Facing the Crisis in SD

After Rio+20: Future needs and remaining challenges – Perspectives on SD for the next generations

Alan AtKisson
Keynote address to the European Sustainable Development Network
Friday, 29 June, 2012

AtKisson Group
Stockholm, Sweden
Key Messages

3 Themes ...

• **Science**: SD is where science meets decision-making
• **Systems**: SD brings systems thinking into policy
• **Growth**: SD facilitates the dialogue on reinvention
Key Messages

3 Themes ...

• **Science**: SD is where science meets decision-making
• **Systems**: SD brings systems thinking into policy
• **Growth**: SD facilitates the dialogue on reinvention

3 Actions ...

• **Look up**: Promote and sustain the SD vision
• **Look down**: Enable greater sub-national action on SD
• **Look around**: Broaden and strengthen SD networking
Is “sustainable development” dying?
Is “sustainable development” dying?
Defining “crisis”

**crisis**  |ˈkrīsis|  *noun* ( *pl. crises*  |-sēz| )  *(from Greek, “krisis” meaning “decision”)*

(1) a time of **intense difficulty, trouble, or danger**: *as in “the current economic crisis”*

(2) a **time when a difficult or important decision must be made**: *a turning point*

(3) the **critical moment in the progress of a disease**, *indicating either recovery or death*
Is SD really in “crisis”? 

- Rio+20 being branded as a “disappointment” or “failure” … even before it began
- Loss of trust in national government as lead actors to realize SD
- Ministerial-level battles for control of key concepts, terminology, policy initiatives, budgets
- Increased polarization between sectors, especially severe disillusionment among civil society leaders
- Science marginalized, economics trumps everything
National governments lose public trust

Edelman Trust Barometer 2012
(Global data)
National governments not trusted on SD

"Down to Business: Leading at Rio+20 and Beyond," The Regeneration Project, 2012
National governments not trusted on SD

Figure 4: Contribution to Sustainable Development Progress
Since 1992: Comparing Expert and Public Views
Ranking of Institutions,* Sustainability Experts vs General Public, 2012

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Good performance</th>
<th>Sustainability Experts</th>
<th>Global Public</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td>Research/academics/scientists</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research/academics/scientists</td>
<td>NGOs</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Religious groups/churches</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>United Nations</td>
<td>Media</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media</td>
<td>Religious groups/churches**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td>Private sector</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National government</td>
<td>National government</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Ranking is based on net performance, i.e. percentage of “good” minus percentage of “poor”

**Not asked in Brazil, Greece, and Spain

”Down to Business: Leading at Rio+20 and Beyond,” The Regeneration Project, 2012
Let’s take stock of Rio+20 ... again
Rio+20 outcome: a positive view (1)

• Full reaffirmation of sustainable development, and of the broad array of relevant international commitments

• Commitment to increase the speed of action on sustainable development

• First global consensus acknowledgement that food, energy, climate are in crisis
Rio+20 outcome: a positive view (2)

• Call for new, broader measures of progress to complement GDP and to be used in policy making

• Endorsement of corporate responsibility / CSR programs and sustainability reporting, including support for relevant policy and regulatory frameworks
Rio+20 outcome: a positive view (3)

• General adoption of the concept of “green economy” and establishment of a set of detailed policy guidelines for working with the concept in a policy context

• Endorsement of life-cycle assessment, sustainable design, and other core methodologies for greening economies
Rio+20 outcome: a positive view (4)

• Adoption of the **new 10-Year Framework Program** on sustainable consumption and production

• **Dismantlement of the CSD** and commitment to create a higher-level body

• A mandate and process for developing a set of global **Sustainable Development Goals**
Rio+20 outcome: A few things that are missing …

• Acknowledgement of “planetary boundaries” and ecosystem limits

• Convincing, government-led mechanisms for financing and implementation of a broad-based sustainability transformation

• Strategy for dealing with the issue of growth
About Growth: What is the “issue”?  

- We are confused about what “it” means  
- But if we don’t have “it”, things get rapidly worse  
- So, we don’t like to question “it”  
- But: there are many different kinds of growth  
- We need more of some kinds, less of others  
- But: we’ve linked them all to the money system  
- … and that system is very difficult to change
Growth is the key issue for SD

It links three themes at the heart of SD today:

• It is the stumbling block creating trouble at the so-called “science-policy interface”

• Understanding growth requires developing a systemic perspective — which remains a challenge in highly differentiated and specialized governance systems

• It is the focus of a clash of worldviews that plays out in institutional and political decision-making
“Growth as Usual”: The Paradox

1. **We need more of it:** It reduces absolute poverty … but mature, post-industrial economies with aging demographic profiles have a difficult time maintaining high rates of GDP-measured economic growth

2. **We need less of it:** Traditional economic growth puts extreme pressures on resources and ecosystems, while often widening the gaps between the wealthy and the poor
The scientific backdrop:
Living during a “Great Acceleration”

1972: The Limits to Growth

- Controversial when launched, generated global headlines
- Routinely attacked – on false grounds – for nearly 40 years
- Now widely acknowledged as an accurate and prescient analysis (even by former critics)
Why have societies been in denial about the limits to growth for so long?

**Answer:** Resource substitution

At the Mad Hatter’s tea party, when the cups got dirty, they just moved down to the clean ones. That’s “resource substitution.” However, eventually they will have come all the way around the table … and back to the dirty cups.
2009: The “Planetary Boundaries”

2011: The growth of questioning growth

- “Growth ‘as usual’ is not an option.”
- “We need to respond to [people’s] aspirations and to link economic growth with broader societal progress.”

— Angel Gurría, Secretary-General, OECD
Release of “How’s Life?”, 12 Oct 2011

• First annual survey of the current “state of the alternatives” to Growth-as-Usual

• Considers only concepts, indicators etc. in active use by some government, somewhere in the world

http://www.LifeBeyondGrowth.org
What is “Green Growth”?

- Concept first championed by the UN Economic and Social Council for Asian and Pacific (ESCAP)

- “Green” means primarily “low-carbon,” and implies achieving normal (or accelerated) economic growth through investments in clean and green technology

- Includes a focus on “sustainable livelihoods” and “Green Jobs”

See: [greengrowth.org](http://greengrowth.org)
What is “Green Economy”?

- Concept first championed by the United Nations Environment Program (UNEP), NGOs & think-tanks
- Much broader than Green Growth in its conception; includes environmental and social goals more centrally and explicitly
- Was a primary focus (and source of controversy) at Rio+20

UNEP also provides consulting support services to nations who wish to adopt the Green Economy framework. The UNEP “Green Economy Report” included a global modeling study showing that by redirecting 2% of global investment, the global economy could be “greened”.

See: unep.org/greeneconomy
What is “De-Growth”?

• Defined as “a voluntary transition towards a just, participatory, and ecologically sustainable society”

• Proponents believe that the transition to a smaller-scale material economy is “inevitable” and that it will bring social and environmental benefits

• Champions include Tim Jackson, author of *Prosperity without Growth*, French Green Party, etc.

See: degrowth.net
Growth: A Spectrum of Alternatives

Frameworks

DE-GROWTH  SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT  GREEN ECONOMY  GREEN GROWTH  GROWTH AS USUAL

Indicators

GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS  GENUINE PROGRESS INDICATOR  GENUINE SAVINGS  GREEN GDP  GDP

Source: AtKisson, Life Beyond Growth, 2012
Factors affecting the growth debate

Frameworks
- DE-GROWTH
- SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT
- GREEN ECONOMY
- GREEN GROWTH
- GROWTH AS USUAL
- GROSS NATIONAL HAPPINESS
- GENUINE PROGRESS INDICATOR
- GENUINE SAVINGS
- GREEN GDP
- GDP

Indicators
- FINANCIAL CRISIS
- DEMOCRACY MOVEMENTS
- DISASTER RECOVERY
- GLOBAL POWER SHIFTS
- POVERTY ALLEVIATION
- ARMED CONFLICT
- RIO+20 & UNITED NATIONS
- PRIVATE SECTOR

Source: AtKisson, Life Beyond Growth, 2012
Defining the New Role of States: SD Facilitators

13. We recognize that people’s opportunities to influence their lives and future, participate in decision making and voice their concerns are fundamental for sustainable development. … [SD] can only be achieved with a broad alliance of people, governments, civil society and private sector, all working together to secure the future we want for present and future generations

“The Future We Want,” June 2012
The Three Themes

- **Science:** SD champions and functionaries have become *de facto spokespeople for science* in the policy arena (note the link to indicator work)

- **Systems:** It is our job to bring a systems perspective, but also to *increase the capacity of others to think in systems terms*

- **Growth:** We must increasingly moderate and *facilitate multi-sector engagement on reinventing growth* … for a civilization in crisis
The Three Actions

• **Look up:** Keep the SD vision alive, use the positives from Rio+20, draw on stories of progress in all sectors

• **Look down:** Increase efforts to create enabling environments for sub-national action

• **Look around:** Strengthen and broaden networks of sustainable development champions … and support each other
For a bit of inspiration, see …

www.Pyramid2012.net

The Workshops

Here we present a photo collage that shows the extraordinary diversity of the Pyramid 2012 campaign workshops. In the appendix to this report, we also present short summaries of those workshops that were formally reported to us in detail. For more information about all the workshops we know about, more photographs, and even some short videos, please visit the official Pyramid 2012 campaign website: http://Pyramid2012.net
Alan AtKisson
alan.atkisson@atkisson.com
+46 70 992 6979
www.AtKisson.com