

Sustainable Development Goals – Reclaiming Circularity, Local Connectivity and Reverence

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Abstract

The most noticeable differences between the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that preceded them are the number of and the position of the environment in the goals. We may say that the SDGs attempt to capture all that matters to everyone on the planet, while the MDGs focused on the gaps between the developed and developing countries, and that the SDGs recognize the central importance of the environment to our continued prosperity.

In fact, the foundations of our existence are found in the natural resources and how we use them to our benefit. All living organisms return to soil and regenerate as plants which in turn support the animals. Water that falls on earth as rain or snow is absorbed by soil and plants, flows down the rivers and stored in waterbodies, and eventually evaporate back to the atmosphere to return again as precipitation. Many elements are continuously cycled in various forms between the different parts of the environment. These cycles function as long as the sun operates as their power source, giving a gloss of infinite availability to most resources. We are deeply dependent on this quasi-infinity of resources, or circularity of elements. Thus the goals that together define our future prosperity are necessarily connected through circular relationships. We cannot solve one goal perfectly when we neglect the others.

We have been convinced for some time that the quintessence of humans is our capacity to control nature or surmount the limitations it imposes on us. We have invented and employed various physical and chemical means to exploit the natural resources by relinquishing reverence for the fellow living beings and the supporting non-living elements as well as by defying the local circularity of nature. Our nonchalance for the plight of the local ecosystems easily spread to engulf the global ecosystem, helped by the lack of information on and difficulty in developing a sense of reality for far flung places. Most circulations of elements at global scale are built on the same at local levels; a well-functioning global ecosystem is not feasible when its building blocks are malfunctioning. Our attempts to overcome what we thought as shortcomings of nature have allowed it to disintegrate in front of our eyes to the extent that our own existence is now threatened.

The SDGs are a call to change our current ways of utilizing natural resources and our relationship with ecosystems. Nature can be used to our advantage and sustain us, not by being blind to its principles and needs, but by abiding by its rules. Respecting what gives its infiniteness – environmental circularity at the local level and reverence for the nature that we are part of – will lead to our sustainable development.