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UN panel aims for 'a future worth choosing'

By Richard Black Environment correspondent, BBC News



Current patterns of consumption are not sustainable, the panel concludes, without major change

Growing inequality, environmental decline and "teetering" economies mean the world must change the way it does business, a UN report concludes.

Health and education must improve, it says. Subsidies on fossil fuels should end, and governments must look beyond the standard economic indicator of GDP.

The [High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability](#) was established in 2010 by UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon.

Its report will feed into discussions leading to the Rio+20 summit in June.

It is being launched in Addis Ababa by its two co-chairs, Finnish President Tarja Halonen and her South African counterpart Jacob Zuma.

"With the possibility of the world slipping further into recession, policymakers are hungry for ideas that can help them to navigate these difficult times," said Mr Zuma.

"Our report makes clear that sustainable development is more important than ever given the multiple crises now enveloping the world."

Ms Halonen emphasised the theme of equality that runs through the report, in terms of gender and redressing the burgeoning gap between people on high and low incomes.

"Eradication of poverty and improving equity must remain priorities for the world community," she said.

Pushing the boundaries



The panel's diagnosis

- The number of people living in poverty is declining, but the number hungry is rising
- Inequality in wealth distribution is rising
- Access to clean water is increasing, but 2.6 billion people lack access to modern sanitation
- By 2030, demand for food will rise by 50%, for energy by 45% and for water by 30%
- Women are too often excluded from economic opportunities
- The financial crisis was partly caused by market rules that encourage short-termism and do not reward sustainable investment
- The current economic model is "pushing us inexorably towards the limits of natural resources and planetary life support systems"

The panel's 22 members include heads of government and ministers past and present, including Barbadian Prime Minister Freundel Stuart, Australian Foreign Minister and former Prime Minister Kevin Rudd, and India's Rural Development Minister Jairam Ramesh.

They also include Gro Harlem Brundtland, the former Norwegian Prime Minister who led the Brundtland Commission in 1987.

It was that report that coined the most familiar definition of sustainable development as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs".

Twenty-five years on, the new report concludes that although substantial progress has been made in many directions, such as reducing poverty, development is anything but sustainable.

"We undertook this report during a period of global volatility and uncertainty," it says.

"Economies are teetering. Inequality is growing. And global temperatures continue to rise.

"We are testing the capacity of the planet to sustain us."

To turn this around, it says: "We need to change dramatically, beginning with how we think about our relationship to each other, to future generations, and to the ecosystems that support us".

Changing track

The report - Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing - includes 56 recommendations that would, if implemented in full, have profound implications for societies,

governments, and businesses.

Governments would build the true environmental costs of products into the prices that people pay to purchase them, leading to an economic system that protects natural resources.



Ban Ki-moon has been urging a global push to provide modern energy for all, clean if possible. Goods would be labelled with information on their environmental impact, enabling consumers to make more informed purchasing decisions.

With UN support, governments would adopt indicators of economic performance that go beyond simple GDP, and measure the sustainability of countries' economies.

Governments would change the regulation of financial markets to promote longer-term, more stable and sustainable investment.

Subsidies that damage environmental integrity would be phased out by 2020. The UN estimates that governments spend more than \$400bn each year subsidising fossil fuels, while OECD countries alone spend nearly the same amount on agricultural subsidies.

In parallel, access to energy, clean water, sanitation and food would be increased, meeting the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and going beyond them.

New targets would be established of ensuring "universal access to affordable sustainable energy" by 2030, while universal telecommunications and broadband access should arrive by 2025.

Governments "should consider establishing a global fund for education" in order to meet the existing MDG on universal access to primary education by 2015, and aim for universal access to secondary education by 2030.

These and other targets should be incorporated into a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be drawn up in the next few years, the panel says.

Some of its recommendations parallel the initial draft agreement drawn up for the Rio+20

summit.

"We greatly welcome the report of the panel and its messages," said Farooq Ullah, head of policy and advocacy at Stakeholder Forum, a civil society group involved with preparations for the summit.

"It outlines a vision of the future which is people-centric and which exists within the safe operating space necessary for planetary health and our existence."

Rio looks to the future

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The impacts of marine pollution, felt across the world, may be tackled by a new initiative

What might the [Rio+20 summit](#) deliver?

We have a little more idea now, following publication of [the "zero draft" outcome document](#) for the June summit.

It's been compiled by the chairs of the preparatory process, following a huge amount of dialogue and input from governments and other interested parties.

But with much more dialogue due, a lot can change between now and then.

This Rio summit, like [the last one 20 years ago](#), isn't part of the UN negotiations on climate change or biodiversity or desertification or anything else.

It's bigger than that. It's a chance for world leaders to take a long view of where the global society is heading, and whether they're happy with that.

If they're not - and there's a welter of evidence showing that [we're doing a pretty poor job of looking after the liveable bits of Planet Earth](#), let alone many of its inhabitants - it's a chance to agree some new principles.

At its most basic, the zero draft is basically a set of ingredients for changing direction onto a new sustainable course.

If environmental decline is a major driver, others are the lack of resilience in the global economy shown up by the current extended financial crisis, and the continuing lack of development in the world's poorest countries.

So - what might the Rio+20 summit deliver?

The zero draft sets out principles of universal access to the essentials - food, water and energy.

A major goal is "to free humanity from hunger and want through the eradication of all forms of poverty and strive for societies which are just, equitable and inclusive, for economic stability and growth that benefits all".



Rio has just felt the impact of heavy weather and poverty, with many dead in recent floods

In order to provide "proper nutrition" for all, it calls for "sustainable intensification of food production" - expanding the food supply without expanding the amount of land, water and other resources needed.

Another goal is to provide "universal access to a basic minimum level of modern energy services" by 2030.

And to make that sustainable from an environmental perspective, the proportion of energy coming from renewable sources should double by the same date.

One of the routes to achieving these aims would be to phase out "market distorting and environmentally harmful subsidies that impede the transition to sustainable development, including those on fossil fuels, agriculture and fisheries..."

These various strands would come together in a new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Precisely what they would contain isn't specified. They'd be agreed by 2015, when most of the existing [Millennium Development Goals \(MDGs\)](#) expire, and would carry target dates of 2030.

To help developing countries, the rich should supply "new, additional and scaled-up financing", as well as making good on their existing commitments.

In the context of the current economic difficulties, it's worth taking a couple of paragraphs out to look back 10 years to the meeting in Mexico that spawned [the Monterrey Consensus on](#)

Financing for Development.

The bit that most people would remember would be the re-affirmation that developed nations should commit 0.7% of their GDP to overseas development assistance.



President George Bush went to a Rio Earth Summit in 1992, but Barack Obama's intentions are not clear

Less familiar, perhaps, are the bits committing governments to economic policies that produce full employment, price stability and the "orderly development" of capital markets.

Some way to go on those, you might observe.

By raising these issues, the Monterrey Consensus hints at the fact that there's more to a country's health than simple GDP.

And that's given explicit form in the Rio+20 draft, which would see governments agreeing "to further develop and strengthen indicators complementing GDP that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions in a balanced manner".

Many of these ideas are already finding form in various countries, often in the basket marked "green growth" or the ["green economy"](#).

The zero draft recognises that although each government will make its own decisions, there are ways in which global co-operation can speed progress.

So some kind of international "toolbox" will be developed, containing ideas that have worked in different parts of the world.

The private sector would be expected to play a prominent role, under "a global policy framework requiring all listed and large private companies to consider sustainability issues and to integrate sustainability information within the reporting cycle".

If that might sound like a business straitjacket, it's worth noting that a number of big companies [are actively lobbying for such a thing](#).

On the straight environmental side, there's to be extra help for developing countries in dealing

with waste, notably electronic waste

Marine issues feature, with a call for "a global action plan to combat marine litter and pollution", including materials such as plastics whose impact [was documented so vividly by my colleague David Shukman a few years back](#).

Ocean acidification would be monitored and tackled, and governments urged to meet existing commitments on reducing over-fishing.

The influence of the UN Environment Programme [would be enhanced](#) by upgrading it in a way that's yet to be finalised.

One of the most eye-catching ideas is "an Ombudsperson, or High Commissioner, for Future Generations".

The document doesn't call for such a person, but for "further consideration" of the idea. That'll disappoint some - but still, it's on the agenda.

The reason why it's there goes to the heart of what sustainable development is and why it matters.

The simple [Brundtland Commission](#) definition - "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" - carries the pretty obvious implication that future generations are important.

But who's there to argue for them? Clearly they can't do it for themselves - so why not have part of the UN system empowered and enabled to do it on their behalf?

This is only a "zero draft" document, and you have to presume that the wording will change quite a bit over the months to the summit, as governments and civil society groups and businesses digest what it all implies.

But you also have to presume that at least some of it will survive.