

The quest for sustainable development: Decoupling of what and how?

A. Introduction

During the last decades the body of evidence suggesting that human activity places unsustainable pressures on the natural environment has grown, and so has the consensus that humankind will need to take decisive measures to promote sustainable development pathways. At national level countries have seen the rise of the green movement, and at the international level they have been promoting global environmental dialogues and actions. In 1992, the world community gathered in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, for the United Nations Conference on the Environment, and in 2012 it came together again in the same place for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. Although the first Rio conference resulted in a comprehensive agenda for action to protect the natural environment -- and has benefited from several follow-up conferences that also outlined action programmes -- the environmental degradation and depletion has continued at an accelerating rate until the second Rio conference.

Despite the increasing recognition that humankind will need to take decisive measures to promote more sustainable development pathways, why has humankind failed to implement these measures? Technological progress has brought about a noteworthy increase in resource efficiency. But why, despite this progress, has the global community failed to reduce the rate of environmental degradation and depletion? Why was it unable to reduce greenhouse gas emissions to avoid a dangerous increase in global temperatures? Why is it still failing to address the mounting pressures on the climate, forests, land and water resources, even though these pressures are associated with an increasing frequency and intensity of natural and humanitarian disasters?

Game theory, misconstrued incentives and disincentive, and the imperfect internalization of externalities, can explain some of these dramatic policy failures. However, the discussions before, during and after the second Rio conference -- Rio+20 -- suggests another important reason for failure: An increasingly political and muddled discussion on sustainable development, which is characterized by an increasing distance from scientific evidence. The decision by the international community to formulate sustainable development goals (SDGs) for the period after 2015, when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are set to expire, is well taken. However, this decision has prompted an increasing number of special interest groups -- including private and public sector organizations, civil society and international agencies -- to engage in the discussion on sustainable development. Many times, their engagement in this discussion does not appear motivated by the sincere promotion of sustainable development, but rather by the strategic positioning of their issues in the next development agenda. They hope that this will ensure growing attention and funding for their issues.

Sometimes special interest groups explain how their issues may further sustainable development, at other times, they explain why sustainable development must be reinterpreted to incorporate their issues. In some cases, these arguments are plausible, but only rarely do these arguments withstand a rigorous scientific examination. Typically they are not grounded in theory, and are at best supported by anecdotal evidence, which is used to draw hasty conclusions. The result of these political discussions and negotiations is an increasingly complex and convoluted web of proclaimed relationships between social, economic and environmental factors, which determine sustainable development pathways. This web of over-determined relationships, on the one side, and the lack of a clear conceptual framework of sustainable development, on the other, undermined the identification of priority actions for sustainable development.

This paper provides a clear framework of sustainable development, which helps to navigate through the increasingly muddled discussion, and to identify policy priorities for sustainable development pathways. The paper reiterates the call for more inclusive and greener economic growth and to this end argues for two distinct

types of decoupling: Efforts to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, depletion and destruction – which are the focus of the literature -- will need to be complemented by efforts to decouple social progress from economic growth. But because both types of decoupling confront limits, sustainable development also critically depends on measures to address and harness demographic change. Without considering population dynamics, we cannot fully understand the challenge of sustainable development, and without addressing and harnessing these dynamics, we cannot develop viable solutions to this challenge. The paper argues that demography is not destiny and that demographic trends can be shaped through rights-based and gender-responsive policies.

B. Conceptual framework of sustainable development

Humans are the central concern of sustainable development (Rio Declaration of 1992, principle 1), and their wellbeing should be our joint starting point in this discussion. While recognizing that wellbeing goes well beyond the satisfaction of material needs and desires, this paper argues that the enjoyment of goods and services is a fundamental precondition for wellbeing. In this sense, material wellbeing is a necessary but not sufficient condition for wellbeing more broadly.

In modern economies, access to essential goods and services is determined by money. However, money is but a mean of exchange, a store of value and a unit of account, and has no intrinsic value. The focus on goods and services, the real economy, is more conducive to explore and understand the linkages between human wellbeing, economic growth and environmental impact than the focus on money metrics.

Regardless of the definition and measurement of human wellbeing – absence of fear and wants, meeting of basic needs, capabilities to functionings, elimination of poverty and food insecurity, opportunity to decent work and remuneration, or access to health and education – it is associated with the enjoyment of essential goods and services. In this sense, economic growth is an essential mean to social progress, and environmental damages are an undesired effect of economic growth. Sustainable development strategies must seek to strengthen the contribution of economic growth to social development, while lessening the impact of economic growth on the environment (graph).

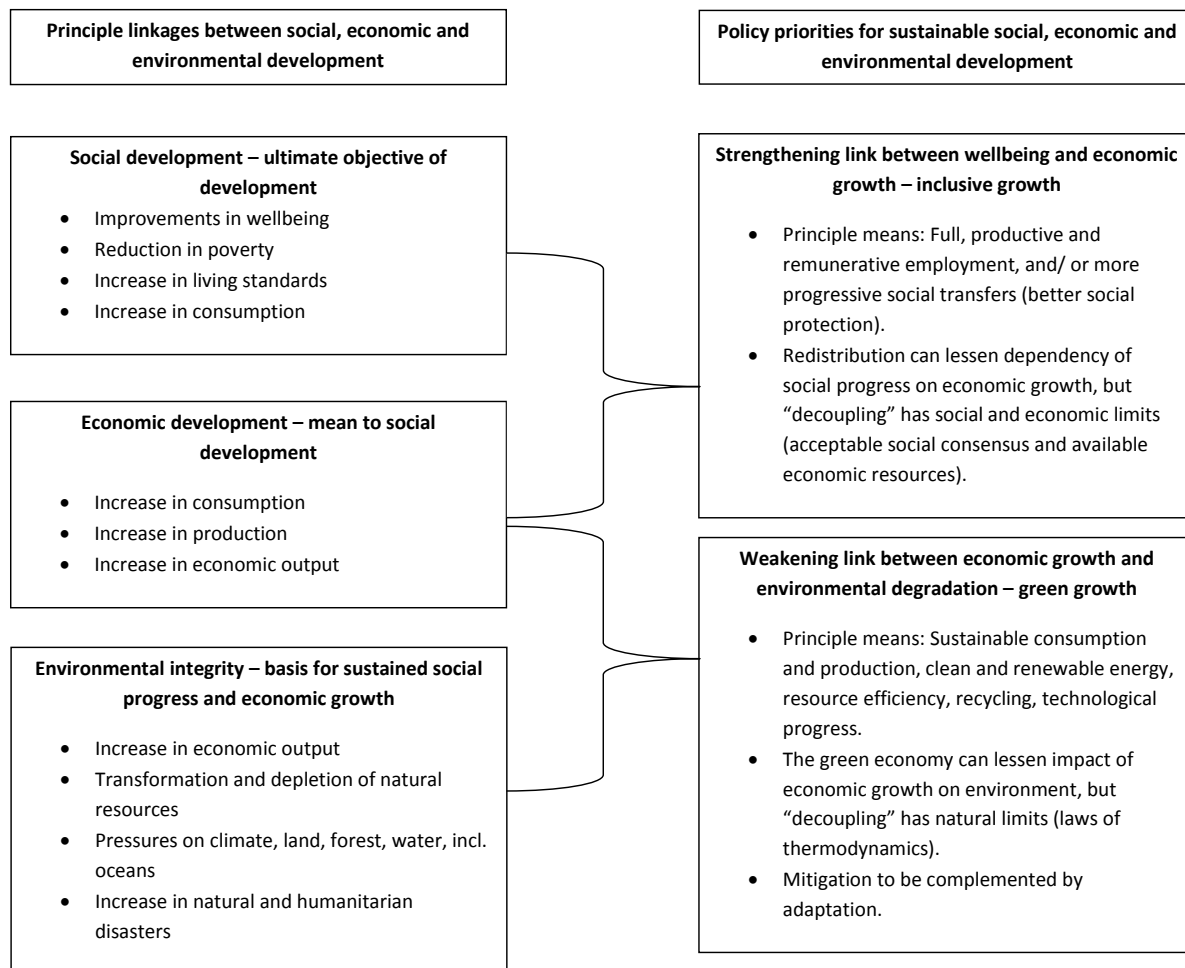
The world population surpassed the 7 billion mark and, according to the medium variant of population projections published by the Population Division of the United Nations, the world population will grow to over 9 billion well before the middle of this century. Accordingly, between now and 2050 about as many people will be added to the planet as inhabited the planet as recently as 1950. Can we meet the needs and improve the wellbeing of a large and growing population, of current and future generations in harmony with nature?

About 1 out of 7 persons continue to live in extreme poverty with less than dollar 1.25 per day in purchasing power parities. About as many suffer from food insecurity and live in slums, and millions cannot find productive and remunerative employment and therefore have inadequate household incomes, and access to essential goods and services. Meeting the needs of the people who currently inhabit the planet – especially the poor who suffer material deprivations that not only reduce the quality of their lives, but effectively shorten their life expectancy and cause physical and mental harm -- and the people who will be added to the planet is the most significant developmental challenge. Meeting it, demands a more balanced distribution of economic resources, especially as inequalities and inequities are continuing to increase, but also requires higher and more sustained output growth.

Today, for instance, food security is still largely a question of distribution and access– the ability of households to go to a market and purchase the food they need – but food security is rapidly becoming a question of availability

– the capacity of the world economy to produce sufficient food to feed a growing world population. To feed a world population of 9 billion will require that agricultural output increases by about 70 per cent over current levels, according to a recent study by FAO (2010). But needed is not only a higher output of the agricultural sector, but also an increasing production of other goods and services. More people will also need more water and energy, clothing, housing and infrastructure, and health and education, amongst others.

Conceptual Framework of Sustainable Development and its Policy Implications



Source: Herrmann (2012).

It is an even bigger challenge to meet the needs of a large and growing world population without inflicting unsustainable environmental damages. Nothing can be produced from nothing, and everything that is produced will result in environmental change. This is true even for seemingly non-material goods such as knowledge, and services such as education and health care. Knowledge often depends on resource-intensive research and development; education requires books, computers and stationary; health care is unthinkable without medical machinery and pharmaceutical industries; and either demands physical infrastructure. The production of goods and services inevitably depends on the transformation of natural resources. This will place mounting pressures on all natural resources including water, land, forests and the climate, which are an essential as well as finite basis of life. Failure – the continuation of business as usual – is not an option. It would result in rising poverty

and inequalities, or lead to unsustainable environmental degradation, and either would ultimately end in unimaginable humanitarian crises. Human kind has maneuvered itself between a rock and a hard place, but still has choices (graph).

C. Implications for sustainable development strategies and policies

The linkages and interactions presented above have three principle implications for action. Two of these were already emphasized by the Rio Declaration of 1992 (principle 8), as well as the Cairo Programme of Action of 1994 (principle 6) agreed at the International Conference on Population and Sustainable Development: A shift towards sustainable patterns of production and consumption – which is the hallmark of the green economy – and policies to address population dynamics. But efforts to ensure environmentally sustainable consumption and production by and for a growing world population should also be complemented by efforts to ensure a more equitable distribution of goods and services. The following three sections address these three implications:

Decoupling between social progress and economic growth

Countries can reduce poverty and ensure adequate consumption levels through two principle means: More inclusive economic growth -- by creating full, productive and remunerative employment which raises disposable household incomes – and more progressive social transfers. Although economic growth has resulted in falling poverty incidence in many countries, it failed to reduce poverty in others. The poverty-reducing effect of economic growth strongly depends on its employment-intensity, but is also determined by poverty incidence themselves, as poverty reduction becomes more difficult at the margin.

Even where the poor have benefited from economic growth, the rich have typically benefited more. Over the last decades income inequality and inequities have risen across the world. The past trends raise the question of alternative scenarios. Is it possible to achieve better outcomes in human wellbeing for the same rate of economic growth, or is it possible to decouple progress in human wellbeing from economic growth? To some extent this decoupling is possible – great improvements in human wellbeing could be achieved through a better distribution of economic goods and services – but redistribution confronts social and economic limits. What is an acceptable social consensus in the Nordic countries of Europe, for example, is hardly a feasible consensus in the United States of America. Furthermore, while even the poorest countries can and should encourage more equitable distribution, distribution there will also confront economic limits.¹ On the one hand they have the highest poverty incidences, which call for large social transfers, but on the other they have limited economic resources to match the needs. In 2010, Eritrea's GDP, adjusted for purchasing power parities, amounted to only 1.3 dollars per person per day. In the same year and by the same measure, every person would have had only 3.1 dollars a day in the low-income countries, on average.² This is too little to ensure access to essential goods and services, and material wellbeing. Distributive efforts must be complemented by higher economic growth – especially in a world characterized by continued population growth -- and for it to be sustainable higher economic growth must be accompanied by decreasing environmental pressures.

¹ The desire of countries to maintain incentive structures is arguably another economic limit to distribution. However, most countries have considerable policy space between a weakening of economic incentive structures and the promotion of more equitable distribution.

² Calculation based on World Bank, World Development Indicators, online.

Decoupling between economic growth and environmental impact

Climate change models have significantly advanced our understanding of anthropogenic forcing and provided a sound environmental basis for action, but their misguided analysis of economic implications has effectively discouraged decisive and meaningful policy responses. The fallacies of this economic analysis include the focus on macroeconomic costs, and the emphasis on green economic sectors:

The fallacy of macroeconomic costs: It was suggested that climate change mitigation will cost up to 5.5 per cent of global GDP by 2050, which amounts to about 0.15 per cent of global GDP per year over the period 2010—2050 (IPCC, 2007).³ This is not only a very small fraction of global income, which has aroused incomprehensible concerns; it is also a nonsensical ratio from an economic perspective. In a closed economy cost is but the flipside of income. A new carbon capture technology is a cost to a coal power plant, but it also is an income for the producers of this technology. To say that mitigation will cost X per cent of global GDP is therefore the same as saying that mitigation will generate X per cent of global GDP.⁴

The issue is not so much costs but rather the effect on income distribution. The focus on income distribution also helps to explain the opposition to the green economy. The companies that are benefiting from the status quo (the “brown economy”) are dominating the stage and have a strong voice, whereas those that are to benefit from change (the “green economy”) are often still in a nascent or infant stage and have a weak voice. Therefore, we are more aware of the businesses that may close and the jobs that may be lost because of the transition to the green economy than business opportunities that will emerge and jobs that will be created because of it.

However, it is not a question if countries will move to the green economy – they will – it is rather a question when and how countries will get there. This transition will happen as the prices of fossil fuels continue to rise, and the costs of environmental damages do too. But there is a considerable risk that we will be crossing critical tipping points before the market is enforcing this transition and precaution therefore dictates that this transition be promoted today through decisive policies (OECD, 2012). It is the role of public policy to solve market failures, promote the internalization of externalities by producers and consumers, and to protect public goods and the global commons. To this end, meaningful product standards and environmental regulations, fiscal disincentives and incentives, and functioning commodity and emissions markets, amongst others, are principle means.

The emphasis on green economic sectors: While a shift towards the green economy is important for sustainable development strategies, the emphasis on green economic sectors can be problematic. Over the past decades several countries have increased their specialization in the services sector, which has a comparatively small carbon footprint, and this has encouraged simulations how further specialization in services can help to reduce overall carbon emissions (IPCC, 2007). Such analysis however encourages misleading conclusions. While individual countries can specialize in services, the world as a whole cannot. The expansion of the services sector – including health care and education, as well as advisory services and banking -- is dependent on the expansion of the agricultural and industrial sector, as explained above. If developed countries were able to limit their carbon emissions through an increasing specialization in services, it is largely because developing countries have assumed the production of many agricultural and industrial goods and increased their carbon footprint in turn.

³ Studies, which used other estimation techniques, targets and time lines, arrived at lower estimates. See for example Burniaux et al. (2008); IMF (2008) and Stern (2006).

⁴ In open economies, of course, costs can occur in one country, while the income is made in another, with concomitant effects on trade and economic growth. However, there is no reason to assume that the shift to the green economy will inevitably be a cost to developing countries, or benefit the developed countries, as explained below.

Seemingly green sectors, companies and jobs often exist only because of brown sectors, companies and jobs. Furthermore, while it is possible to reduce the environmental footprint of all economic activities – for example by shifting from carbon-intensive energy sources to clean and renewable energy sources-- some economic activities will always have a larger environmental footprint than others. Cotton production for example will probably always have a larger environmental footprint than fashion design. Because economic activities are interdependent and their environmental impact changes with technological development, governments cannot focus on promoting selected economic activities that are deemed particularly green but must instead seek to green all economic activities simultaneously and to the maximum possible extent.

While countries can completely decouple economic growth from environmental degradation -- nothing can be produced from nothing and everything that is produced will have an environmental impact – countries can do much more to reduce the negative environmental effects of economic growth. They will need to replace carbon-intensive energy sources with clean and renewable energy sources, and they will need to significantly increase resource efficiency and decrease emissions and waste.

The transition to the green economy is best understood as a process of structural change. Although structural change has always caused a stir in sunset industries – which typically call for protection through trade barriers, a cut in labor costs, and/ or subsidies to maintain competitiveness –structural change is a *sine qua non* for economic development. It has happened many times before and will happen many times more, and efforts to delay or prevent it are nonsensical, typically costly and always futile. The transition from the brown to the green economy is not fundamentally different from the replacement of typewriters with computers, for example. If the introduction of computers had to be discussed and decided by governments it probably would have raised similar issues as the shift to the green economy. Developing countries may have wondered whether they can compete in the production of these new technologies and may have opposed it for fear that they cannot. However, today most computers and their components are produced by developing countries, and developing countries will also benefit from the shift to the green economy. They will not only be able to contribute to different stages in production chains of green technologies, but can also advance their own technological solutions to environmental challenges which often better address the needs of other developing countries.

While the transition to the green economy does not need to have negative net effects on overall economic growth, it will come with transition costs for individual companies and people. These are best addressed through social protection mechanisms, which prevent people from slipping into poverty, and continuing education and training, which help people to update and upgrade their skills to participate in new markets.

The ultimate purpose of the green economy is to reduce environmental pressures, and it would be overly optimistic, and demanding, to expect that the transition to the green economy will also reduce economic inequities. Although the transition to the green economy can be used to promote social inclusion, in many cases the green economy will not necessarily more or less inclusive than the brown economy. This fact does not make the green economy less important and urgent; it just means that we do not have a magic wand that can solve all our challenges simultaneously. Efforts to promote greener economies cannot substitute for the importance of social policies or vice versa.

Addressing and harnessing population dynamics

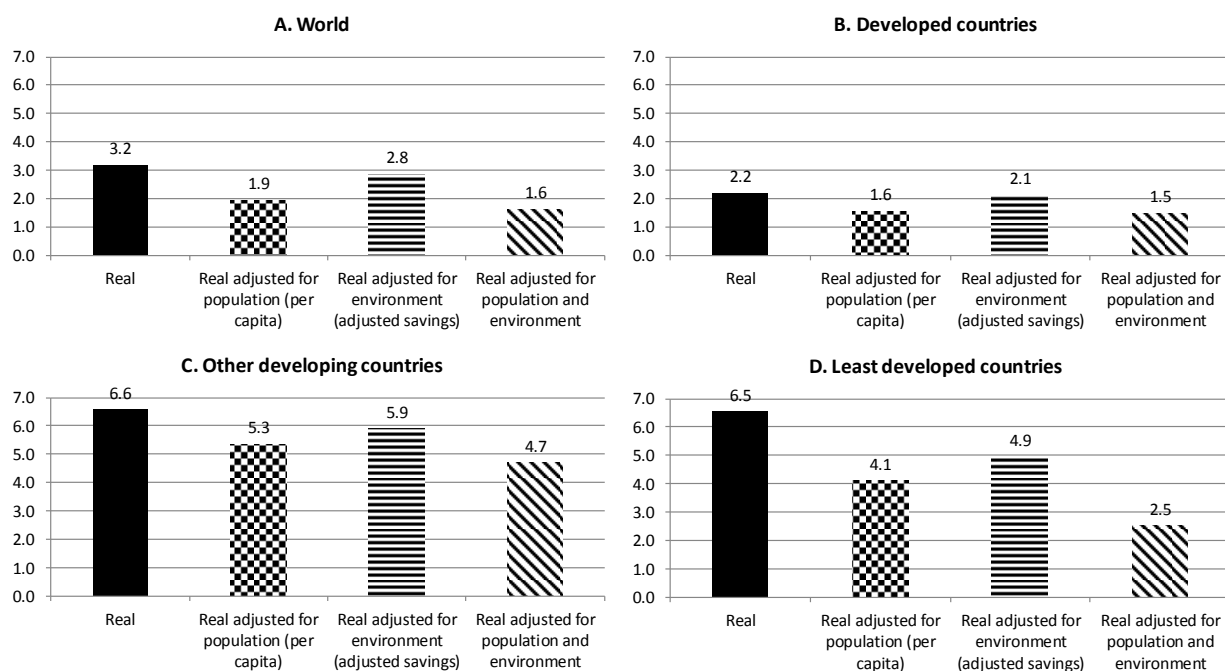
The projected growth in the world population masks considerable differences between countries. On the one extreme of the spectrum are the countries in Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia, where fertility is still high and populations continue to grow rapidly; on the other are advanced countries in Europe and East Asia, where

fertility is comparatively low and populations are aging. However, while the least developed countries are most immediately challenged by high population growth (box), all countries will feel its effects. The world is not only bound together by trade and financial flows, but also by demographic and environmental change. Efforts to meet a rapidly growing demand for water, food and energy, for example, will affect prices, production and natural resources in all countries. Likewise, failure to meet people's needs, reduce poverty, raise living standards and ensure greater equity will threaten stability, security and sustainability throughout the world. To address population dynamics requires not only political will from the countries where they occur, but also adequate support from their development partners.

The challenges in least developed countries

The poorest countries have the highest rates of population growth, highest incidence of poverty and food insecurity, and confront the greatest challenges in rising, and indeed up keeping, per capita spending on health and education for a growing population. Furthermore, while a comparatively small share of their population is outright unemployed, largely owing to the lack of (sufficient) unemployment benefits, the vast majorities of their populations hold unproductive or precarious jobs and suffer from underemployment or vulnerable employment. In the least developed countries today about 80 per cent of the people who are working are only vulnerably employed and no less than 60 per cent continue to live in extreme poverty despite of work (ILO, 2011). These countries confront a staggering employment deficit, and the employment challenge will further grow over the next decades. Between now and 2050 their population will double, their working-age population will expand by about 16 million persons per year, and their labor force will grow by approximately 33 thousand young persons each day (UNFPA, 2011). Meeting the needs of the current and future population for goods, services and employment – which depend on higher economic output -- while ensuring a sustainable use of natural resources has become the greatest developmental challenge today.

Average rate of real economic growth adjusted for population and environmental depletion and damages, average 2000--2008



Source: Estimates, based on World Bank, World Development Indicators, online, 17 February 2011.

Note: Log estimation. Environmental adjustments account for damages caused by carbon dioxide and emissions, as well as depletion of energy, minerals and forests.

To date, the world's poorest countries have contributed least to global greenhouse gas emissions, but they are

disproportionately affected by climate change. Climate change is reinforcing exposure to natural hazards, including shifts in precipitation and an increase in desertification, impacting agriculture. But pressures on agricultural land, forests and water resources are not only attributable to climate change caused elsewhere; they are also attributable to the patterns of consumption and production in the poorest countries themselves. Many of these countries rely heavily on the exploitation of their natural resources to spur economic growth – notably extractive industries, large-scale agriculture and timber production — and many of the poorest households also rely heavily on wood and other natural resources for their daily needs. The world’s least developed countries are suffering most from a rapid degradation and depletion of their natural resources, and that this is effectively undermining a sustainable catch-up with more advanced countries (UNFPA, 2012). Between 2000—2008, the average rate of real economic growth in the least developed countries was almost as high as in other developing countries (6.5 per cent compared with 6.6 per cent, respectively), but adjusted for population growth and environmental degradation and depletion it was almost half of what it was in other developing countries (2.5 per cent compared with 4.7 per cent respectively) (graph).

A rapid shift towards the green economy is of great importance for a sustainable and sustained development of the world’s least developed countries. Sustainable development pathways require not only sustainable patterns of production and consumption but also human-rights based policies to address population dynamics. Human-rights based policies, as outlined in the Cairo Programme of Action agreed at the International Conference on Population and Development include access to sexual and reproductive health care, including voluntary family planning, as well as the empowerment of women and youth.

The past decades were characterized by considerable progress in these areas, but in the least developed countries, particularly in Africa, progress has virtually stopped. The least developed countries have a high adolescent pregnancy rate, 121 births per 1,000 girls of 15-19 years, compared with 52 in developing countries; a low contraceptive prevalence rate, 31 percent compared with 62 in developing countries; and a high rate of unmet need for family planning, 24 percent compared to 11 in developing countries (UNFPA, 2011).

But as regards the unmet need for family planning, there are not only important differences between the more and less advanced countries, there are also significant differences between the social strata within the poorest countries themselves. Data from demographic and health surveys undertaken in 1998 and again in 2008 in a total of 17 African LDCs show that women with a secondary or higher education, women in urban areas, and women of the wealthiest households are less likely to become mothers as adolescents, more likely to use contraceptives and less likely to have an unmet need for contraception than women with no or primary education, women in rural areas, or women of poor households.

Contrary to common perceptions, demography is not destiny, and can be addressed through human-rights based policies. Whether the world population will indeed grow to over 9 billion by mid-century and level off at about 10 billion by the end of the century, or grow instead to over 10 billion by mid-century and to about 16 billion by the end of the century depends on policies that countries pursue today. The differences between the former (the medium variant of the United Nations population projections), and the latter (the high variant of its population projections) is but half a child per woman, less or more, on average (UNFPA, 2012). Every decade of delay in reaching replacement-level fertility implies continued, significant population growth for decades to come.

Essential and effective rights-based policies to address population dynamics ensure access to sexual and reproductive health care, including family planning; investment in education beyond the primary level; and the empowerment of women and young people. Special effort must be made to ensure that girls are not left behind. Together these measures will help to improve the quality of life of people. They will help to curb infant, child and maternal mortality; the spread of communicable diseases; unintended pregnancies of adolescents; the psychological, physical and financial burden of diseases; and they will also contribute lower fertility, slower population growth, demographic transition and more sustainable development.

However, even if fertility levels were to instantaneously drop to replacement levels, because of the sheer number of women in child-bearing age the populations will continue to grow for decades to come. In the poorest countries, rural populations will continue to grow, but urban populations will grow at an even faster pace. Furthermore, many countries are already witnessing the rapid aging of their populations, an accelerated rate of urbanization, and an increase in migration, which fundamentally affect all aspects of social, economic and political life. To address associated challenges and harness associated opportunities countries will need to systematically use population projections to inform rural, urban and national development strategies, plans and policies.

If countries anticipate and plan for demographic change, rather than react to it as it unfolds, demographic change can contribute to sustainable social, economic and environmental development. A fall in fertility will temporarily reduce dependency ratios and open up a window of opportunity for households and countries to increase investment in people and productive capacities. Furthermore, migration can ease pressures on natural resources and enable people to adapt to changes in economic and environmental conditions. And urban population growth – in many of the poorest countries it is accelerated by a rapid rate of rural-to-urban migration -- can also positively contribute to sustainable development. As populations increase, it makes economic and environmental sense for people to move closer together in urban areas. There, governments can deliver essential goods and services at lower costs per capita than in rural areas and population consume less energy, adjusted for income, than in rural areas. Energy savings are particularly significant in the housing and transport sectors.

D. Implications for sustainable and forward-looking development goals

It is widely recognized that the post-2015 development agenda must focus on sustainable development. In accordance, it will need to pay balanced attention to the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. These three dimensions are inseparably linked. There is no doubt that social development – the improvement in the wellbeing of current and future generations – is the ultimate objective of development. However, social development is not possible without economic development – the production of goods and services – and economic development cannot be entirely delinked from environmental change – the transformation, degradation and depletion of natural resources. In accordance it is desirable to develop a broader measure of development, which places a greater focus on human wellbeing and environmental sustainability, but such a measure should not distract from the importance of economic growth. Economic growth and a relentless effort to improve the material living conditions of the poor, disadvantaged and vulnerable are essential development objectives.

Rather a broader measure of development should encourage us to reexamine what and how much we need, how we distribute what we have, and how we produce what we want in a manner that ensures environmental sustainability. To this end, economic growth should be systematically adjusted for environmental degradation and depletion, using the system of environmental and economic accounting, and it should be systematically complemented by measures of poverty and inequality. The system of environmental-economic accounts, which shows how many resources are consumed by the current generation and how many are bequeathed to future generations, also provides important insights into the intergenerational distribution of resources, and whether we are in fact ensuring that our children will live a better life, or whether we are having a party that is eroding the material basis of their life.

Whether countries are able to achieve the dual objective of improving human wellbeing and ensuring environment sustainability critically depends on the policies that countries are pursuing today. This dual

objective requires a two-pronged approach. Countries must promote sustainable patterns of production and consumption – which are the defining features of the green economy – and they must address demographic change through human-rights based policies. However, where economic growth fails to be inclusive, countries need to fight poverty and rising inequality also through redistributive policies.

The promotion of inclusive and green economic growth, as well as the promotion of rights-based population policies must be the corner stones of sustainable development strategies, goals and targets. Inclusive economic growth is determined by full, productive and remunerative employment, as well as social protection measures; green economic growth depends on increasing resource efficiency, decreasing resource use, decreasing emissions and waste, as well as safe, clean and renewable energy sources; and human-centered and rights-based population policies call for the realization of sexual and reproductive health and rights, including voluntary family planning, investment in education beyond the primary level, and the empowerment of women and young people. Girls who often continue to be discriminated in the family and community, schools, labor markets and politics must receive particular support. They must be provided with an equal opportunity to live healthy lives, attain higher education and pursue a career.

An important lesson to be drawn from the Millennium development Goals (MDGs) is the need for truly forward-looking development goals. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, which focused on improving the living conditions of people who suffered from deprivations during a certain base year, forward looking development goals must also focus on the needs of people who will be born over the next years. For instance, while numerous countries made progress in reducing the share of people who lived in extreme poverty in 1990 (the base year of most MDGs) many of the least developed countries will have a larger number of people who live in extreme poverty in 2015 (the target year of the MDGs). This is because poverty reduction did not keep pace with population growth. For every person who managed to escape poverty, more than one slipped into poverty. Likewise, for every person who moved out of slums, more than one person was added to slums.

To ensure genuine progress, future development goals and targets must commit to help those who are in need today, and must at the same time commit to provide adequate support to those who will be born in the next years. We have achieved much if we succeed in meeting the needs of the 222 million women who currently have an unmet need for family planning, but we will not have achieved enough if we do not manage to also meet the needs of the millions of women who will enter reproductive age in the next decades. Likewise, we have to plan for the millions of young people who will enter primary, secondary and tertiary school age; the millions of people who will leave the labor force and require social protection measures; and the millions of people who will move to urban areas who will need housing, water, sanitation, health and education.

Countries must address and harness population dynamics through rights-based policies, and they must consider population dynamics in their development efforts. The systematic use of population projections is essential for the formulation of forward-looking development goals and targets, and planning for future population trends is essential for sustainable development strategies. This is as true for rural and urban development strategies, as it is for national and global development strategies. People are the central concern of sustainable development, and sustainable development strategies must account for people. It is simply impossible to meet the people's needs without considering how their numbers, age or location will change in the coming years.