

A Global Assessment for Prosperity, People, and the Planet (Session 2)

Significant Global Triage Challenges and the SEA Process

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Introduction – An Emergency over 50 years in the making.

We are arguably entering one of the most complex periods in global history with nations, and at times larger global regions, facing multiple challenges including catastrophic weather events, famine, and mass migration due to environmental or economic forces. Political instability, ongoing conflicts, and an economy that has been impacted by the ongoing COVID pandemic are just some, of the overarching societal forces that are influencing how the global human population responds to these challenges.

Concern about global challenges is not new and have been identified for multiple decades. Even if we only focussed on the last half century, there are numerous dire warnings that we need to act. The 1972 Report *Limits to Growth*ⁱ to the Club of Rome was a study of the future of the global economy and argued that growth could not continue unabated on a finite planet, our world is essentially a closed system. Closed systems inherently have constraints. The argument addressed that if we continued to act without regard to the exploitation of natural resources without worrying about depletion, pollution, and overpopulation, things would turn for the worse with a global economic collapse – perhaps as early as the 1-2 decades of the 21st century.

The next decade saw the 1987 United Nations publication of Our Common Futureⁱⁱ (often referred to as the Brundtland Report). This publication was in recognition of Gro Harlem Brundtland's, former Norwegian Prime Minister, role as Chair of the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED).ⁱⁱⁱ The WCED's targets were multilateralism and interdependence of nations in the search for a sustainable development^{iv} path. The report attempted to rekindle the energy behind the first Human Environment Conference in Stockholm, Sweden in 1972, which had introduced environmental^v concerns to the formal political development sphere. Our Common Future placed environmental issues firmly on the political agenda; it aimed to discuss the environment and development^{vi} as one single issue. The report defined 'sustainable development' as "Development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".^{vii} This publication again emphasised the concept of limits to growth, arguing,

"The concept of sustainable development does imply limits - not absolute limits but limitations imposed by the present state of technology and social organization on environmental resources and by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities. But technology and social organization can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth."^{viii}

The belief that the state of technology and social organisation can be managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth, was not only an optimistic position to take but also an escape valve – and it was common for any reference to the report to only refer to the environmental aspects and make no reference to limits on society. The world's populations and economic pressures on the planet continued to mount, although Sustainable Development was now part of the vocabulary of some

– and I knew it was dead when as a Corporate Banker I was shown the ad for the development of an old-style strip mall, with no green engineering and no access to transit referred, to as ‘A Striking Example of Sustainable Development’.

The following decade saw the 1992 Rio Conference on Environment and Development.^{ix} Political leaders, diplomats, scientists, representatives of the media and non-governmental organizations (NGOs) from 179 countries gathered to examine the impacts of people, and all that we do, on the environment. For the first time, a 'Global Forum' of NGOs was also held in Rio de Janeiro at the same time, bringing together an unprecedented number of NGO representatives, who presented their own vision of the world's future in relation to the environment and socio-economic development. This event presented a dramatic counterpoint to the messaging from the UN conference.

“The Rio de Janeiro conference highlighted how different social, economic and environmental factors are interdependent and evolve together, and how success in one sector requires action in other sectors to be sustained over time. The primary objective of the Rio 'Earth Summit' was to produce a broad agenda and a new blueprint for international action on environmental and development issues that would help guide international cooperation and development policy in the twenty-first century”.^x

This Rio Summit had a number of high-profile outcomes including:

- Agenda 21 – a nonbinding action plan for sustainable development^{xi}
- Rio Declaration^{xii}
- The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)^{xiii}
- Convention on Biological Diversity^{xiv}
- Declaration on the principles of forest management^{xv}
- Creation of the Commission of Sustainable Development^{xvi}

Agenda 21's first statement in the preamble reads,

“Humanity stands at a defining moment in history. We are confronted with a perpetuation of disparities between and within nations, a worsening of poverty, hunger, ill health and illiteracy, and the continuing deterioration of the ecosystems on which we depend for our well-being. However, integration of environment and development concerns and greater attention to them will lead to the fulfilment of basic needs, improved living standards for all, better protected and managed ecosystems and a safer, more prosperous future. No nation can achieve this on its own; but together we can - in a global partnership for sustainable development.”^{xvii}

Again, we see reference to limits to growth, but again there is this sense that we can have a pareto optimal outcome from integrating environment and development concerns, and that by doing so we would enter into a safer and more prosperous future. Pareto optimal outcomes only exist in theory.

The **Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)**^{xviii} were eight [international development goals](#) targeted for 2015 that had been established following the 2000 [Millennium Summit](#)^{xix} of the [United Nations](#) in 2000, following the adoption of the [United Nations Millennium Declaration](#).^{xx} The MDGs were based on the OECD DAC International Development Goals agreed by Development Ministers in the "Shaping the 21st Century Strategy. All 191 United Nations member states, and at least 22 international organizations, committed to help achieve the following Millennium Development Goals by 2015:

1. To eradicate [extreme poverty](#) and [hunger](#)
2. To achieve [universal primary education](#)

3. To promote [gender equality](#) and empower women
4. To reduce [child mortality](#)
5. To improve [maternal health](#)
6. To combat [HIV/AIDS](#), [malaria](#), and other diseases
7. To ensure environmental sustainability
8. To develop a global partnership for development

“Each goal had specific targets, and dates for achieving those targets. The eight goals were measured by 21 targets. To accelerate progress, the G8 finance ministers agreed in June 2005 to provide enough funds to the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the African Development Bank (AfDB) to cancel \$40 to \$55 billion in debt owed by members of the heavily indebted poor countries (HIPC)^{xxi} to allow them to redirect resources to programs for improving health and education and for alleviating poverty.”^{xxii}

The UN believes that the MDGs developed capacity and a better understanding of what was required to move ahead^{xxiii} The [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs)^{xxiv} succeeded the MDGs in 2016.

“The Sustainable Development Goals or Global Goals are a collection of seventeen interlinked objectives designed to serve as a “shared blueprint for peace and prosperity for people and the planet, now and into the future”. The SDGs are:

1. No poverty
2. Zero hunger
3. Good health and well-being
4. Quality education
5. Gender equality
6. Clean water and sanitation
7. Affordable and clean energy
8. Decent work and economic growth
9. Industry, innovation and infrastructure
10. Reduced inequalities
11. Sustainable cities and communities
12. Responsible consumption and production
13. Climate action
14. Life below water
15. Life on land;
16. Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions
17. Partnerships for the Goals

The SDGs emphasize the interconnected environmental, social and economic aspects of sustainable development by putting sustainability at their center^{xxv} What is striking is that the number of goals is increasing and we are seeing a further splintering of concepts (in Linnaean Biology, we could call this splitting and not clumping). Examples include:

- No poverty, zero hunger are separate goals to Good Health and Well-Being
- Two foci on Life (below water and on land) rather than just Life.
- Decent work and economic growth – do we need economic growth or consolidation and the elimination of externalities and unnecessary waste through adopting a closed system of production?

Progress as of the latest report.

“At the mid-way point towards 2030, this Special Edition report provides an update on progress made since 2015 against the global SDG indicator framework. It finds that many of the SDGs are moderately to severely off track and puts forward five major recommendations to rescue the Sustainable Development Goals and accelerate implementation between now and 2030, for Member State consideration in advance of the SDG Summit.”^{xxvi}

This has been just a brief overview of how we got here, it has only focussed on a limited number of international efforts over a 50-year time frame. It is very cursory, very constrained, and there is no reference to:

- The efforts of civil society, such as ENGOs, or global service organisations such as Rotary International
- UNDRIP, FPIC and the role of Indigenous People
- The question of whether acting locally does significantly advance global goals if those global goals are not clearly delineated, agreed to, binding, monitoring and enforced
- How SMART are the SDG or other goals?
 - Specific (simple, sensible, significant).
 - Measurable (meaningful, motivating).
 - Achievable (agreed, attainable).
 - Relevant (reasonable, realistic and resourced, results-based).
 - Time bound (time-based, time limited, time/cost limited, timely, time-sensitive).

Triage and addressing the emergency, aka, the Conclusion.

Elizabeth Freele who presents with me on this panel has addressed a number of issues for mining. This is an industrial sector with a significant footprint, but which plays an essential role for any future trajectory we find ourselves on. The Concept of ESG similarly plays a significant role, but we need to fully define the idea and avoid greenwashing – we don’t have the luxury of time. Any future successful strategy requires a comprehensive strategy moving forward with the management of the mining, and other industrial, commercial or residential sectors and the life-long stewardship of by-products and waste. We cannot afford to accept negative externalities as a cost of business.

The earlier panel has talked about the Land Use Planning, Biodiversity, Environmental Assessments and communities, both Indigenous and non-Indigenous. We are facing in many ways something that represents a spectrum of wicked problems.

A Wicked Problem can be described as “a social or cultural problem that’s difficult or impossible to solve because of its complex and interconnected nature. Wicked problems lack clarity in both their aims and solutions and are subject to real-world constraints which hinder risk-free attempts to find a solution.

Classic examples of wicked problems are:

- Poverty
- Climate change
- Education
- Homelessness
- Sustainability”^{xxvii}

These are all elements of the latest version of global goals, the SDGs. We are proposing an opportunity to explore Strategic Environmental Assessments through regional or national pilots as a means to quickly explore another alternative approach, a constrained approach that will have SMART elements and management.

There are no obvious answers, but we believe that an action plan to save the planet that is SMART needs to occur, and it needs to occur now. We have no time to come up with yet another iteration of goals, another global compact that is non-binding. We need to Triage the situation we are in and start to act in an adaptive management manner, to implement and monitor aggressively to determine what is working and what is not and adapt for success. We believe a Strategic Environmental Assessment Approach has merit and is worth the time and treasure to fully explore it. After all, what do we have to lose other than Life itself?

Endnotes

ⁱ https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_Limits_to_Growth

ⁱⁱ [Our Common Future - Wikipedia](#)

ⁱⁱⁱ [Brundtland Commission - Wikipedia](#)

^{iv} United Nations General Assembly (1987) *Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future Archived* 31 March 2022 at the [Wayback Machine](#). Transmitted to the General Assembly as an Annex to document A/42/427 – Development and International Co-operation: Environment.

^v [Natural environment - Wikipedia](#)

^{vi} [Economic development - Wikipedia](#)

^{vii} Ibid

^{viii} Ibid, p.16

^{ix} <https://www.un.org/en/conferences/environment/rio1992>

^x Ibid

^{xi} [Agenda 21 - Wikipedia](#)

^{xii} [A/CONF.151/26/Vol.I: Rio Declaration on Environment and Development \(un.org\)](#)

^{xiii} [What is the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change? | UNFCCC](#)

^{xiv} [Home | Convention on Biological Diversity \(cbd.int\)](#)

^{xv} [Forest Principles - Wikipedia](#)

^{xvi} [Commission on Sustainable Development \(CSD\) ∴ Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform \(un.org\)](#)

^{xvii} [Agenda 21 - Wikipedia](#)

^{xviii} [Millennium Development Goals - Wikipedia](#)

^{xix} [Millennium Summit - Wikipedia](#)

^{xx} [United Nations Millennium Declaration - Wikipedia](#)

^{xxi} [Heavily indebted poor countries - Wikipedia](#)

^{xxii} [Millennium Development Goals - Wikipedia](#)

^{xxiii} https://www.un.org/development/desa/dpad/wp-content/uploads/sites/45/publication/2015wess_ch1_en.pdf

^{xxiv} [Sustainable Development Goals - Wikipedia](#)

^{xxv} Ibid

^{xxvi} [https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-](https://sdgs.un.org/sites/default/files/2023-04/SDG_Progress_Report_Special_Edition_2023_ADVANCE_UNEDITED_VERSION.pdf)

[04/SDG_Progress_Report_Special_Edition_2023_ADVANCE_UNEDITED_VERSION.pdf](#)

^{xxvii} [What Are Wicked Problems and How Might We Solve Them? | IxDF \(interaction-design.org\)](#)