

Three Thoughts on Next Generation International Goals with Respect to the Environment

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In the lead-up to the June 2012 Rio + 20 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, serious attention is being paid to how sustainability can inform the framing of a new generation of international goals concerning the environment. Below are three suggestions for how to take advantage of this opportunity effectively.

1) Set goals aimed at deepening deliberation of environmental problems

There is a class of environmental problems for which the biggest problem is not so much that governments are not making progress toward goals, but that they simply aren't engaged. There is inadequate debate about the magnitude of the problem's severity, the appropriate nature of coordinated responses, or the types of goals and targets that would be most beneficial. Skipping this kind of engagement limits what can happen with respect to goals and targets. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that proved most effective at spurring action were those that came on the heels of generations of engagement around these foundational matters; as a general proposition goal and target-setting fail when attempted in isolation from such practices. Alarming, there is no mechanism at present by which governments can systematically take stock of international environmental problems and engage in the kind of review, reflection and debate that permits movement toward goals and targets. Engagement with civil society is almost totally nonexistent. Examples of environmental problems for which scientific evidence points to clear dangers but for which there is inadequate engagement to support meaningful goal and target setting include land degradation, water scarcity, nitrogen pollution, hazardous chemical management, and global transboundary air pollution. For these problems, it is probably premature to set quantitative time-bound global targets, but that should not be misconstrued as indicating that the problems are not severe – they are! Under the circumstances, it may make sense to set targets that call on governments to undertake explicit assessments of

such problems and to undertake internal and multilateral deliberations aimed at creating appropriate goals, targets and plans.

2) Formulate goals around hard-core livelihood and security issues.

Because the international environmental policymaking environment is so fragmented and weak, it will take substantial investment in building institutional procedures, measurement programs, assessment processes, and evaluation mechanisms to support meaningful target-based management. The hurdles are very large compared to many other MDG processes which already have such mechanisms either in place or on the books. It will therefore take serious investment to get up to speed on these matters, and finding sources for such investment will be challenging worldwide. Consequently, it makes sense to link such investments not to abstract, theoretical visions of the stakes but rather to the core dimensions of what affects people's livelihoods and security. That is, it may make sense to construe a class of environmental goals and targets organized not around environmental protection per se, but to larger-scale phenomena that already loom large on policy agendas and which are more easily understood as being of high importance in people's lives. One could construct a set of goals and targets around natural disaster risk reduction, for example, within which a number of environmental matters would be prominent. Likewise, one could formulate health goals that incorporate problems such as air quality and chemical pollution.

3) Begin a process to formulate place-specific goals.

We now know, even more than ever, that the way environment and development processes interact manifest themselves in very different ways across the human landscape. The MDG regarding slum-dwellers was a partial recognition of this fact, but it was formulated in an awkward manner and did not get picked up significantly. For human landscapes where the pace of change is rapid, where the cross-sectoral linkages dominate, and where business-as-usual projections are highly alarming, it makes sense to set goals and targets in a different way than the first-generation MDGs. For example, it would be useful to have distinct goal and target processes surrounding such critical human landscapes as low-lying coastal megacities and regions at high risk of water scarcity. Other such constellations could be considered. We know enough about how environmental problems manifest in such areas to understand that achieving progress depends crucially on how multiple sectors are integrated and how place-specific planning processes are carried out. Generic goals will not go far in such areas.