National Scholarship Recipient and studying a Masters of Practical Development at James Cook University in Cairns. She has previously completed a Bachelors of Arts & Science. She is an indigenous Australian and is interested in participation, green growth and energy issues.

## Abstract

Key Point: In order to streamline and improve the legitimacy of the United Nations Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD) it is proposed that Sustainability is elevated to the status of council, superseding the ideologically antiquated Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

- The new Sustainable Development Council would utilize and improve on the existing coordinating machinery of ECOSOC.
- Cooperative institutionalism (derived from the example of cooperative federalism in Australia) would be the functional protocol employed. The Sustainable Development Council would serve as the coordinative, managerial body thereby ensuring the reduction of waste, duplication and inefficiencies throughout the various functional committees, specialized agencies, programmes and funds.
- The highest priority for Rio+20 is the establishment of a well defined approach that adequately balances socio-economic goals with the sustainable use of natural resources and the stewardship of ecosystem services. It is essential that this is simultaneously developed with a means for measuring both the advances and bottlenecks experienced along goal pathways, in accordance with the contexts and priorities of each country.
- The Sustainable Development Council would effectively establish and monitor the proposed Sustainable Development Goals and universal sustainable development.
- The fundamental ideology of “sustainable development” is the integration of the three pillars of society, the economy and the environment; with the acknowledgment that both society and the economy are presided by environmental limitations. The current UN managerial organ

ECOSOC is a direct contradiction of this fundamental premise and exemplifies antiquated development practices.

- The utilization of the existing coordinating machinery of ECOSOC would remove current concerns and would enable a more rapid transformation to a more ideologically and practically sustainable network. This is opposed to the generation of another committee or specialized agency which would add to the current issues of duplication and waste.
- Calls have been made for UNEP to be promoted to the state of council; however this would still engender an imbalance of the three pillars of sustainability and would also ignore the valuable network of functional committees, specialized agencies, programmes and funds within the ECOSOC framework.

## Introduction

The United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 saw the General Assembly endorse the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) as a high level commission. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation in 2002 and all subsequent sessions of the General Assembly re-affirmed the status of this commission, intending it be the cornerstone of an intergovernmental framework for sustainable development governance within the United Nations. The outcomes of this commission have been somewhat constrained by a lack of recognized authority and cooperation from both states and institutions. There have been a number of reforms proposed regarding improvements on the scope of the Commission's workings, including the establishment of a Sustainable Development Council or the transfer of its functions to ECOSOC (Economic and Social Council) – with both options entailing the disbanding of the Commission<sup>1</sup>. This essay will show that

---

<sup>1</sup> United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) 2011a, United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat.

these reform proposals should be taken one step further. A Sustainable Development Council should indeed be created, furthermore; it should supersede the current functions of ECOSOC.

In concurrence with the proposal submitted by the Governments of Columbia and Guatemala, the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development to be held in June 2012, constitutes a critical opportunity for the international community. The experiences of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) over the past 12 years have chronicled the various benefits and shortcomings of a time-bound, goal-set framework. Evidence suggests that it is both more efficient and effective for governments and institutions to work together when there are specific objectives to guide their actions<sup>2</sup>. The highest priority for Rio+20 is the establishment of a well defined approach that adequately balances socio-economic goals with the sustainable use of natural resources and the stewardship of ecosystem services. It is essential that this is simultaneously developed with a means for measuring both the advances and bottlenecks experienced along goal pathways, in accordance with the contexts and priorities of each country.

To effectively establish and monitor the proposed Sustainable Development Goals and universal sustainable development, an interdisciplinary, overarching body must be created. The fundamental ideology of “sustainable development” is the integration of the three pillars, namely society, the economy and the environment; with the acknowledgment that both society and the economy are presided by environmental limitations. The current UN managerial organ ECOSOC is a direct contradiction of this fundamental premise. Despite incorporating the various functional committees, specialized agencies, programmes and funds associated with the environment and “sustainable development” within its responsibilities, the Economic and Social Council – as its name suggests – regards the environment as being of less importance to the priorities of the economy and society. This has led to an ideological imbalance of the three pillars and examples antiquated development

---

<sup>2</sup> Governments of Columbia and Guatemala 2011, United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat.

practices. This report investigates the potential of the existing coordinating machinery of ECOSOC as the ideal structural instrument for a Sustainable Development Council (SDC), thereby enabling a rapid transition to a more legitimised global network of sustainable development. A line of reasoning for the data regarding the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the new Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD) to be obtained from more representative indices, including differentials (such as gender and age) is also determined. It is imperative that governments no longer view the GDP index as the primary determinant of development. In summary, to enable this critical paradigm shift, the three pillars of sustainability must be incorporated into a single index for the modus operandi of the Sustainable Development Goals. In order to successfully facilitate these Sustainable Development Goals, an overarching coordinator that embodies interdisciplinary cooperative institutionalism, the Sustainable Development Council, must be established.

### Current framework of the Commission on Sustainable Development

At the core of the Commission on Sustainable Development's mandate is the task of monitoring the progress and implementation of Agenda 21 and the commitments set forth within it; particularly those associated with the provision of resources and the transfer of technology. Furthermore, the Commission is charged with agenda setting (developing policy recommendations) and facilitating partnerships and multi-stakeholder dialogue.

According to General Assembly resolution 47/191,<sup>3</sup> the official functions of the Commission on Sustainable Development are as follows:

- a) Monitor progress in the implementation of Agenda 21, based on analysis and evaluation of reports from all relevant organs, programmes and institutions of the United Nations system;

---

<sup>3</sup> UNDESA 2011a.

- b) Consider information provided by Governments, including problems faced in implementation;
- c) Review the progress in the implementation of the commitments set forth in Agenda 21. Including those related to the provision of financial resources and transfer of technology;
- d) Regularly review and monitor progress made by developed countries towards achieving the target of 0.7 per cent of GNP as ODA, as reaffirmed in JPOI;
- e) Review on a regular basis the adequacy of funding and mechanisms, including efforts to reach the objectives agreed in chapter 33 of Agenda 21;
- f) Receive and analyse relevant input from competent non-governmental organizations, including the scientific community and the private sector;
- g) Enhance the dialogue with non-governmental organizations and other entities outside the United Nations system;
- h) Consider information regarding the progress made in the implementation of environmental conventions, which could be made available by the relevant conferences of parties; and
- i) Provide appropriate recommendations to the General Assembly, through the ECOSOC.

Representatives from various subsidiary bodies of the United Nations system and other intergovernmental organizations, such as international financial institutions and regional development banks were also instructed within the resolution to “assist the commission in the performance of its functions” and “participate actively in its deliberations”<sup>4</sup>.

Sustainable development is characterised by a multi-faceted focus area. The very breadth of the CSDs mandate has lead to ambiguities regarding traditional assessments of its jurisdictional influence and its overall effectiveness. This has been attributed to the fact that the effectiveness is frequently measured by outputs (such as rules, programs and regulations), outcomes (such as

---

<sup>4</sup> UNDESA 2011a.

change to target groups) and impacts (refers to the actual in-situ issue improvements). Complications with this methodology have arisen however, due to the tracing of cause and effects relationships for outcomes and impacts being very difficult and impractical. Kaasa<sup>5</sup> further established that CSD policy decisions are “soft” as they do not impose binding obligations and only facilitate a system of voluntary national reporting on a biannual basis. That being said, the Commission on Sustainable Development has played a role, albeit minor, in keeping the broad agenda of sustainable development under active review and has in some cases aided with the introduction of topics into the broader United Nations framework<sup>6</sup>.

## The Millennium Development Goals

Since the establishment of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2000, the world has anticipated their date of “expiry” in 2015 in order to critically analyse their successes, failures, strengths and weaknesses. These goals served as a blueprint for both countries and institutions and galvanised unprecedented efforts to meet the needs of the global poor<sup>7</sup>. By most accounts, the MDGs will not reach their 2015 targets. The reasoning behind this is because they are not well-integrated and have predominantly been approached in an exclusive manner (for example the goal regarding the environment and health are different from the goal relating to the women). One of the primary shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals that is often overlooked by evaluators is that they begin from assumptions. One such assumption is that societies can rely on the trickle-down benefits of growing economies to be passed on to the global poor - without any conceptual reappraisals of the notion of development itself; there are limits to growth. Declining fossil fuel

---

<sup>5</sup> Kaasa, S.M 2005, The Commission on Sustainable Development: A Study of Institutional Design, Distribution of Capabilities and Entrepreneurial Leadership, Fridtjof Nansen Institut, Norway.

<sup>6</sup> Dodds, F; Gardiner, R; Hales, D; Hemmanti, M and Lawrence, G 2002, Post Johannesburg: The Future of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (Stakeholder Forum Paper #9), WHAT Governance Programme, London.

<sup>7</sup> United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UN-MDGs) 2012, United Nations.



resources and the realities of climate change indicate that alternatives to addressing issues such as poverty need to be generated.

Environmental sustainability has been indicated as just one of the eight Millennium Development Goals, as opposed to it being the ideological base on which all of the other goals must rest. It would be detrimental to invest in goals for eradicating poverty that depend on cheap fossil based energy, an infinitely growing and steady economy and a stable climate. As has been elaborated, one of the dominant predicted outcomes of the Rio+20 summit is the generation of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in order to moderate the shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals and more efficiently and effectively facilitate sustainable global development.

The proposed SDGs would actively integrate the 3 pillars (environmental, social and economic) into a blueprint for sustainable development (SD). It has been suggested that the existing MDGs be incorporated into the updated Sustainable Development Goals and that these SDGs (like the MDGs) should have time-bound targets<sup>8</sup>. It has also been recommended that the SDGs are applied universally, have clear accountability mechanisms and rationalize specific financing requirements for the reaching of targets. According to the position paper produced by United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service<sup>9</sup>, the financing mechanisms to meet the SDGs should also incorporate human rights and equity principles, including specific programs to reach marginalized communities (for example women and indigenous people). Non-government organizations have also highlighted that corporate accountability should be integrated with the SDG framework<sup>10</sup>. Corporate accountability indicators and metrics should be developed in order to ensure that corporate actions include an ideological transformation of consumption and production patterns and that these

---

<sup>8</sup> Governments of Columbia and Guatemala, 2011.

<sup>9</sup> United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) 2011, NGLS.

<sup>10</sup> NGLS 2011.

actions include specifics such as job creation, sustainable energy use and reduced waste, further supporting the SDGs.

As has been established within the issues briefs produced by UNDESA<sup>11</sup>, it is predicted that the SDGs will cover seven broad themes. These seven “critical issues” are as follows:

- 1) Green jobs and social inclusion;
- 2) Energy;
- 3) Sustainable cities;
- 4) Food security and sustainable agriculture;
- 5) Water;
- 6) Oceans;
- 7) Reducing disaster risk and building resilience.

According to a submission produced by United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (2011), a measure other than that of the GDP system would need to be utilized to measure the progress of the SDGs. The new measures should equally value the quality of life (exemplified by Bhutan’s Gross National Happiness index) and the integrity of the environment. Indicators should also measure the quality of life for the different demographics (for example; men, women and youth), and include paid and unpaid work, political rights and participation, among others. Measures for the integrity of the environment should quantify ecosystem degradation, natural resources and carbon (and/or carbon equivalent) emissions. The integration of existing indices (such as GDP) with the new, more universal set is necessary for the greater success of the proposed Sustainable Development Goals and would provide a more accurate quantification of results. It follows that in order to more

---

<sup>11</sup> UNDESA 2011a and 2011b, United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat.

effectively encourage and facilitate sustainable processes and outcomes, a more authoritative and thereby influential institutional organ must be established.

### Proposed Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development

One of the dominant focus areas for the Rio+20 Summit as has been identified by UNDESA<sup>12</sup> is the strengthening of the Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD). In order to effectively and efficiently facilitate the establishment and supervision of the SDGs, it is imperative that governments agree on the development of a leading institution for sustainable development. The sheer volume of functional committees, specialized agencies, programmes and funds associated with the United Nations has become unwieldy. It is clear that improvements on existing institutions are essential, rather than the generation of more. This in turn would reduce waste, avoid duplication and centralize responsibilities.

According to the issues brief on an Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development<sup>13</sup>, an intergovernmental body on sustainable development in a reformed institutional framework would have the following roles and responsibilities:

- 1) Advocating for SD and setting the agenda for the future, thus involving negotiations to fill gaps and address emerging challenges;
- 2) Reviewing progress in implementation of commitments, thus involving metrics for monitoring and mechanisms for assessing progress;
- 3) Reviewing mainstreaming and integration of all three pillars of SD at all levels;
- 4) Reviewing progress in meeting commitments to provide support for SD in developing countries;

---

<sup>12</sup> UNDESA 2011a and 2011b.

<sup>13</sup> UNDESA 2011a.

- 5) Sharing experiences and lessons learnt and extending partnerships with other stakeholders, thus playing a facilitative role; and
- 6) Building technical capacity of countries in the area of SD.

In 2002 the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation emphasized the need to “enhance the integration of sustainable development in the activities of all relevant United Nations agencies, programmes, funds and international financial institutions, within their mandates”<sup>14</sup>. Furthermore, the World Summit Outcome Document of 2005 recognized the need for the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) to become:

*“...more effective as a principal body for coordination, policy review, policy dialogue and recommendations on issues of economic and social development, as well as for implementation of the international development goals agreed at the major United Nations summits and conferences, including the Millennium Development Goals”<sup>15</sup>.*

The World Summit Outcome also elaborated that ECOSOC should play a key role in the overall coordination of funds, programmes and agencies, ensuring coherence among them and avoiding duplication of mandates and activities.

It follows that the aspirations of the aforementioned institutions are contradicting their fundamental ideologies of reducing duplication and waste. It is proposed that the United Nations General Assembly adopts the ideologies of cooperative federalism (as exemplified by the Australian Government) to better coordinate actions and reduce duplication and waste in between the various functional committees, specialized agencies, programmes and funds. In effect this would generate a

---

<sup>14</sup> Dodds et. al 2002.

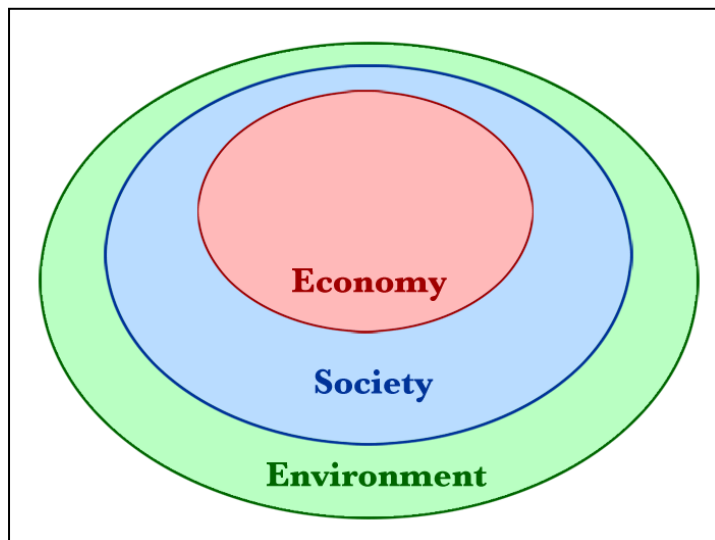
<sup>15</sup> United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) 2011, Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development.

system of cooperative institutionalism whereby institutions would interact cooperatively and collectively to solve common and/or related problems. To effectively and efficiently facilitate and coordinate this notion of cooperative institutionalism, an overarching body would provide the strong institutional framework required. The existing principal organ of ECOSOC would be the ideal structural instrument for a Sustainable Development Council (SDC) and would enable a rapid transition to a more legitimised network of sustainable development. The acknowledgement of the SDC as the primary coordinative body to which to report, would also enable a more effective process for mitigating market failures and improving social welfare<sup>16</sup>.

The supersession of ECOSOC with the SDC would not only aid with the development of the multi-dimensional indices that incorporate the 3 pillars of sustainability, but, through its very existence, would endorse the fundamental premise of sustainable development – being that both the economy and society are presided by environmental limitations (Figure 4.1). I reiterate, what is required internationally is a paradigm shift of the ideological conception of development. The SDC would pave this new direction and would also reduce the waste, overlapping and time delay that would occur should ECOSOC remain in its present institutional state whilst yet another subsidiary institution is added to the United Nations framework (see Appendix 1).

---

<sup>16</sup> Etsy, D.C., 'Toward Optimal Environmental Governance', New York University Law Review, vol. 74, no. 6, 1991, pp. 1495 - 1574.



**Figure 4.1:** Interaction of the three pillars of sustainability – the environment ultimately determines what can be achieved by society, which in turn determines the economic prowess of a society.

**Source:** Scott Cato 2009, p. 37.

## Conclusion

In conclusion, to effectively establish and monitor Sustainable Development Goals and universal sustainable development, an interdisciplinary, overarching body must be created. The fundamental ideology of “sustainable development” is the integration of the three pillars of society, the economy and the environment; with the acknowledgment that both society and the economy are presided by environmental limitations. The current UN managerial organ ECOSOC is a direct contradiction of this fundamental premise. Despite incorporating the various functional committees, specialized agencies, programmes and funds associated with the environment and “sustainable development” within its responsibilities, the Economic and Social Council – as its name suggests – regards the environment as being of less importance. This has led to an ideological imbalance of the three pillars and examples antiquated development practices. As has been established, the existing coordinating machinery of ECOSOC would be the ideal structural instrument for a Sustainable Development Council (SDC) and would enable a rapid transition to a more legitimised global network of sustainable development. The qualification and quantification of data regarding the outputs, outcomes and impacts of the new Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development should be obtained from more representative indices and include differentials (such as gender and age). It is imperative that governments no longer view the GDP index as the primary determinant of development. Incorporating the three pillars of sustainability into a single index for the universal establishment of the Sustainable Development Goals and the introduction of the Sustainable Development Council as the overarching, facilitative body of the interdisciplinary cooperative institutionalism would enable this critical paradigm shift.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

Dodds, F; Gardiner, R; Hales, D; Hemmanti, M and Lawrence, G, *Post Johannesburg: The Future of the UN Commission on Sustainable Development* (Stakeholder Forum Paper #9), WHAT Governance Programme, London, 2009.

Etsy, D.C, 'Toward Optimal Environmental Governance', *New York University Law Review*, vol. 74, no. 6, 1999, pp. 1495 - 1574.

Governments of Columbia and Guatemala, United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat, 2011, viewed 24 March 2012,  
<<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/colombiasdgs.pdf>>.

Kaasa, S.M, *The Commission on Sustainable Development: A Study of Institutional Design, Distribution of Capabilities and Entrepreneurial Leadership*, Fridtjof Nansen Institut, Norway, 2005.

Scott Cato, M, *Green Economics: An Introduction to Theory, Policy and Practice*, Earthscan, UK, 2009.

United Nations Civil Society Organizations (UN-CSOs), *Declaration of the 64<sup>th</sup> Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference: Sustainable Societies; Responsive Citizens*, 2011, Chair's Text, Germany.

United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), *Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development*, 2011, viewed 28 March 2012,  
<<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?page=view&type=12&nr=228&menu=63>>.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) 2011a, United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat, viewed 26 March 2012,  
<[https://docs.google.com/gview?url=http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/209Issues+Brief+3+-+IFSD+SD+Body\\_final\\_final\\_111111.pdf&embedded=true](https://docs.google.com/gview?url=http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/209Issues+Brief+3+-+IFSD+SD+Body_final_final_111111.pdf&embedded=true)>.

United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) 2011b, Nations Commission on Sustainable Development Secretariat, viewed 26 March 2012,  
<<https://docs.google.com/gview?url=http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/content/documents/IssuesBrief.pdf&embedded=true>>.

United Nations Millennium Development Goals (UN-MDGs), United Nations, 2012, viewed 27 March 2012, <<http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/bkgd.shtml>>.

United Nations Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS) 2011, NGLS, viewed 26 March 2012,  
<[http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?page=agssp&id\\_article=3327](http://www.un-ngls.org/spip.php?page=agssp&id_article=3327)>.





This report was prepared by Sarah Douglass a National Scholarship Recipient for the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012.

Global Voices is a non-profit organisation seeking to promote an understanding of and participation in international diplomacy by young Australians.

Visit [www.globalvoices.org.au](http://www.globalvoices.org.au) for more information.