UNCOMPROMISING SUSTAINABILITY: HOW THE UNITED NATIONS’ NEW SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS WILL TRANSFORM OUR WORLD

By Herman Greene

The Center for Ecozoic Societies in Chapel Hill, North Carolina, is one of many organizations grounded in the work of Thomas Berry. Thomas Berry was a self-described “geologian,” a lover and student of Earth. He has been credited with beginning the spiritual ecology movement. With respect to the relation of ecology, religion, and culture, he was certainly one of the most influential people of his time.

He would have loved Pope Francis’s encyclical, *Laudato Si’: Care for our Common World*. Berry’s thoughts are evident in it, especially in the ideas of integral ecology and ecological conversion. The centrality of ecology in Berry’s work is shown in this statement:

> Ecology is not a course or a program. Rather it is the foundation of all courses, all programs and all professions because ecology is a functional cosmology. Ecology is not a part of medicine; medicine is an extension of ecology. Ecology is not a part of law; law is an extension of ecology. So too in their own way the same can be said of economics and even the humanities.

What Berry meant by ecology in the above is the same as what Pope Francis meant by “integral ecology.”

In the world of ethics, Berry is thought of as a leading proponent of ecocentrism or biocentrism as a basis for ethics. For him, the “central flaw [in human development is our] mode of consciousness that has established a radical discontinuity between the human and other modes of being and [has bestowed] all rights on the humans.” He also wrote, “The historical mission of our times is to reinvent the human—at the species level, with critical reflection, within the community of life systems, in a time-developmental context, by means of story and shared dream experience.”

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1 Thomas Berry died in 2009 at age 94.


5 Ibid., 159.
Berry made no pretense of developing a comprehensive system of ethics. He was single-mindedly focused on human-Earth relations. Of the UN documents, his favorite was the World Charter for Nature. Its first two principles are:

1. Nature shall be respected and its essential processes shall not be impaired.
2. The genetic viability on the earth shall not be compromised; the population levels of all life forms, wild and domesticated, must be at least sufficient for their survival, and to this end necessary habitats shall be safeguarded.

It is an all but forgotten document in the sustainable development dialogue.

In contrast to it, the “Rio Declaration” adopted at the UN’s “First Earth Summit” held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 proclaims that:

**Principle 1**

Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development. They are entitled to a healthy and productive life in harmony with nature.

Many, perhaps most, involved in the sustainable development dialogue have been concerned about the relative roles of human development and environmental protection. The issue was addressed in the 1987 report of the World Commission on Environment and Development that gave rise to the term by Gro. Harlem Brundtland in the “Chairman’s Foreword” as follows:

When the terms of reference of our Commission were originally being discussed in 1982, there were those who wanted its considerations to be limited to “environmental issues” only. This would have been a grave mistake. The environment does not exist as a sphere separate from human actions, ambitions, and needs. ... The word “development”

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10 The original definition of sustainable development comes from Paragraph 27 of the Brundtland Report, which provided as follows:

27. Humanity has the ability to make development sustainable to ensure that it meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
has also been narrowed by some into a very limited focus, along the lines of “what poor nations should do to become richer” . . .

But the “environment” is where we all live; and “development” is what we all do in attempting to improve our lot within that abode. The two are inseparable. Further, development issues must be seen as crucial by the political leaders who feel that their countries have reached a plateau towards which other nations must strive. Many of the development paths of the industrialized nations are clearly unsustainable. . . .

Many critical survival issues are related to uneven development, poverty, and population growth. They all place unprecedented pressures on the planet’s lands, waters, forests, and other natural resources, not least in the developing countries. . . . These links between poverty, inequality, and environmental degradation formed a major theme in our analysis and recommendations. What is needed now is a new era of economic growth—growth that is forceful and at the same time socially and environmentally sustainable. 11

Thus, from the beginning, sustainable development has been a compromise between those who want to privilege environment and those who want to privilege economic development, the compromise being that the concern for economic development would be primary and social and environmental concerns would condition development.

One could argue based on the Outcome Document of the 2015 United Nations Sustainable Development Summit that the compromise is still in place. The document, titled Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development ("TOW"), 12 states “We envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth.”13 And the objective of economic growth is repeated thirteen times in the document.

A careful reading of TOW, however, shows that the term “economic growth” means something different than conventional economic development. TOW offers the promise of uncompromising sustainability and, hence, of transforming our world. It is a good platform, the best possible platform that could become the internationally agreed, UN global agenda for development.

11 “Chairman’s Foreword,” Brundtland Report (emphasis added).


13 Ibid., Paragraph 9 (emphasis added).
The remainder of this article is an ethical interpretation of the UN’s new Sustainable Development Goals (“SDGs”) and Targets. The topics covered below are (1) the role of nations and the need for a global development agenda, (2) the meaning of economic growth in TOW, (3) the SDGs as surpassing successors to the Millennium Development Goals (“MDGs”), and (4) what has been achieved with the SDGs and how they will transform our world.

**The Role of Nations and the Need for a Global Development Agenda**

*The UN Is the Only Truly International Institution in the World*

The UN has been called the only truly international institution in the world. Much is made of multinational corporations and economic globalization. Much is made of global movements, and even of global crime syndicates or terrorist organizations. Some states or regions are perceived as having global reach. Including the United States, and the European Union, and other nations have important global impact or seek it. Some culture is said to be global, such as hip-hop, Hollywood movies or “world music.” In the minds of many, these have become the truly international institutions.

The dominant form of social organization of the people of the world is, however, through nation-states. The United Nations with 193 member states and two non-member permanent observer states (the Holy See and Palestine) is the only truly international institution in the world.

*There Is a Need for a Global Development Agenda*

From the earliest times in human history, we have been acculturated into a microphase awareness of our place in the Earth system, perhaps this is even a part of our biological (in contrast to our cultural) inheritance. Yet we find ourselves now at a place where humans as a whole have a macrophase impact. Microphase refers to our individual or local community achievements, freedoms, and aspirations; macrophase refers to our place as a collective human community within the Earth system.

The problem of ecological sustainability cannot be solved locally or regionally with a microphase mindset, it must be addressed globally with a macrophase awareness—though somewhat paradoxically this calls for regional and local solutions everywhere. As the Great Transition Initiative has so ably stated, we humans are in the “planetary phase of civilization.”

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14 The SDGs and Targets are set forth in TOW. Since 2011, I participated, as an NGO representative, in the process of developing them, including attending Rio+20 in 2012 and the UN DPI/NGO conference in 2014.

We are nearing or exceeding planetary boundaries, and our ecological footprint is 150% of global carrying capacity.\textsuperscript{16}

These excesses are reflected in the degradation of planetary ecosystems. Poorer nations currently suffer greater ecosystem losses than richer nations,\textsuperscript{18} but no nation will be spared from their effects. Climate change is evident everywhere. These realities compel a global response.

As Gro Harlem pointed out in 1987, notions of global development have focused on bringing poor nations and people to the level of the rich. The global development plan in the SDGs is a dramatic departure from past approaches, including that in the MDGs. The SDGs are the fulfillment of the promise of transforming the global development agenda into a sustainable development agenda.

\textsuperscript{16} ““The planetary boundaries framework was first introduced in 2009, when a group of 28 internationally renowned scientists identified and quantified the first set of nine planetary boundaries within which humanity can continue to develop and thrive for generations to come. Crossing these boundaries could generate abrupt or irreversible environmental changes. Respecting the boundaries reduces the risks to human society of crossing these thresholds. “Planetary Boundaries Research,” Stockholm Resilience Centre, accessed September 10, 2015, http://www.stockholmresilience.org/21/research/research-programmes/planetary-boundaries.html

\textsuperscript{17} ““Today humanity uses the equivalent of 1.5 planets to provide the resources we use and absorb our waste. This means it now takes the Earth one year and six months to regenerate what we use in a year.” “World Footprint: Do We Fit on the Planet?” Global Footprint Network, accessed September 10, 2015, http://www.footprintnetwork.org/en/index.php/GFN/page/world_footprint/

The Importance of Governments

It is desirable that nation-states, and for the foreseeable and relevant future it is certain that nation-states will, continue to be the dominant form of global social organization. The well-being of nation-states and of communities of nations is essential for furtherance of a global development agenda.

In a healthy global social system, governments, private businesses, and the social welfare sector (composed of nongovernmental organizations or “NGOs”) function in creative tension. There are many advocates for business taking the lead in development especially since the end of the cold war in 1991. Business has an important role to play, but the limits of businesses acting without the support of governments and NGOs is often not recognized. A business has to maintain an enterprise and do so by providing goods and services at a profit. The abilities of businesses to provide public goods and protect the commons are quite limited. Acting alone, they are not suited to bring about the scale of change needed within the timeframe needed for a sustainable future. They have a role to play and it is in partnership.

With respect to why well-functioning governments are so important, David Orr keenly observed:

There is a considerable movement to green corporations, and that is all to the good. But only governments have the power to set the rules for the economy, enforce the law, levy taxes, ensure the fair distribution of income, protect the poor and future generations, cooperate with other nations, negotiate treaties, defend the public interest, and protect the rights of posterity. Errant governments can wage unnecessary wars, squander the national treasure and reputation, make disastrous environmental choices, and deregulate banks and financial institutions, with catastrophic results. In other words, we will rise or fall by what governments do or fail to do. The long emergency ahead will be the ultimate challenge to our political creativity, acumen, skill, wisdom and foresight.¹⁹

The UN brings the governments of the world together to address the common good. TOW provides a remarkable framework for addressing how the world develops over the next 15 years.

The Meaning of Economic Growth in TOW

As stated earlier, from its beginning in the 1987 Brundtland report, sustainable development has been a compromise between environmental concerns and economic development. To the good, the vagueness of the term has brought all parties to the table, governments, businesses, and NGOs. Now, however, the impingement of environmental and social issues on conventional

economic development has required the people of the world, as reflected in TOW, to revisit the “Great Compromise.”

A word needs to be said about why conventional economic-industrial development is held in such high regard by sincere people. Human history is sharply divided by the times that humans acquired speech and culture around 30,000 years ago, the beginning of agricultural civilization around 10,000 years ago, and the modern period which began in the 16th century. The modern period is itself marked by the beginning of the industrial revolution at the end of the 18th century and by the period of rapid industrial and technological growth in the 70 years following World War II.

China’s economic growth over the last 35 years is a microcosm of the potential for good of conventional economic-industrial growth. The standard for extreme poverty used by the World Bank is $1.25 per day. From 1981 to 2004, based on this standard, those living in extreme poverty in China fell by over 500 million people, from 85% of the population to 27%. GDP per capita grew at an average rate of 8.3% per year and poverty fell at a rate of 7.1% per year. This means that for every 10% of increase in per capita GDP, there was a 9% fall in extreme poverty. In terms of the United Nations human development indicators, China’s progress over this period was similarly substantial. Given this, it is understandable that many promote economic growth as the key to alleviating poverty and improving the conditions of human life.

As also stated earlier, the Rio Declaration, the foundational statement of the principles of sustainable development, begins “Human beings are at the centre of concerns for sustainable development,” in contrast with the Charter for Nature which begins “Nature shall be respected and its essential processes shall not be impaired.” But the time has passed when human and nature can be divided. The stark reality is that human history and Earth history have converged

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21 According to the World Bank, economic growth has also reduced poverty globally:

There has been marked progress on reducing poverty over the past decades. The world attained the first Millennium Development Goal target—to cut the 1990 poverty rate in half by 2015—five years ahead of schedule, in 2010. Despite this progress, the number of people living in extreme poverty globally remains unacceptably high.

- According to the most recent estimates, in 2011, 17 percent of people in the developing world lived at or below $1.25 a day. That’s down from 43 percent in 1990 and 52 percent in 1981.
- This means that, in 2011, just over one billion people lived on less than $1.25 a day, compared with 1.91 billion in 1990, and 1.93 billion in 1981.
- Progress has been slower at higher poverty lines. In all, 2.2 billion people lived on less than US $2 a day in 2011, the average poverty line in developing countries and another common measurement of deep deprivation. That is only a slight decline from 2.59 billion in 1981.

and that, as Bruno Latour has advocated, we can now only speak of “geostory.” Or as Thomas Berry wrote, “If the central pathology that has led to the termination of the Cenozoic [era] is the radical discontinuity established between the human and the nonhuman, then renewal of life on the planet must be based on the continuity between the human and the other than human as a single sacred community.”

TOW addresses the Great Compromise by promoting economic growth but only in context. Economic growth as presented in TOW cannot be understood simply as growth in GDP and increase in material throughput. Nor can the workings of an economy be understood as a circular flow of money.

Here are examples of how TOW references economic growth:

Paragraph 9: We envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources—from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas—are sustainable. One in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law as well as an enabling environment at national and international levels, are essential for sustainable development, including sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger. One in which development and the application of technology are climate-sensitive, respect biodiversity and are resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.

Paragraph 27: Sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth is essential for prosperity. This will only be possible if wealth is shared and income inequality is addressed. We will work to build dynamic, sustainable, innovative and people-centred economies, promoting youth employment and women’s economic empowerment, in particular, and decent work for all. We will eradicate forced labour and human trafficking and end child labour in all its forms. All countries stand to benefit from having a healthy and well-educated workforce with the knowledge and skills needed for productive and fulfilling work and full participation in society. We will strengthen the productive capacities of

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23 Berry, The Great Work, 80.
least-developed countries in all sectors, including through structural transformation. We will adopt policies which increase productive capacities, productivity and productive employment; financial inclusion; sustainable agriculture, pastoralist and fisheries development; sustainable industrial development; universal access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy services; sustainable transport systems; and quality and resilient infrastructure.

In the SDGs themselves, economic growth is the subject of Goal 8, which states,

**Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all**

While economic growth is in some parts of Goal 8 dealt with conventionally, such as in Target 8.1 which focuses on per capita GDP growth in the least developed countries, in TOW as a whole economic growth is always conditioned by “sustainable” and “inclusive” and is further conditioned and/or put in the context of

- decent work for all
- sustainable consumption and production—from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas
- democracy, good governance and rule of law; consistent with relevant international rules and commitments
- shared prosperity
- different levels of national development and capacities; respect for national policies consistent with relevant international rules and commitments
- a world in which development and the application of technology are climate-sensitive, respect biodiversity and are resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected
- integrated solutions, common but differentiated responsibilities
- eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions
- combatting inequality within and among countries
- fostering social inclusion
- people-centred economies, promoting youth employment and women’s economic empowerment
- eradicate forced labour and human trafficking and end child labour in all its forms
- healthy and well-educated workforce with the knowledge and skills needed for productive and fulfilling work and full participation in society
- increase productive capacities, productivity and productive employment; financial inclusion; sustainable agriculture, pastoralist and fisheries development; sustainable industrial development
- modern energy services; sustainable transport systems; and quality and resilient infrastructure
• global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation
• protect labour rights and promote safe and secure working environments for all workers, including migrant workers, in particular women migrants, and those in precarious employment

Therefore, one could rightly say that, while the measure of per capita income growth is kept intact in target 8.1, it is not the measure of sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth. Economic growth that contravenes or fails to promote the conditioning factors set forth above is not the economic growth called for in TOW.

The meaning of the term is so altered by the conditioning factors and context that we might speak of economic growth in TOW as “economic growing up” or “economic maturation.” When a human being develops or grows we don’t think of this as meaning only that the size of his or her body enlarges. For a human to develop is to move toward spiritual, physical, emotional, mental, and social maturity. In TOW economic growth also means moving toward a mature economic form in multiple dimensions.

Perhaps Paragraph 13 of TOW says it best:

A new approach is needed. Sustainable development recognizes that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combatting inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent.

SDGs as Surpassing Successors to the MDGs

From an environmental standpoint, the SDGs are quite different from the MDGs. There were eight MDGs and one was devoted to environmental sustainability:

MDG 7 Ensure environmental sustainability

There are 17 SDGs and four are devoted to environmental sustainability:

SDG 11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
SDG 12 Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
SDG 13 Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
SDG 14 Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
SDG 15 Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
The MDGs did not show the depth of ecological concern that the SDGs do. This is primarily because the MDGs were not “sustainable development goals.” They were goals aimed at development, especially in the least developed countries, and in improving the lives of the poor through poverty eradication, better health, literacy, and more.

The SDGs are quite different. They are aimed at altering the development of the rich world as much as the poor. Even in the area of improving the lives of the poor, however, the SDGs are different in their approach from the MDGs.

MDG 1 was “Eradicate poverty and hunger,” and the Targets under MDG 1 were:

- Target 1.A: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day
- Target 1.B: Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people
- Target 1.C: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger

The MDGs had no criteria for how this goal or these targets were to be achieved, only numeric goals.

The SDGs in contrast are more specific. They say that if nations are to reduce poverty and hunger, they must:

- End poverty in ALL its forms.
- Achieve food security.
- Improve nutrition.
- Promote sustainable agriculture.
- Ensure access to sustainable modern energy.
- Build infrastructure.
- Sustainable industrialization (presumably for higher and more efficient levels of production.)
- Reduce inequality WITHIN and AMONG countries.
- Build peaceful and inclusive societies.
- Provide access to justice for all.
- Build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions.

TOW is the first international agreement calling for a new mode of development. The SDGs have greatly transformed development goals in the areas of poverty and environmental protection and all other areas covered by the MDGs. This is seen by comparing the complete
lists of MDGs and the SDGs. The SDGs below are categorized following the order of the MDGs.

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<th>MDGs</th>
<th>SDGs</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger</td>
<td>1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere</td>
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<td>2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</td>
<td>2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture</td>
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<td>6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all</td>
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<td>7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all</td>
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<tr>
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<td>9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation</td>
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<td>10. Reduce inequality within and among countries</td>
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<td>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</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Achieve universal primary education</td>
<td>4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all</td>
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<td>3. Promote gender equality and empower women</td>
<td>5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls</td>
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<td>4. Reduce child mortality</td>
<td>3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages</td>
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<td>5. Improve maternal health</td>
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<td>7. Ensure environmental sustainability</td>
<td>11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable</td>
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24 In one area, health, this comparison seems to indicate the SDGs are weaker than the MDGs. If one reviews the Targets under SDG 3, however, one will find that this is not the case.
The SDGs are more specific. The SDGs do not simply give numerical targets for goals, e.g. the MDG target under “Reduce Childhood Mortality” states “Target 4.A: Reduce by two-thirds, between 1990 and 2015, the under-five mortality rate.” Rather the SDGs address what needs to be done to achieve such targets. Further the SDGs never leave aside issues of inclusion, and they do not entertain blind spots or shy away from tough issues—for example, the Targets under the above SDGs name and address water-borne illnesses, drugs, alcohol, and tobacco, family planning, intellectual property rights to medicines, universal healthcare, hazardous chemicals, regulation of global financial markets, fossil fuel subsidies, terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems, biodiversity loss, and much more.

**What Has Been Achieved With the SDGs and How They Will Transform the World?**

The SDGs are a stunning achievement. When one looks at the MDGs and then the SDGs one can see how far the global “development” agenda has progressed.

In *Planet Dialectics*, Wolfgang Sachs (who was a member of ECOSOC’s Sustainable Development Commission) gives this brief history of the term “development”: In 1949 President Truman, in his inauguration speech, “defined the largest part of the world as ‘underdeveloped areas’.” From this point on, the South had a single name, underdeveloped. All the world’s peoples could be understood in terms of what their GNP per capita was and all were to move along a single trajectory—toward development. Greater production and economic growth were the key to peace and a better life for all.

Wolfgang Sachs foresees the end of development: “The two founding assumptions of the development promise have lost their validity . . . , first that development could be universalized in space, and second, that it would be durable in time.” He writes of a post-development world of selective slowness, one where resource sufficiency is more valued than resource efficiency. It is a world where it is recognized that the economic system is subordinate to the natural system and where economic demands are adjusted to those that the natural system can withstand. His exploration is one of “limits.” He asks, “Are the rich countries capable of living without the surplus of environmental space they appropriate today? Can the appreciation of limits lead to a more flourishing society? Can even self-limitation be part and parcel of self-liberation?” Can we imagine a world in which well-being and economic sufficiency are understood as superior to a world of well-having? If so, he concludes

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“[Eventually] the social scale of the economy will also have to correspond to the economy’s physical scale. . . . As it is not plausible to seek limits to economic expansion only in one dimension—the physical one—research on sufficiency must also explore limits in the social and cultural dimensions.”

Once such observations and questions would have been seen as wildly out of touch with reality. Yet, here we are with TOW: the 193 member states of the United Nations have—in other words the world has—adopted Wolfgang Sachs’, and for that matter Gro Harlem’s, post-development agenda.

Getting to this point was no simple task. In July 2014, the Open Working Group released its proposal for the SDGs, a proposal that has largely been adopted in TOW. In it the Open Working Group catalogued the UN conferences and agreements that had led up to its proposal. Hundreds of events were held around the world to shape the SDGs, thousands of NGO comments and conversations were made and had with representatives of UN member states and staff to shape the SDGs, and years of academic conferences, books and articles were taken into account in the SDGs.

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27 In the outcome document, the commitment to fully implement the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21, the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (Johannesburg Plan of Implementation) and the Johannesburg Declaration on Sustainable Development, the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States (Barbados Programme of Action) and the Mauritius Strategy for the Further Implementation of the Programme of Action for the Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States was also reaffirmed. The commitment to the full implementation of the Programme of Action for the Least Developed Countries for the Decade 2011-2020 (Istanbul Programme of Action), the Almaty Programme of Action: Addressing the Special Needs of Landlocked Developing Countries within a New Global Framework for Transit Transport Cooperation for Landlocked and Transit Developing Countries, the political declaration on Africa’s development needs and the New Partnership for Africa’s Development was also reaffirmed. The commitments in the outcomes of all the major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and environmental fields, including the United Nations Millennium Declaration, the 2005 World Summit Outcome, the Monterrey Consensus of the International Conference on Financing for Development, the Doha Declaration on Financing for Development, the outcome document of the high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development, the key actions for the further implementation of the Programme of Action of the International Conference on Population and Development and the Beijing Declaration and Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences were reaffirmed. In the outcome document of the special event to follow up efforts made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals, held in September 2013, inter alia, the determination to craft a strong post-2015 development agenda was reaffirmed.

Ibid. Paragraph 6.
The miracle is that what had been different agendas for human development, one focusing on economic growth, another on the environment, another on security and peace, another on gender equity, another on justice and equity, and so forth, have now come together in a single agenda, one almost euphemistically called the “Sustainable Development Goals.” I write “euphemistically,” because no prior document on development or sustainability or even sustainable development ever looked like this.

But what are we to make of TOW? Will the SDGs really transform the world?

The SDGs have been criticized both from the right and the left and also from the many groups focusing on particular concerns of environmental protection, justice, equality, climate, or other issues. Some argue that the SDGs are nothing but a wish list, which “even includes reduction of traffic accidents.” Others argue that in their areas it doesn’t go far enough. Deep ecologists, including Thomas Berry, would have worried for example that concern for oceans is couched in the language of “conserve and sustainably use.” Even many of the ardent supporters of the overall purposes of the SDGs are concerned that there are too many goals and targets. Unlike the MDGs, the SDG document doesn’t focus attention on a few key issues. It covers 17 goals and 167 targets.

Some who find the UN ineffectual dismiss the significance of the SDGs because they come from the UN. The UN rarely exercises coercive power, and then only through the Security Council on issues of peace and security. For the most part, the UN only has soft power—the power of persuasion. Adherence to the SDGs is voluntary, with most of the burden and responsibility falling on nation-states. The global partnership and means of implementation needed to achieve the SDGs are yet to take form. There are even some who view the UN as pernicious and are not open to positive consideration of the SDGs.

There is some merit in each criticism of, or objection to, all or part of the SDGs. They are not the realization of what they propose. In fact they, in and of themselves, will not transform the world. Of course not! They are a roadmap, not a destination.

Still, we cannot conclude that the SDGs lack importance. To the contrary, with the adoption of the SDGs by the UN General Assembly, the world has crossed a threshold. The SDGs lay out a comprehensive, interrelated, and integrated, post-development, development agenda. We, the world, will never go back. Necessity, creativity and commitment can and will carry us forward.

Now we know where we are going. We have a moral framework for the future.