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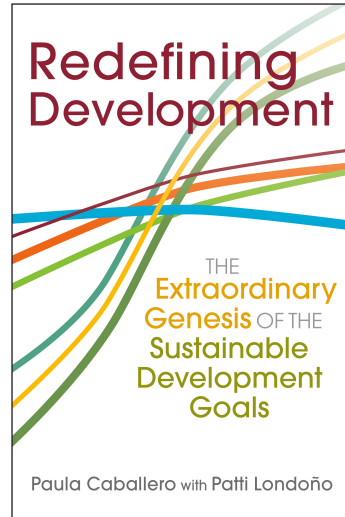
Redefining Development: The Extraordinary Genesis of the Sustainable Development Goals

Paula Caballero with
Patti Londoño

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1

The Sustainable Development Goals: The Roadmap for Our Time

The remarkable and largely unknown story of the struggle—against many odds—to achieve global acceptance of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) speaks to the extent to which they shattered the existing paradigm and ushered in a new understanding of development. The transformation that they represent proves that the boundaries of what is possible are fluid and that determination, perseverance, and vision can deliver unexpected shifts. The SDGs fundamentally changed the development agenda, moving from a narrow, siloed suite of goals to be delivered almost exclusively by developing countries to a vibrant, inclusive, and universal framework. The SDGs spawned a more integrated understanding of the world, demanding that all dimensions of development be comprehensively and synergistically tackled. Today, they form the backbone of the international development agenda and guide the actions of governments, companies, and coalitions.

Intended as a primary source, this book is a firsthand account of the process, led by two women from the Global South who unexpectedly crafted and launched a new global initiative. It recounts the improbable journey to frame and get acceptance of the SDGs concept throughout 2011 and then provides an insider's perspective of the negotiation process during the first half of 2012, culminating at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) known as Rio+20, as told by practitioners deeply familiar with the halls, rooms, and procedures of the United Nations. It includes a rich trove of negotiation documents,

rarely available to the public, and uncovers a deeper understanding of how agreements unfold through multilateral negotiations. It shows how a country like Colombia, which has not traditionally been a major player in shaping the global agenda, can radically alter established processes and expectations with a combination of experience and boldness, geopolitical savviness and technical knowledge, to create a new understanding of global relations. We share the story of how we challenged the status quo because now we all need to do so again to implement the SDGs as they were envisioned: far-reaching, resolute, and uncompromising. We must surmount incumbency, entitlement, and inertia across all systems to deliver the radical solutions needed to address the convergence of crises the world faces today. This book aims to inspire and incite.

It Took a Village

This book is the chronicle of what it took to conceptualize and frame an implausible idea and then position it internationally and get agreement at a historic summit at the level of heads of state. It is the story of a notably diverse group of diplomats and practitioners that we brought together to create an upwelling of support and build a movement. First and foremost, the SDGs were only possible thanks to the unflagging support of Patti Londoño—then vice minister for multilateral affairs in the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs. Between the two of us, we had decades of experience in government and in multilateral affairs, and we were well versed in navigating the international system. Together, Patti and I led a rogue operation that ultimately sidelined the formal agenda for Rio+20 and succeeded in creating the pathway for redefining how we understand and think about development.

This book is a first-person narrative because I led many of the processes, events, and negotiations in New York and other cities detailed in the book. This was a journey undertaken jointly with Patti, who was a fellow “conspirator” and master strategist from the very beginning. Hence the plural “we” is used throughout the book to convey this close partnership. “We” also conveys the fact that we were both government officials and thus represented the vision and position of the Colombian government. Finally, “we” reflects the fact that there was an exceptional team supporting our efforts.

The book also tells the story of how an enlightened government saw the extraordinary potential in the SDGs concept and supported it to make it a reality. The SDGs became possible because we benefited from

the unconditional support of President and Nobel Laureate Juan Manuel Santos and Minister of Foreign Affairs María Ángela Holguín. President Santos is a savvy political leader with a long-standing track record in the international arena and a keen appreciation of the value of technocratic approaches. Likewise, Minister Holguín, who has years of bilateral and multilateral diplomatic experience and discerning political judgment, immediately grasped the full scope of this idea. Without the full backing of a president who was willing to support disruption in the international system and a minister who understood the need for it, the SDGs would have never seen the light of day.

This is also the story of a team. At the ministry, I led the Directorate for Economic, Social and Environmental Affairs, where I benefited from the commitment of a group of talented and dedicated experts who played a vital role in shaping and framing this new concept and navigating the uncharted pathways of informal diplomacy. During the long, lonely months of 2011 during the struggle to position the idea, they believed in it. As negotiations got underway in 2012, we strategized constantly and worked together to navigate the complex international political waters. In parallel, they orchestrated and led extensive consultations at the national level to build ownership and flesh out this concept.

The story of the genesis of the SDGs is also the story of a movement. As government representatives of Colombia, Patti and I may have led the process, but without the resolute and vibrant support of a cohort of fellow negotiators and friends, the SDGs would not have been successful. Hailing from countries from both the Global North and the Global South, individual delegates worked tirelessly to position and advance the SDGs' cause in their own governments and in their respective political groups. All brought innovation, insights, and information as we worked together to build the SDGs concept and achieve progressive agreement. Several countries provided funding for key international consultations that unlocked the process. Civil society played a decisive role, and from the outset we consulted with and gave representatives a leading place at the table. Many constituencies embraced the SDGs proposal early on and created momentum around it. Getting the SDGs to become a reality literally took a village.

The SDGs Genesis

In bringing to light the tough journey to get agreement on even the concept of the SDGs, this book invites reflection on what it takes to drive and advance the urgent and imperative reset needed across our societies

and economies to stem and reverse the systemic devastation that characterizes the epoch of the Anthropocene. That our fractured and ultimately short-sighted approach to growth has given rise to a new geologic epoch should be enough to give us pause and force a reflection not just of the scale of what we have done but more so of what we need to do now. The word “Anthropocene” in itself should be a call to action, with the SDGs a vital tool. They are no silver bullet, but they do provide a lens through which everyone from all walks of life can better understand the complexity of development and the immensity and depth of the interlinkages and trends. Something that drove us to persevere with our proposal was the sense that without a framework like that of the SDGs, the world would be a darker, more obtuse place.

SDGs implementation is inherently linked to tackling the climate crisis; the science is clear. We have just a few years to radically alter our productive systems and consumption choices, to change how we recognize and value natural and social capital. We often hear about 2050 as the target year we need to focus on. But 2050 is now: the world of 2050 is defined by what we decide to do right now. We must align our economies and societies with pathways that can effectively deliver net zero by 2050 while tackling the massive impacts that the climate change phenomenon is already wreaking around the world. Climate action demands alignment and unwavering sustained commitment to the Paris Agreement targets across all sectors, all cities, all landscapes, and all countries. For that the SDGs provide a blueprint, laying bare key arenas of development and priority actions.

SDGs implementation is also about decisively stemming the biodiversity crisis. Protecting biodiversity is also fundamentally about changing our value systems and mindsets. The actions needed to safeguard the vast and still largely unknown web of life of this small planet need to happen across all productive sectors. Action on effective biodiversity protection and sustainable management cut across vast swathes of the SDGs, not just the two goals that explicitly speak to “life on land” and “life below water.” A fundamental aim of the SDGs is to disabuse humans of the notion that environmental issues are somehow distinct from economic and social realms, even as the latter two are often prioritized at the expense of the former.

The SDGs are also inherently about equity. Equity within countries, equity between countries, equity across generations. The interlinked crises of the Anthropocene will limit our capacities to respond to global human needs and undermine hard-won development gains. The Covid-19 pandemic has merely laid bare yet again the structural

inequities of our societies and economies and, in many cases, the absence of a value system to drive resolute action. Millions continue to be left behind, and many millions more across an entire generation risk slipping into poverty. Growing inequality is thus also a reminder that 2050 is now, that our actions today determine—as never before—the world of tomorrow.

Yet rather than unleashing the deep changes that these interlinked crises demand, and despite the potential for the SDGs to launch radical shifts, in many ways their implementation has so far followed well-trodden trails. We are hopeful that we can spur more dramatic action by opening a window onto the remarkably difficult process we undertook with many friends and colleagues to convince nations to accept the SDGs idea.

Indeed, the story of the SDGs' genesis is profoundly relevant today. The commonly held assumption that the SDGs were a logical and inevitable sequence to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) belies the stark struggles that took place across governments and within governments and across constituencies.¹ In obscuring the origin struggle, the SDGs' disruptive potential has yet to be fully recognized and embraced. In fact, the SDGs are a roadmap to a viable planetary future if we deploy and implement them as intended.

There are four key attributes that make the SDGs revolutionary. First, the goals broke down the concept of separate and distinct “pillars” around which human activity has been structured and conceived, with primacy afforded to the economic and social pillars. Instead, the SDGs spoke to “dimensions”; they emphasized integration, the need to assess and understand the effects, trade-offs, and win-wins of actions, policies, and investments across sectors. The SDGs are the first comprehensive, integrated metric to guide and drive sustainable development pathways.

Second, the goals ushered in a conceptualization of development as a universal agenda, relevant to and actionable by all countries of the world and by all constituencies, from government to private sector to civil society. Thus, they changed the prevailing idea of “development” as a “lack of” that only a subset of countries had to tackle and on which their precursor, the MDGs, had been predicated. The SDGs set the stage for an unprecedented depth and scale of collective action to finally address the unconscionable destruction of the planet's global commons and effectively include those who have been historically marginalized. The Covid-19 pandemic, which evidenced with stark precision our societies' and economies' interconnections, has also cast a spotlight on pervasive inequalities that are now exacerbated.

Third, the SDGs brought together two separate agendas in the multilateral system and created a process that enabled the remarkable and complex negotiation process of the SDGs framework to come to fruition. This combining of two arenas is proof that it is possible to change the formats and architecture of tracks across the UN. This success still has high resonance today, notably as a clarion call to unify the SDGs, biodiversity, and climate agendas at global and national levels. They are one and the same.

Fourth, the SDGs process broke with established UN formats and created an innovative, science-based forum for developing an actionable, sensible metric—what came to be known as the Open Working Group. This was the most bitter front of the negotiations, a reflection of the degree to which it deviated from well-known, comfortable political processes.

We discuss these four disruptions in more detail below.

Driving Disruption

At first glance, there may appear to be a logical sequence from the MDGs to the SDGs: a narrow set of social goals (see Appendix 1) inevitably progresses to a more ambitious framework that encompasses the complexity of development. Nothing could be further from the truth.

In the decade since Rio+20, there has been broad and growing awareness that we are at a planetary, economic, and social inflection point. Study after study documents the relentless pace of biodiversity loss and deforestation, the grim trajectory of climate change, and the exhaustion of fish stocks, soil, and groundwater.² Acidified oceans increasingly become cesspools of plastic and waste. Air pollution silently kills millions. Even before the Covid-19 global pandemic, gains in poverty eradication faced enormous hurdles. Almost half of humanity—3.4 billion people—lived on less than \$5.50 a day in 2018 and faced high risks of sliding back into poverty.³ Extreme poverty is increasing in sub-Saharan Africa and by 2030, “under all but the most optimistic scenarios, poverty will remain in double digits.”⁴ In parallel, income inequality has increased in most developed countries and in some middle-income countries, including China and India, since 1990.⁵

Yet as a global community, we are still largely pretending that we will bring about the necessary shifts across all systems—food, energy, transport, health—while eradicating poverty, merely through small tweaks to our business-as-usual models and pathways. The painful inadequacy of our collective climate commitments attests to this: under a

carbon-intensive pathway, increases in global average temperatures could exceed 3°C over preindustrial levels by the end of the century. The Covid-19 pandemic has shown just what disruption can mean, but despite calls for a “green recovery,” rather than capitalizing on the crisis, humanity is simply slipping back into old habits.

First SDGs Disruption: The Need for Integration

Relentless innovation over the past centuries has transformed our world and societies. Until just a generation ago, humanity was mesmerized by a sense of inevitable progress toward ever greater prosperity. It was tacitly assumed to be our entitlement as a species that was held to be above all other species and beyond the laws of nature by dint of intelligence, consciousness, language, and opposable thumbs. In the developed world, prosperity was a birthright, and children expected to be better off than their parents. In the developing world, the lifestyles of the richer quintiles of the global population beacons while great (albeit uneven) strides were made in poverty eradication. Development was the rallying cry: socio-economic progress at any cost. Environmental impacts, when considered at all, were seen as inconvenient hurdles. Environmental issues were outliers, optional and discretionary, to be considered only insofar as they did not deter development and prosperity. This idea was consolidated in the concept of three distinct and separate pillars of development: economic, social, and environmental.

The first global conference on the “human environment” in Stockholm in 1972 captured and translated the nascent understanding of planetary boundaries implicit in the first photographs of Earth from space, which made the stark reality of our cosmic isolation tangible. The ensuing years gave rise to ever more distinct environmental movements and the concept of sustainable development. Twenty years later, at the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro,⁶ the gradual realization of the need to protect the planet’s natural assets and comprehensively tackle the many fronts of development generated Agenda 21,⁷ a first attempt at a far-reaching development framework. The Earth Summit also generated the three so-called Rio conventions: the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD). For its part, Agenda 21 spawned an impressive institutional outburst that sought to consolidate and capitalize on a fully integrated agenda, with commissions for its implementation established across countries and at many scales of governance. But these efforts gradually fizzled out, and the notion of the three distinct pillars of sustainable development became more entrenched.

Growth remained the imperative. Humans first, and no-holds-barred development to enable developing countries to catch up with the others. For its part, the environmental movement evolved and came to emphasize the need to “mainstream” environmental considerations into other sectors, to work with communities and deliver local benefits. But this mainstreaming remained an outlier in key conversations and movements, marginalized from the imperative to deliver continuous growth across governments and the private sector. The rallying calls for sustainability and equity hinted at the systemic transformations needed, but there was never a real commitment to changing the comforts of the status quo, the lifestyles of the entitled, or the drive for growth. It is said that we measure what matters; tellingly, the value of natural and human capital did not figure into the calculations of decision-makers across public and private sectors. Gross domestic product remained the guiding North Star; only the total economic output achieved by a country was measured, thus ignoring the natural and human capital that are the actual foundation of all well-being and ignoring the effects or externalities of unbridled growth.

This divide inherent in a vision of development that privileges economic growth at the expense of the environment was manifest in the distinct communities that evolved. In the wake of the Earth Summit, many countries, including Colombia, established or consolidated a Ministry of the Environment. These novel institutions, almost without exception, became cabinet laggards, ministries with inadequate funding and little political clout, with an agenda widely considered at odds with the imperative of growth, development, and prosperity nominally advanced by other sectoral ministries and by the development community. The development cooperation agendas privileged social and economic issues, consolidating the divide with environmental issues. Across governments, aid agencies, multilateral financial institutions, and philanthropies, the view was largely cemented that environmental issues were optional or a brake on development. The interaction between the socioeconomic pillars and the environmental pillar was perceived by many as a zero-sum game.

Our SDGs proposal sought to shatter the status quo around these pillars. By creating a referent framework that reflected and translated the complexity of development, we aimed to hold up a mirror to guide decisionmaking at all levels. The three pillars had ensconced the majority into a comfortable worldview with blinders that made it possible to advance on single tracks with willful disregard for spillover impacts and trade-offs across sectors or geographies. We were convinced that the

SDGs framework would force stakeholders at all levels, across all walks of life, to consider where their actions fit in in the full scheme of development; to consider whether their actions were in fact, sustainable. SDGs would provide a common language and grammar for countenancing and taking ownership for the comprehensive scope of what development entailed. We feared that in the absence of such a holistic systemic referent, the narrow, marginal understanding of development would continue to prevail, bolstering an untenable status quo.

The SDGs idea brought to the fore a sharp, actionable, systemic vision. We called for deep structural shifts to truly deliver on goals first envisioned in a minimalist fashion in the MDGs: not just eliminate hunger but transform food systems; not just tackle a few infectious diseases but create functional health systems that all could access. As Colombia argued from the outset, the SDGs aimed to create the systems and mindsets to effectively deliver on the MDGs and beyond.

Second SDGs Disruption: The Need for Universality

According to the widely prevailing narrative at the start of the millennium and crystalized in the MDGs, developed countries had achieved prosperity and were called on to support less developed countries in advancing toward equivalent prosperity. For their part, developing countries were called on to emulate the pathways of already industrialized nations and advance “development.” Within this broad understanding, there was agreement that the overarching priority and imperative was to eradicate poverty, so poorer countries and marginalized people had to be prioritized. Building on earlier work, the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), largely an organization of the world’s industrialized nations, compiled a list of goals and targets in 1996 to guide official development assistance (ODA). This list gained currency across the bilateral development community and leading multilateral organizations and in 2001 dovetailed into the MDGs, which were actually referred to in official documents as “the internationally agreed development goals, including those contained in the Millennium Declaration.”⁸ At the UN International Conference on Financing for Development, in Monterrey, Mexico, in 2002, member states agreed to mobilize financial resources and build new partnerships between developing and developed countries to meet the MDGs targets. In principle, the MDGs were thus a partnership. But they were an uneven one.

The MDGs in fact cemented the divide between countries—between those whose main responsibility was to provide resources and those that

had an implementation responsibility. Moreover, although the MDGs were powerful in driving change across a few select and critical fronts of development—the Global Alliance for Vaccination is a potent example—in general, their approach was minimalist. The MDGs embedded a pro-poor approach that wholly sidelined, for example, the fact that to effectively eradicate poverty or hunger for the long run, systems change is imperative. There was no space to acknowledge shared issues—such as deep pockets of poverty in developed countries—or to tackle the threats to the global commons. Nominal consideration was given to environmental issues under MDG7,⁹ but only two of the four targets MDG7 encompassed were actually focused on environmental issues and were so broad as to be largely ineffectual.¹⁰

This sharp division in how countries were characterized was reinforced in international negotiations by another concept that came to have far-reaching influence. In 1992, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) enshrined the principle known as common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and respective capabilities, as defined in Article 3.1: “The Parties should protect the climate system for the benefit of present and future generations of humankind, on the basis of equity and in accordance with their common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. Accordingly, the developed country Parties should take the lead in combating climate change and the adverse effects thereof.”¹¹ Furthermore, Article 4.1 in the section of commitments states that “All Parties, taking into account their common but differentiated responsibilities and their specific national and regional development priorities, objectives and circumstances” should undertake a range of actions and policies.

This principle became such a mainstay of negotiations in the sustainable development arena that it came to be known simply as CBDR-RC or CBDR. Under UNFCCC, the CBDR principle acknowledged that all states have a shared obligation to address environmental effects. However, given disparities in industrialization timelines, nations that first industrialized have higher historic responsibility for environmental degradation and greenhouse gas emissions. Thus, those states also have a higher degree of responsibility to deliver on halting climate change and must do so sooner than developing countries. The principle also recognized that there are disparities in terms of the resources that countries have to deliver on the convention’s objective. Reflecting CBDR, parties to the convention were divided into “Annex 1” and “non-Annex 1.” Annex 1 generally referred to developed countries,¹² and non-Annex 1 to developing countries. Under the conven-

tion, Annex 1 countries have greater and obligatory responsibility to deliver on mitigation action. Developing countries do not have this obligation as such.

Simplistically, CBDR could be interpreted to mean that industrialized nations had a primary responsibility to act to reduce emissions and provide financing for other nations who needed to achieve the same prosperity in a world that had since woken up to the implications of climate change, for them to reduce their emissions. Over time, the CBDR principle contributed to a bifurcated view of a world of antagonistic responsibilities and acrimonious worldviews. CBDR took on a life of its own beyond the UNFCCC and came to be invoked across many negotiations by members of the G77 and China.¹³ Even though CBDR was invoked as part of a broader negotiating tactic, for many in the G77 and China, it was a cardinal principle that encompassed several key tenets. First, it implicitly reaffirmed what a major emerging economy at one point called the “right to development”: given the primacy of eradicating poverty and achieving robust growth, developing countries should have the same right that industrialized nations had had to develop with no regard for environmental and climate considerations. Second, it obligated developed countries to take a decisive lead with regard to action on environmental issues. Third, it conditioned more ambitious efforts by developing countries to the provision of resources by developed countries. It also had the unfortunate consequence of lumping developing countries together in the same category even if they had negligible emissions or were among the top emitters in the world.

The SDGs challenged those dichotomous worldviews. A new agenda was proposed that called on all countries to act across a comprehensive framework encompassing the main arenas of development. This universal aspect of the Colombian proposal was initially looked at askance. How could such a framework possibly apply to developed countries that had already resolved all development issues? There were different readings of the concept of universality and from our perspective, it spoke to two of them. First, given the interdependence of our globalized society, many conditions and factors that underpin societies’ well-being are driven by processes or systems beyond the purview of individual countries. These range from climate change and pandemic diseases to trade flows and the global financial system, and they call for different forms of collective and national action. Second, although there are marked national differences based on where countries were situated across a spectrum of development parameters, development issues are

relevant to all countries. For example, in 2017 one in five children in rich countries lived in relative income poverty, and on average, 12.7 percent of children lived with a respondent who is food insecure.¹⁴ Research has shown that “high-income countries are still far from delivering for their children the vision held out by the SDGs. Income inequality is growing, adolescents’ mental health is worsening and child obesity is increasing. Not a single country does well on all indicators or has shown positive trends on all fronts.”¹⁵ As we often said when trying to explain our idea, the SDGs were about “inequality between nations, inequality within nations, and inequality across generations.” If the new global agenda was to result in structural change and a systemic transformation of development trends, then it had to be universal. For us, the SDGs posited a revolution in responsibility for all.

Third SDGs Disruption:

The Need to Align Tracks at the UN

The MDGs evolved from a track firmly embedded in ongoing processes related to traditional development assistance, which was core to the architecture and *raison d’être* of the UN. In 2011, when Colombia decided to propose a brand-new framework, the end date of the MDGs in 2015 was still years away. Progress was being made across the targets, but those four years of implementation were crucial to achieving them around the world.

Since the MDGs’ formal launch in 2002, a comprehensive development architecture—domestic, bilateral, and multilateral—had consolidated around them. Developing countries built them into national development agendas, and a vast range of stakeholders, from multilateral financial institutions to bilateral donors and philanthropies to think tanks and nongovernmental organizations, structured their development assistance and programs around the MDGs. The agencies and ministries that managed international development assistance were keen champions of the MDGs. Philanthropic organizations took them up, and they inspired incredibly successful coalitions. The MDGs were pinned to walls in national ministries and aid agencies around the world. The MDGs were a nice, short, crisp list focusing on a few salient social goals. They were easy to understand and comfortably confirmed the prevailing status quo—that only developing countries had development issues and a need to act on them. Surprisingly, it was generally overlooked that they had not resulted from an inclusive multilateral process but from a UN Secretariat-led initiative to capitalize on a Millennium Declaration and had been developed by UN experts.

In this context, any proposal that could be interpreted as moving away from or undermining the MDGs was sure to meet with fierce resistance, although in truth we woefully underestimated just how fierce that resistance would be. The many constituencies that were married to the MDGs were adamant that the goals were tackling the “real” core development issues and must not be eroded in any way. They endlessly intoned that the MDGs were “unfinished business,” and many affirmed that the MDGs would need to be carried on beyond their nominal end date of 2015. The UN and many others were focused on accelerating MDGs implementation.¹⁶ We were told time and again that no one should have the temerity to propose anything else until 2015. In any case, why worry about post-2015 when it was still only early 2011? This resistance did not end even after the adoption of the SDGs proposal at Rio+20. These tensions spilled over into the deliberations of the Open Working Group, where the SDGs framework was defined (2013–2014).

The process that had created the MDGs was thus completely separate from the Rio track that began in 1992 that had spawned the lion’s share of the international multilateral environment legal framework. Given the prevailing worldview that regarded the international development agenda as wholly distinct from the environmental one, these two tracks had unsurprisingly run parallel to each other for almost two decades. Efforts had been ongoing in the environment community to link the environment to “human development,” but even so, it still constituted a fundamentally separate track in the UN. Under normal circumstances, such distinct tracks never meet in international arenas, and their separation fueled mindsets that locked in divergent visions of development.

Thus, when Colombia proposed that a major outcome of the Rio+20 Summit could be a revamped, truly global metric, a successor to the MDGs no less, those that did not dismiss it as blasphemous dismissed it as a sheer impossibility, the pipe dream of a negotiator who did not understand the system or the history. The reasons were legion: historically, these were two distinct tracks; the MDGs still had four years to run, so no one could dare to propose a successor; and what would happen to the MDGs after 2015 was something exclusively for the development community to propose after due diligence in the form of extensive assessments of MDGs implementation, gaps, and “emerging issues.” To top it off, the agenda for Rio+20 had already been locked in with a formal UN resolution.¹⁷ In short, we were repeatedly reminded that it was a conceptual and procedural impossibility.

Yet this is exactly what we achieved in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012.

*Fourth SDGs Disruption:**Inclusive, Science-Based Decisionmaking*

What made this alignment of agendas so powerful and transformative was the fact that at Rio+20, countries not only committed to negotiating the SDGs, they also agreed to establish a radically different format for negotiating the goals, the Open Working Group (OWG). If the SDGs had been negotiated under a more traditional UN format, the world would most likely have ended up with political declarations couched as a metric or a cookbook of recommendations doomed to be shelved. The drive to create this format spawned some of the most bitter negotiations in the entire process, which gives a measure of how radical the OWG proposal was seen to be.

Colombia advocated for the unique negotiation format of the OWG and it proved central to crafting a globally relevant and actionable SDGs framework. Rather than being driven largely by political considerations, the OWG allowed for a major intergovernmental negotiation based on science and the multisectoral expertise that each country could bring from their capitals. Moreover, the format aspired to be transparent and participatory, one that all constituencies and stakeholders could follow. We were convinced that the SDGs negotiation process had to be not just intergovernmental but also open and inclusive of all stakeholders to achieve universal consensus and, above all, ownership around an ambitious and forward-looking agenda.

After months of fruitless negotiations on the format, the final agreement that Colombia and Pakistan brokered at Rio+20, which the Brazilian presidency ultimately supported, proved to be transformative. As we advocated, rather than having the new body be “open-ended” and operate under the aegis of the UN General Assembly rules—and thus be led by the traditional political negotiation blocs—the body would be open so that all nations and constituencies could follow the proceedings even if they were not a formal member of the new body. Moreover, proceedings would be livestreamed so that it would be radically transparent. This format finally routed the other standard option that had been favored: a small, closed high-level panel appointed by the Secretary-General. This time around, nothing would be negotiated or agreed to behind closed doors.

Multilateralism in Crisis

If the SDGs faced an uphill battle to gain acceptance because of how disruptive they would be, the context in which they were proposed and developed was itself a significant hurdle. The negotiations for Rio+20

took place at a point when the import and value of multilateralism was being deeply questioned.

During 2011 when we proposed the SDGs concept, the fallout from the 2008 financial crisis and the food crisis was still unfolding. Confidence in global governance had been severely damaged. In the context of multilateral environmental negotiations, the implosion of the Fifteenth Conference of the Parties (COP) of the UNFCCC in Copenhagen in 2009 due to perceptions of a lack of transparency and inclusivity further fractured trust in the international system. Ultimately the Copenhagen Accord was not adopted by the parties and was left in limbo, and “Copenhagen” was ominously invoked in meetings around the world for the next few years as a dire warning of where exclusive processes would lead. Distrust in multilateralism peaked.¹⁸

One bright spot in the international arena was the Tenth COP of the CBD held in Nagoya, Japan, in October 2010, weeks before the Cancún UNFCCC COP. There, countries adopted a 2011–2020 Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, which included the Aichi Biodiversity Targets (five goals, twenty targets, each with a respective suite of indicators).¹⁹ We took this as proof that the international community was able to jointly define and commit to measurable priority actions.

Book Overview

This book covers the period from early January 2011 through to the Rio+20 Conference, which culminated on June 22, 2012, and focuses exclusively on the journey from the first conceptualization of an idea we called the SDGs through to their final acceptance in Rio+20. (See the Timeline.) In the context of the Rio+20 negotiations, it maintains a tight focus on the negotiations around the section on the SDGs in the Zero Draft and does not cover the complex discussions around the many other tracks within the negotiations.

The book ends with the conclusion of the Rio+20 Conference and does not describe the process that followed on the composition of the OWG or its deliberations. Many books have already been written about that remarkable exercise.²⁰ Co-chairs Csaba Kőrösi of Hungary and Macharia Kamau of Kenya did a brilliant job in structuring and leading a process of progressive understanding and enlightenment around the many thematic arenas that were tackled. The intensely participatory process they established was exactly what we had envisioned when we fought for an open process rather than an open-ended one. Seldom has a

UN process generated so much ownership and a sense of shared accountability and responsibility by legions of constituencies.

We do not purport to provide a comprehensive analysis of the many and diverse consultations, initiatives, and research that were percolating in the run-up to Rio+20. In the preceding years, there were various processes and discussions as many organizations and individuals were thinking about how to understand and broach the multiple challenges humanity was facing and how to craft solutions and pathways. In 2010, UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon had established a High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability, which issued a report in early 2012.²¹ He also established a UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda in September 2011, which led to a wide range of consultations and reports.²² For the latter, Ban turned to the Department for Economic and Social Affairs (UNDESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) to help shape the process. There were various reviews of the MDGs and proposals for undertaking gap analyses to identify and prioritize the issues that needed to be tackled, both existing and emerging.²³ There were numerous documents outlining what Rio+20 could focus on and deliver, such as the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)'s *Road to Rio+20* and a wide range of papers by UNDP, UNEP, and UNDESA. When one reviews all this literature and takes the pulse of the consultations and analyses that were ongoing, it is even more notable that in the end it was the SDGs that captivated the world.

Our book aims to contribute to the extensive literature on this period by providing a firsthand account of a decisive contribution to the international development agenda whose genesis is largely unknown. The SDGs were a minuscule part of the massive Rio+20 negotiation, which covered all the main thematic arenas of sustainable development. Yet in the end they endured and became the cornerstone of international development, resonating with governments, the private sector, civil society, and academia around the world. We trust that by casting light on the richness of the historic Rio+20 process negotiations, others will want to further explore and analyze them.

In telling our story, this book is a primary source. Beyond the scenes from the UN General Assembly broadcast every fall with ceremonial takes of heads of states and governments, we provide insights from the backrooms of negotiations, formal and informal, that take place across meeting rooms, in corridors, and even in cafés.²⁴ It also provides the reader with access to negotiation materials, which are seldom available to the public. When negotiations are unfolding at a rapid

pace, there are often versions of proposed language that are informally circulated in the negotiation rooms or more formal versions put forward by those leading or facilitating the negotiations to try to craft consensus language. Most of these documents were only available to those directly involved in the negotiations, and many are designed to be ephemeral—once an issue is resolved, interim negotiation drafts are discarded. These materials, set out in the appendixes, will enable readers to better understand how the UN works and the intricacies of a negotiation track.²⁵ Only by being able to read these documents can one understand the pace and scope of a negotiation: the appendixes provide a unique insider's perspective of how negotiations evolve. In addition to this, we include the many concept papers that Colombia presented with other countries and other relevant documents. These shed light on the evolution of the process as these were political documents that we issued based on deep listening across constituencies and that aimed to guide the discussions and negotiations. For ease of reference, we include the relevant SDGs sections of the final, formally agreed Rio+20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*.

Finally, but most important, Appendix 2 provides a succinct introduction to negotiations at the UN for readers who are not so familiar with multilateral processes. For some, it may even be helpful to read this appendix before delving into the story.

We have included a timeline of the events we describe in the book and a schematic of the time period covered by each chapter.

In Chapter 2, we show how informal diplomacy outperformed politically imposed limitations and expectations. A narrow framing for Rio+20 was eclipsed by our innovative and creative proposal to transform the way we understand development and agree to a global evidence-based agenda with universal commitments. The transition from the MDGs to the SDGs, now seen as evident and intuitive, was a challenging minefield that proved just how difficult it is to set a paradigm shift in motion. From the outset, innovation and tenacity helped make the SDGs a reality.

In Chapter 3, we deal with the challenges inherent in motivating countries from all over the world to consider a proposal that was an outlier. In so doing, we defied the formal blueprint for Rio+20. It describes how we used a blend of backroom outreach, hallway lobbying, and formal settings to position our proposal. Furthermore, we explain why getting the SDGs into the Zero Draft of the Rio+20 summit was a major breakthrough in advancing the adoption of a new framework by the international community.

In Chapter 4, we present an analysis of the international consultations and tools that we deployed to enable the full range of stakeholders to unpack and understand what the SDGs proposal was about. We examine the main areas of contention that would come to define the negotiations. This chapter is aimed at enabling the reader to understand the framing of the proposal and its importance. Describing the genesis of support for our proposal, we explain how we established a core group of countries to help drive the process.

In Chapter 5, we provide an overview of the political economy of the negotiations, introducing the key players and analyzing the dynamics among them. It recounts the initial round of preparatory negotiations and how we continued to capitalize on informal diplomatic channels even as we shifted to formal proceedings.

In Chapter 6, we bring to life the complex negotiations in New York, delving into the architecture and perils of the format. We describe the difficulty of advancing on the various negotiation tracks, providing insight into constituencies' positions. Well-intentioned efforts backfired, evidencing the widely divergent expectations around our brave agenda. We delineate the challenges of the three negotiation rounds held in New York from March to June 2012 (see Timeline). We track how the relevant passages of the negotiation text ballooned, seemingly out of control.

In Chapter 7, we cover the same timeframe as in Chapter 6 but focus on a close analysis of the main negotiation tracks in the SDGs process. We describe the evolution of the text through several rounds of negotiations. This chapter is extensively documented with the actual negotiation texts. This allows us to offer a unique insight into what might be considered the equivalent of "how the sausage gets made" behind the scenes in international diplomacy. This more technical analysis of the negotiation draft may be of greater interest to more specialized or academic audiences.

In Chapter 8, we take the reader to Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, providing an insight into the backroom negotiations there. We document how the final text was gradually crafted through a combination of informal diplomacy, trust, and sheer negotiation clout. We narrate the final stressful hours in which agreement seemed evasive in the midst of highly politically charged positions, and we share a development that almost derailed the whole SDGs process. We would like the reader to understand the remarkable story of what it took to get a final consensus outcome.

In Chapter 9, we focus specifically on the fraught process that ultimately delivered what came to be known as the OWG. We discuss why

establishing a technical, evidence-based body to develop the SDGs framework after Rio+20 became an essential component of our transformative proposal. To the end, there was opposition to the establishment of the OWG, an institution that has since been credited as instrumental in bringing about the SDGs adopted in 2015.

In Chapter 10, we conclude by sharing a few lessons that are relevant for implementing the SDGs as they were envisioned to drive deep changes across systems and mindsets. We point to the audaciousness of the SDGs story as evidence that transformation is possible and necessary for humanity to finally find the balance of sustainability and equity.

Notes

1. The MDGs were proposed to UN member states by the Secretary-General in his report *Road Map Towards the Implementation of the United Nations Development Declaration* (A/56/326, September 6, 2001), a year after the Millennium Declaration was adopted in 2000. More information on their elaboration and impact is included in Appendix 1.

2. Brondizio et al. (2019); Pirlea et al. (2020); World Economic Forum (2021).

3. Lawson et al. (2019).

4. World Bank (2018), 3.

5. UNDESA (2020).

6. The full name of the Earth Summit was the UN Conference on Environment and Development.

7. Agenda 21 resulted from the Earth Summit. Rio+20 Summit of 2012 was a continuum of the efforts to build more sustainable development pathways at a global level to address the environmental, social, and economic challenges the international community needs to tackle together.

8. See additional information on the MDGs in Appendix 1.

9. MDG7: Ensure Environmental Sustainability, was added at the last minute when the UNDP administrator was asked whether the new framework being developed at the UN included anything on the environment and the notable gap was redressed.

10. MDG7: Target 7.A: Integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programs and reverse the loss of environmental resources; Target 7.B: Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss; Target 7.C: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation; and Target 7.D: Achieve, by 2020, a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum dwellers.

11. The 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances That Deplete the Ozone Layer is widely recognized as an earlier formulation of the CBDR principle; see Stalley (2018).

12. Annex 1 included industrialized countries that were members of the OECD in 1992 and countries with economies in transition, which encompassed states of the former Soviet Union and those of Central and Eastern Europe.

13. The G77 and China is the main negotiating group of the developing world with 134 countries from Asia, Africa, and Latin America and the Caribbean, and during the negotiations for Rio+20 it played a major role in channeling the views

and voices of the Global South. It is commonly a counterpart to the European Union and Others, that represent the views of the Global North in negotiations. In this book, when we mention “the Group” or “the G77 and China” we are referring to the Group of 77 and China.

14. UNICEF (2017), 13 and 17.

15. UNICEF (2017), 52.

16. UNDESA (2011).

17. UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/64/236, December 24, 2009.

18. For more on the Copenhagen COP, see Meilstrup (2010).

19. The goals addressed issues including biodiversity loss, promotion of its sustainable use, and safeguarding ecosystems, species, and genetic diversity. Each goal has targets, such as making people aware of the value of biodiversity, eliminating incentives harmful for biodiversity, developing incentives for conservation, implementing plans for sustainable production and consumption, sustainable management of fisheries and agricultural activities, and others that can be found in the CBD. See <http://www.cbd.int/sp/targets>.

20. Dodds et al. (2014, 2017).

21. UNSG (2012).

22. United Nations (2012).

23. UNDESA (2011, 2012b); UN System Task Team (2012).

24. Many books and articles have been written about UN negotiation and decision-making. See Hawden and Kaufman (1962).

25. As the negotiations advanced, the Zero Draft grew exponentially. Thus the appendixes of this book only include negotiation texts for the section on the SDGs.