Economic Growth in the UN Post-2015 Development Agenda: A Critical Analysis

Helena Hedström
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Abstract:

This study examines how economic growth is framed in the UN post-2015 development agenda, which is centered on the Sustainable Development Goals. It uses a transdisciplinary approach combining Ecological Economics and Critical Theory. Through a qualitative content analysis of nine official documents from different work streams in the post-2015 process, the thesis seeks to answer what the goal of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ growth actually means, how it relates to the aim of transformative change which is central to the agenda, and how the agenda addresses the relationship between growth and the environment. The results show that there is a strong consensus to maintain and increase growth levels, while changing the quality of growth to make it more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. Thus, the agenda reinforces the ‘sustainable development’ concept which has been established over the last three decades as the mainstream approach to international environmental governance. No limits to growth are recognized; poverty reduction and greater equality are to be achieved mainly by aiming for higher growth rates in developing countries than developed ones. It is acknowledged that the GDP metric has many shortcomings and needs to be revised to better account for externalities and complemented by alternative measures of welfare and well-being. However, no existing alternative measures are used in the SDGs. The goal is to develop better ones by 2030, which effectively postpones the necessary shift away from GDP. The documents express a strong belief in ‘green growth’ (the decoupling of growth from material resource use and emissions), but this optimism seems to be unfounded since the documents fail to account for several aspects that are crucial to determining the feasibility of green growth. Most notably, there appears to be no evidence of absolute decoupling ever having occurred. At the same time, the scale of decoupling that is required appears to be physically impossible to achieve. Since the agenda does not question growth dependency at all, and fails to distinguish between the intrinsic and instrumental value of GDP growth, my conclusion is that it does not fulfill the promise of transformative change.

Keywords: economic growth, sustainable development, United Nations, post-2015, Agenda 2030, decoupling

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Summary:

The UN post-2015 development agenda (also referred to as Agenda 2030) is centered on the Sustainable Development Goals and will guide global development strategies for the next 15 years. The SDGs supersede the Millennium Development Goals and are meant to provide an extensive and holistic framework that better integrates the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainability. The greatest challenge of the agenda is to ensure that human activity stays within planetary boundaries, while providing a decent living standard for a global population that is likely to exceed 9 billion by 2050. Economic growth is central to this dilemma since current growth patterns are environmentally unsustainable and its benefits are very unequally distributed. This study examines how economic growth is framed in the post-2015 agenda, using a transdisciplinary approach combining Ecological Economics and Critical Theory. Through a qualitative content analysis of nine official documents from different work streams in the post-2015 process, the thesis seeks to answer three main questions: What does the goal of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ growth actually mean; how does it relate to the aim of transformative change which is central to the agenda; and how does the agenda address the relationship between growth and the environment? The results show that there is a strong consensus to maintain and increase growth levels, while changing the quality of growth to make it more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. The documents do not recognize any limits to growth; poverty reduction and greater equality are to be achieved mainly through a convergence of living standards by aiming for higher growth rates in developing countries than developed ones. It is acknowledged that GDP is not a good welfare measure, and needs to be revised to better account for externalities and complemented by alternative measures of welfare and well-being. However, no alternative measures are used in the SDGs. The goal to develop better ones by 2030 in effect postpones this necessary shift. Regarding environmental sustainability, the documents express a strong belief in ‘green growth’, i.e. the decoupling of growth from material resource use and emissions. This optimism seems to be unfounded, since the documents fail to account for several aspects that are crucial to determining the feasibility of green growth. Most notably, there appears to be no evidence of absolute decoupling ever having occurred. At the same time, the scale of decoupling that is required appears to be physically impossible to achieve. Ultimately, the agenda fails to call growth dependency into question, and to distinguish between the intrinsic and instrumental value of GDP growth. Therefore, my conclusion is that the UN post-2015 agenda does not represent transformative change, but rather a lost opportunity to steer the world onto a truly sustainable course.

Keywords: economic growth, sustainable development, United Nations, post-2015, Agenda 2030, decoupling

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# List of abbreviations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
<th>Full Form</th>
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<tr>
<td>CBDR</td>
<td>Common-but-differentiated responsibilities</td>
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<tr>
<td>HLP</td>
<td>High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda</td>
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<tr>
<td>IMF</td>
<td>International Monetary Fund</td>
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<td>IPCC</td>
<td>Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change</td>
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<td>SDSN</td>
<td>Sustainable Development Solutions Network</td>
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<tr>
<td>UN</td>
<td>United Nations</td>
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<tr>
<td>UNDESA</td>
<td>United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs</td>
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<td>UNGA</td>
<td>United Nations General Assembly</td>
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<td>WWF</td>
<td>World Wide Fund for Nature</td>
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1 Introduction

In the words of UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2015 is the most important year in global development since the founding of the United Nations (UNGA 2014b, p 34), and represents an opportunity that “will not come again in our generation” (ibid, p 33). During this year three high-level international meetings have set the course of the future development trajectory; the twenty-first session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Paris, November 30-December 11), the third International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa, July 13-16), and the UN Sustainable Development Summit (New York, September 25-27). At the UN Sustainable Development Summit, a high-level plenary meeting of the General Assembly, the new Sustainable Development Goals were adopted with the outcome document Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As they come into effect on January 1 2016, the SDGs will supersede the Millennium Development Goals for the 2015-2030 period.

Since the 2012 Rio+20 conference, an unprecedentedly wide-reaching consultation process has been taken place which has resulted in the adoption of 17 goals and 169 targets that are intended to finish the work of the MDGs, and increase ambitions by tackling challenges that have not been adequately addressed in the previous framework or have become more urgent (such as increasing inequalities, rapid urbanization, and climate change). Most importantly, the post-2015 development agenda is meant to be more holistic and to better integrate the social, environmental and economic dimensions of sustainability. As stated in the outcome document, it is “a charter for people and planet in the twenty-first century” (UNGA 2015, p 12). While the goals are not binding, the agenda has great significance as it will guide policy decisions at the national level and provide a globally shared normative framework for the next 15 years.

Transformation has become a key element of the post-2015 development agenda. There is a strong emphasis throughout the process that the world is at a historical crossroads, and that business as usual is not an option. The “bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (ibid, p 1) represent “one of the greatest technical, organizational, and financing challenges that humanity has faced” (SDSN 2014, p 20). However, according to the Secretary-General, the new agenda is also a unique opportunity to transform the world to better meet human needs, protect the environment, ensure peace and security, and realize human rights (UNGA 2014b, p 3).

The emphasis on transformation highlights one of the most central and contested aspects of sustainability – the relationship between economic growth and the environment. Since the Limits to Growth report was published by the Club of Rome in 1972, there has been an ongoing debate about whether exponential growth is possible on a finite planet, and whether economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation. The 1987 report Our Common Future established ‘sustainable development’ as the new approach to this dilemma, shifting the emphasis towards ‘green growth’ and technological solutions; however, there are also many critics of this approach.

While economic growth is a relatively new policy objective, it has become a top priority for almost all national governments and many of the international institutions, as well as for regional trading blocs, multinational corporations, and citizens all over the world (Purdey 2012, p 78). The focus on GDP as a measure of societal progress has been widely criticized for several reasons, yet it has remained central to economists and policy-makers. The main
problem of this trajectory is that, thus far, economic growth been strongly linked to increased resource use and associated carbon dioxide emissions, which has caused such severe environmental stress that current growth patterns have become unsustainable. Humanity is living beyond its means to the extent that we would need the regenerative capacity of 1.5 Earths to sustain our annual consumption of ecological goods and services, according to some estimates (Raworth 2012, p 6; WWF 2014, p 32). We have transgressed several planetary boundaries, and are facing the threat of dangerous levels of anthropogenic climate change. At the same time, poverty and inequality remain enormous challenges as more than one billion people live on less than $1.25 a day, while income inequality has increased for the last two decades with rapid wealth concentration in the last few years. The global population is estimated to increase from the current 7.3 billion to more than 9 billion by 2050, while 3 billion people are expected to join the global ‘middle-class’ by 2030, resulting in even greater pressure on natural resources and ecosystems.

Given these immense contemporary challenges, and the fact that the debate around limits to growth is far from resolved, it is highly relevant to examine how economic growth is framed in the post-2015 development agenda. The aim for ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth is one of the most important elements of the agenda, with SDG 8 entirely dedicated to this objective. Therefore, this thesis seeks to answer the following questions: What does ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ growth really mean? How does it relate to the aim of a transformative agenda? How does the agenda address the relationship between growth and the environment? This is done through a qualitative content analysis of nine documents produced as part of the process of formulating the SDGs. My purpose is to critically analyze the UN post-2015 development agenda as it is officially presented, and to analyze the outcome rather than the process itself. The research questions are addressed through a transdisciplinary theoretical framework of Ecological Economics and Critical Theory.

The nine documents selected for my analysis are the most significant official ones emanating from the different work streams of the UN bodies in the SDG process; the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General, the UN Development Group, the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. All are UN bodies except the SDSN and the High-Level Panel, which were created with the specific mandate to advise the Secretary-General on the post-2015 development agenda, in coordination with each other.

The outcome document from the UN Sustainable Development Summit, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, is the most central as it contains the final text and adopted SDGs. The other documents have been included in order to give a more comprehensive view of how economic growth has been addressed, especially since the outcome document is largely limited to listing the goals and targets and does not provide much reasoning on how the goals were selected and formulated.

Chapter 2 provides a background to the current global challenges, the Rio+20 conference, and the UN post-2015 development agenda. Chapter 3 outlines my theoretical framework of

1 Planetary boundaries define the safe operating space for humanity in the Earth system along nine critical dimensions: climate change, biosphere integrity (genetic and functional diversity), stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows (nitrogen and phosphorus), land system change, freshwater use, atmospheric aerosol loading, and introduction of novel entities (Steffen et al. 2015). See Chapter 2.1.
Ecological Economic and Critical Theory, followed by a literature review on topics relevant to my research questions: current growth patterns, the growth debate, the sustainable development paradigm, and the normative foundation of growth as a policy objective. Chapter 4 elaborates on my research questions, methodology, and choice of material. Chapter 5 contains the results from my study of the nine documents, and Chapter 6 presents my conclusions.

2 Background

2.1 The Global Challenges

For more than 40 years, humanity’s demand on nature has exceeded what our planet can replenish (WWF 2014, p 32). We are living far beyond our means, and no previous generation has borrowed so freely from the future (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 4). Since 1970, global commercial energy consumption has more than doubled, while food production, water use, population, and overall economic activity have increased in roughly similar proportions (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 6). This has come at the cost of unprecedented use of natural resources and environmental degradation (UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda 2012, p 16). An estimated 60% of the world’s ecosystem services have been degraded or over-used since the mid-20th century (Jackson 2011, p 13). Humanity’s ecological footprint (the area in hectares required to supply the ecological goods and services we use) outstrips our biocapacity (the land actually available to provide these goods and services). Since the 1990s we have reached overshoot by the ninth month every year (WWF 2014, p 33), and we currently need the regenerative capacity of 1.5 Earths to provide the ecological goods and services we use each year (Raworth 2012, p 6; WWF 2014, p 32). The continuous striving for improvements in material welfare is threatening to surpass the limits of the natural resource base and the Earth’s carrying capacity as a source and sink (UN System Task Team 2012, pp i, 16); thus, the way we use natural resources “risks bringing our life support system to the brink of collapse” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, pp 4-5).

The global population is now 7.3 billion people (UNDESA 2015), and by 2050 it is projected to exceed 9 billion people (UNGA 2012, p 5; UN System Task Team 2012, p 14; SDSN 2014, p 5; UNGA 2014b, p 7), of whom 85% will be living in what are now developing countries (UN System Task Team 2012, p 14). Global demand for water is expected to rise by 30%, and demand for food and energy both by 50% (Raworth 2012, p 20). The global ‘middle class’ is expected to grow from under 2 billion consumers today to nearly 5 billion by 2030, increasing particularly in India and China (ibid, p 19: Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 162). This will increase demand on transport, electricity, and meat; for example, the global car fleet is predicted to double, and China’s per capita consumption of meat could increase by 40% (Raworth 2012, p 20). The obvious conclusion is, as Johan Rockström and Anders Wijkman put it, that “the expected increase in demand cannot be met, unless there is nothing less than a revolution in the way we use natural resources” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 162).

By combining scientific understanding of the Earth system’s functioning with the precautionary principle, leading Earth system scientists brought together by the Stockholm Resilience Centre have identified nine critical Earth system processes with ‘tipping points’ or gradients of increasing risk, referred to as ‘planetary boundaries’ (Steffen et al. 2015). Crossing these boundaries or thresholds could lead to irreversible and, in some cases, abrupt environmental change, which carries the risk of destabilizing the Holocene state of the Earth system, which has lasted for 11,700 years and is the only state of the planet that we know for
certain can support contemporary human societies. According to the authors, “[a] continuing trajectory away from the Holocene could lead, with an uncomfortably high probability, to a very different state of the Earth system, one that is likely to be much less hospitable to the development of human societies”. Thus, the planetary boundaries represent “a safe operating space for humanity” (ibid, p 1).

The nine boundaries are climate change, biosphere integrity (genetic and functional diversity), stratospheric ozone depletion, ocean acidification, biogeochemical flows (nitrogen and phosphorus), land system change, freshwater use, atmospheric aerosol loading, and introduction of novel entities. These boundaries overlap significantly with the environmental concerns raised by governments in their submissions to the Rio+20 conference (Raworth 2012, pp 12, 22). The first two are recognized as ‘core’ planetary boundaries. They provide the planetary-level overarching systems within which the other boundary processes operate. Each of them has the potential on its own to drive the Earth system into a new state if it is substantially and persistently transgressed (Steffen et al. 2015, p 8). Two of the boundaries – biogeochemical flows and genetic biodiversity – have already been transgressed, i.e. gone beyond the zone of uncertainty into a high risk zone. Two of them – climate change and land system change – are in the zone of uncertainty, i.e. at increasing risk of being passed. The need for precaution is also underscored by the fact that environmental change does not occur in linear, predictable ways, “but rather entails unexpected discontinuities, synergisms, feedback loops, and cascading effects” which can reinforce each other; it may be years or decades before the full effects are evident (Renner 2015, p. 10).

Ever since the industrial revolution greenhouse gas emissions have risen steadily, and carbon has been the dominant component of our ecological footprint for more than half a century, mainly through the burning of fossil fuels, for most years in an upward trend (WWF 2014, p 33). It has intensified since mid-20th century – CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel use have increased by 80% since 1970 (Jackson 2011, p 71), and half of the anthropogenic CO₂ emissions between 1750 and 2011 have occurred during the last 40 years (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change 2014, p 4), with the largest absolute increase between 2000 and 2010 (ibid, p 5). In its fifth synthesis report from 2014, the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) states that “recent anthropogenic emissions of greenhouse gases are the highest in history”, and that “[w]arming of the climate system is unequivocal, and since the 1950s, many of the observed changes are unprecedented over decades to millennia.” (ibid, p 40). The panel “is now 95 percent certain that humans are the main cause of current global warming”, stating that “human influence on the climate system is clear and growing, with impacts observed across all continents and oceans” (ibid, p v). It finds that “[c]limate change will amplify existing risks and create new risks for natural and human systems”, and that these risks “are unevenly distributed and are generally greater for disadvantaged people and communities in countries at all levels of development” (ibid, p 13). They conclude that “[m]ultiple lines of evidence indicate a strong, consistent, almost linear relationship between cumulative CO₂ emissions and projected global temperature change to the year 2100” (ibid, p 8), and that “the more human activities disrupt the climate, the greater the risks of severe, pervasive and irreversible impacts for people and ecosystems, and long-lasting changes in all components of the climate system” (ibid, p v).

However, “[b]eneath this global-scale picture of resource use lie huge inequalities in terms of where resources are being used and by whom”, as Kate Raworth puts it in her Oxfam discussion paper A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can we Live within the Doughnut? (Raworth 2012, p 12). Per capita footprints, as well as contributions to the collective footprint,
vary greatly among countries, regions, and different social groups, and according to Raworth, “[t]he biggest source of planetary boundaries stress today is the excessive consumption levels of roughly the wealthiest 10 per cent of people in the world, and the production patterns of the companies producing the goods and services that they buy” (ibid, p 19). For example, the paper points out that just 11% of the global population generate around 50% of the global CO₂ emissions, while 50% of people generate only 11%. High-income countries, home to 16% of the global population, account for 64% of the world’s spending on consumer products and 57% of the world’s electricity use (ibid). Food wasted by consumers in industrialized countries each year is almost as high as the total net food production of sub-Saharan Africa (ibid, p 20).

The challenge is to address the ‘environmental ceiling’ while also addressing the ‘social foundation’: a minimum level of meeting people’s essential needs and enabling them to lead lives of dignity and opportunity, based on the UN Universal Declaration of Human Rights from 1948². Raworth identifies 11 areas of social sustainability that were prioritized by governments for the Rio+20 conference: food security, income, water and sanitation, health care, education, energy, gender equality, social equity, voice (e.g. freedom of expression and political participation), jobs, and resilience (e.g. populations facing multiple dimensions of poverty) (ibid, p 10). These are all further defined through illustrative indicators, and Raworth finds that none of the 11 dimensions have been achieved (although there are no numbers yet for the last three). She also notes that while “[s]ustainable development envisions people and communities prospering far beyond this”, the extent of deprivation and extreme inequality in the world means that this ‘social foundation’ must be the first focus (ibid, p 9). In contrast to the Earth system processes, which must be moved back to their ‘safe space’ of the pre-industrial era, “the human population has never all lived above the social foundation in a ‘just space’”, and “the aim now must be for all of humanity to reach it” (ibid, p 8).

Poverty and inequality are the major challenges of social sustainability. More than a billion people still live in extreme poverty, living on less than $1.25 a day³ (UNGA 2012, p 5; Raworth 2012, p 19). Poverty is inextricably linked to environmental sustainability in several ways. Environmental stress can exacerbate poverty (e.g. through climate change causing more extreme weather and shifting seasons which will affect food security), and those living in poverty are often the most vulnerable to the effects of environmental degradation. Poverty can also exacerbate environmental stress, as people living in poverty may be forced to use resources in unsustainable ways and with a short-term timeframe to meet their most essential needs. Therefore, as stated in the planetary boundaries report, “[t]he prospect of tighter resource constraints and rising environmental hazards is also unavoidably turning the focus onto global social equity” (Steffen et al. 2015, p 9).

In their 2015 issue briefing Wealth: Having it All and Wanting More, Oxfam International showed that global wealth is becoming increasingly concentrated among a small wealthy elite. In 2014 the richest 1% of people in the world owned 48% of global wealth, leaving 52% to be shared between the other 99% of adults on the planet. If this trend continues, the wealth share

² Raworth, K. (2012) A Safe and Just Space for Humanity: Can We Live within the Doughnut? An image of the ‘doughnut model’ can be found on page 4. The 11 dimensions of the social foundation are based on governments’ priorities for Rio+20, and the nine dimensions of the environmental ceiling are based on A safe operating space for humanity, the first report on planetary boundaries by Johan Rockström et al. (2009).

³ The current International Poverty Line, as determined by the World Bank, is $1.25 a day. However, it has been criticized as too low to constitute an actual living wage. Using an IPL of $2.50 or higher, which some analysts have found to be more accurate, means that more than 3 billion people are living below the poverty line. See Hickel (2014) and Sandbu (2015).
of the top 1% will exceed 50% by 2016 (Oxfam International 2015, p 2). The richest 80 people in the world now own the same amount of wealth as the bottom 50% of the world’s population (3.5 billion people). This shows a rapidly growing gap in the last five years: in 2010 it took 388 of the richest people to equal the wealth of the bottom half (ibid, p 3).

The national, thematic, and online consultations of the post-2015 agenda showed that “[p]eople are indignant at the injustice they feel because of growing inequalities and insecurities. They feel that the benefits of economic growth are distributed unequally, and so demand decent jobs and livelihoods.” (UNDG 2013, p 2). With few exceptions, income and wealth inequalities within countries have increased since the early 1980s, including in high-income countries, and most of the gains from economic growth have been restricted largely to the top few percent of the population (Jackson 2011, pp 5, 117; UN System Task Team 2012, p 12; Victor & Jackson 2015, pp 47-48). Jørgen Randers noted in 2012 that “[a]n elite group is getting richer by the day at incomprehensible speed”, while for many their situation is the same or worsening, resulting in increased inequity and social tension (Randers 2012, p 167).

As Raworth points out, “[b]oth the social foundation and the environmental ceiling are essentially normative boundaries. What constitutes human deprivation is determined through widely agreed social norms. Likewise, although science focuses on giving an objective description of the planet’s biophysical reality, the question of where to set the boundaries of natural resource use is ultimately a normative one, based on perceptions of risk, and of the desirability of staying within the Holocene.” (Raworth 2012, p 8).

### 2.2 The Rio+20 Conference

The 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development took place 20 years after the 1992 UN Conference of Environment and Development (known as the Earth Summit), and is therefore referred to as Rio+20. While there were high expectations that it would become a milestone on the path to sustainability, the conference has been criticized for lacking in focus, leadership, vision, and commitments (Bernstein 2013, p 12; Ivanova 2014, p 138; Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 167). Many, especially environmental NGOs, were frustrated that the tough decisions required were avoided or postponed (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 167), and “everyone was equally unhappy” with the outcome document, which “just about meets the minimum requirements of success” (ibid, p 169). Much of the time and effort at the Rio+20 conference was consumed by the struggle for developing countries to get the developed countries, especially the U.S., to renew the original Rio principles established at the 1992 Earth Summit. These include the environmental precautionary principle and the polluter pays principle, as well as “development and equity principles on the right to development” and the common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR). The CBDR is especially important, as it implies that developed countries have to take the lead on environmental protection and provide financial and technological support to developing ones (ibid).

There was also a contentious debate on “the green economy in the context of poverty eradication and sustainable development”, one of the two themes of the conference. The green economy was a controversial idea, partly because it was a new subject for multilateral

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4 The CBDR is a principle of environmental law that was formalized at the 1992 Earth Summit, establishing that all states are responsible for addressing global environmental degradation, but not equally responsible. It is based on the need for a collective response to global issues, as well as the recognition that states’ contributions to environmental problems, and their capabilities to address them, are not equal.
negotiations that might result in new obligations, and partly because there was confusion about its conceptual and practical interface with sustainable development (ibid, p 173). It became one of the main obstacles to reaching consensus in the conference, for several reasons. Some saw it as a threat to economic development and liberal economic norms, while some were afraid that it would lead to the commodification of nature. Developing countries were hesitant due to concerns that the environmental dimension of sustainable development would be prioritized at the expense of the social dimension. They also feared that the idea of the green economy would be used to justify trade protectionism, and that it would be a one-size-fits-all approach with the same obligations for everyone, without corresponding financial and technological support from developed countries (ibid, pp 173-174; Ivanova 2014, p 142, Bernstein 2013, p 14).

Eventually the green economy was included in the outcome document, which stated that it “should contribute to eradicating poverty as well as sustained economic growth, enhancing social inclusion, improving human welfare and creating opportunities for employment and decent work for all, while maintaining the healthy functioning of the Earth’s ecosystems” (UNGA 2012, p 10). The action points were rather mild, and it was described as “one of the important tools available for achieving sustainable development”, which can “provide options for policymaking but should not be a rigid set of rules” (ibid). Instead, the establishment of Sustainable Development Goals, which was not an original mandate of the conference, received support “as a concrete ‘deliverable’ for the summit and as a kind of replacement for the controversial Green Economy issue”, according to Martin Khor (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 172). He notes that “[a]lthough establishing SDGs turned out to be a complex exercise, at least the concept of sustainable development was an accepted and comfortable one, unlike the green economy” (ibid).

While transformation would later become the watchword and a key element of the post-2015 process, there is no mention of it at all in The Future We Want, which seems to reflect the fact that the General Assembly and conference secretariat, according to Bernstein, saw the conference as being about “integration, implementation, and coherence” rather than transformation (Bernstein 2013, p 13).

Although the conference was portrayed as a failure at the time (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 168; Ivanova 2014, p 138), it can also be seen a starting point for potentially important action. Its success should therefore be judged on the strength of the follow-up (Conca & Dabelko 2014, pp 169, 176). It was decided that new Sustainable Development Goals would supersede the Millennium Development Goals, and that a new High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development would replace the Commission on Sustainable Development (which had gradually become ineffective). To facilitate the work on the post-2015 agenda, the Secretary-General created the UN System Task Team previous to the Rio+20 conference, as well as the Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the High-Level Panel as a response to the outcome5. The conference also resulted in a significant reform within the UN system, as UNEP was given some key beneficial attributes of a specialized UN agency, while remaining a subsidiary organ. This strengthened both its role and its resources (Bernstein 2013, p 17; Ivanova 2014, pp 143-145). With this new and improved institutional architecture for sustainable development, “Rio+20 completed the years-long process of reforming the system of global environmental governance” (Ivanova 2014, p 149).

5 See Chapter 4.3 for a more detailed outline of these initiatives.
2. The UN Post-2015 Development Agenda and Sustainable Development Goals

2.3 Origins and Consultation Process

Discussions on the UN post-2015 development agenda officially started at the 2010 High-Level Plenary Meeting of the UN General Assembly to review progress towards the Millennium Development Goals, where governments called not only for accelerating the progress, but also for thinking about how to advance the agenda beyond 2015. At the Rio+20 conference member states agreed to establish a set of Sustainable Development Goals to supersede the MDGs and be the guiding document for global development within the UN framework for the next 15 years. Just as the MDGs were one part of the Millennium Declaration, the SDGs are one part of the post-2015 agenda, which also includes issues of war and peace, ridding the world of nuclear weapons, and addressing major macroeconomic challenges such as reforming the global financial systems to avoid another financial crisis (SDSN 2014, pp 34-35). This thesis focuses on the SDGs, while some of the documents that are examined concern the post-2015 agenda as a whole.

The process of defining the SDGs is fundamentally different from that of the MDGs. While the MDGs were set mainly by experts from the UN and the OECD, the post-2015 development agenda has emerged through a process of consultations so broad and inclusive that it is unprecedented in global governance (UNGA 2014b, p 5; UNGA 2015, p 3). It involves “all member states, the entire UN system, experts and a cross-section of civil society, business and, most importantly, millions of people from all corners of the globe” (UNGA 2014b, p 5). To facilitate the process, the Secretary-General created the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. An intergovernmental Open Working Group on the post-2015 agenda was formed in the General Assembly. To make the process inclusive beyond the UN system, 11 thematic consultations were carried out, along with national and regional consultations and the online MyWorld survey.

After the Secretary-General’s synthesis report was released in December 2014, negotiations ensued between member states on the final parameters of the SDGs. A zero draft of the outcome document was released in June 2015, and in September the General Assembly adopted the SDGs at the UN Sustainable Development Summit (New York, September 25-27). The goals and targets are listed in the outcome document, Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They will come into effect on January 1, 2016.

2.3.2 Differences from the Millennium Development Goals

Since the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, sustainable development has been identified as the new pathway for human well-being (UNGA 2014b, p 4). The MDG framework has made a historic contribution by putting poverty reduction and human progress at the forefront of the global development agenda, and has “helped to galvanize development efforts, set global and national priorities, and focus action at all levels” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 5). It has gained broad support due to its “simplicity, transparency and multidimensionality” (ibid, p 6). Its success can be attributed to targets that are “engaging, clear, few in number, ambitious yet feasible, measurable and with far-reaching and long-term
positive implications” (ibid, p 34). However, while the MDGs “have generated unprecedented advances in human development” according to the Secretary-General (UNGA 2013, p 2), progress has been insufficient and uneven (UNGA 2012, pp 5, 21; HLP 2013, p 1; UNGA 2013, pp 4-5; UNGA 2015, pp 5-6), leaving many behind and widening inequalities (UN System Task Team 2012, p 11). The MDGs were aimed almost exclusively at developing countries, and focused on the end objectives with little guidance as to the means to achieve them (ibid, p 7). In the national consultations for the post-2015 agenda, many argued that the focus had been on symptoms rather than the underlying drivers of development (UNDG 2013, p 36), and that some important values that were present in the Millennium Declaration (such as freedom, equality, and respect for nature) had to a great extent been lost in the implementation of the MDGs (ibid, pp 21-22). Most seriously, in the view of the High-Level Panel, “the MDGs fell short by not integrating the economic, social, and environmental aspects of sustainable development”, thus “environment and development were never properly brought together” (HLP 2013, Executive Summary). The silo approach made environmental sustainability a separate and over-loaded goal, instead of an underlying principle integrated across all the goals (UNDG 2013, p 130). Since the MDGs were adopted, integrating environmental sustainability has only become more urgent, as the scale of human impact on the physical Earth has reached dangerous levels more rapidly and disruptively than was foreseen by most back in 2000 (SDSN 2014, p 2).

The post-2015 agenda seems to have taken the criticism of the MDGs into account. It “aims to provide a more holistic guide to international and national policymaking” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 33), and is based on “universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike” (UNGA 2015, p 3). Reflecting the increased awareness of planetary boundaries and linkages between the environment and human rights (UNDG 2013, p 130), sustainability is now seen as a “fundamental principle for all aspects of development and for all societies” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 25). The SDG framework seeks to better integrate the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability and recognize their interlinkages (UNGA 2012, p 2; UNGA 2013, p 12; UNGA 2014a, p 9; UNGA 2014b, p 20; UNGA 2015, p 3), not least by addressing their current institutional and operational separation (UNGA 2013, pp 16-17), and to make sure that the environmental dimension is being “articulated across the whole sustainable development agenda” (UNGA 2014b, p 10).

The post-2015 agenda aims to complete the MDGs, scale up their success, and expand their scope, while addressing new challenges that “have become more pressing since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration and did not figure explicitly or were not adequately reflected in the MDG framework” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 9; UNGA 2013, p 19). The world has changed profoundly since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, e.g. through increasing inequalities, rapid urbanization, and technological change. Humanity has been approaching or exceeding planetary boundaries at increasing speed, and experiencing the effects of climate change to a greater extent (UNGA 2013, p 2; UNDG 2013, pp 11-13, 130; SDSN 2014, p 2). Thus, the SDGs “break new ground with goals on inequalities, economic growth, decent jobs, cities and human settlements, industrialization, energy, climate change, sustainable consumption and production, peace, justice and institutions” (UNGA 2014b, p 10).
2.3.3 Content and Significance

The outcome document of the UN Sustainable Development Summit, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, presents a vision of a “just, equitable, tolerant and socially inclusive world” in which “humanity lives in harmony with nature” (UNGA 2015, p 4). The UN System Task Team report similarly calls for a “rights-based, equitable and sustainable process of global development” (UN System Task Team 2012, p ii). Acknowledging that globalization offers great opportunities, but that its benefits are at present very unevenly shared, the System Task Team posits that the central challenge of the post-2015 agenda is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world’s peoples of present and future generations (ibid, p i). As agreed in *The Future We Want*, poverty eradication is recognized as the greatest global challenge facing the world today (UNGA 2012, p 1; UNGA 2014a, p 6; SDSN 2014, p 9; UNGA 2015, p 3), and is also considered to be the overarching objective of and an essential requirement for sustainable development, together with promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production, and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development (UNGA 2012, p 2; UNGA 2014a, p 6). *The Future We Want* emphasizes that in order to achieve a just balance among the economic, social, and environmental needs of present and future generations, it is necessary to promote harmony with nature (UNGA 2012, p 8). Thus, sustainability “represents the key challenge for a transformative agenda: how to reduce global greenhouse gas emissions and achieve more equitable and sustainable management and governance of natural resources, while promoting dynamic and inclusive economic and human development” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 25). The UN Secretary-General’s synthesis report concludes that all voices in the post-2015 process “have called for a people-centred and planet-sensitive agenda to ensure human dignity, equality, environmental stewardship, healthy economies, freedom from want and fear and a renewed global partnership for sustainable development” (UNGA 2014b, p 11).

Different recommendations on how to frame the post-2015 agenda, and the SDGs in particular, can be found in several of the main documents. In the outcome document, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, the goals are framed by five essential elements; “People” (to end poverty and hunger and ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential), “Planet” (to protect the planet from environmental degradation and climate change), “Prosperity” (to ensure prosperity for all humans in harmony with nature), “Peace” (to foster peaceful, just, and inclusive societies), and “Partnership” (to mobilize the means to implement the agenda through strengthened global solidarity) (UNGA 2015, p 2).

The SDGs are meant to be “action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities” (UNGA 2012, p 47). One of the main challenges has been to expand the scope of the MDGs without making the SDGs too overloaded and extensive (HLP 2013, p 14). The proposed SDGs consist of 17 goals accompanied by 169 targets, and will be followed-up and reviewed through different sets of indicators to measure progress at the global, regional, and national levels (UNGA 2015, pp 11, 32). Recognizing “both the need for policy coherence and the diversity of contexts and challenges within and among countries” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 21), the UN System Task Team notes that the post-2015 agenda needs a “common-but-differentiated approach to policy coherence” which is “guided by the overall vision and underlying principles of the proposed framework” (ibid, p 22). The
goals are meant to provide guidance without being prescriptive, with the aspirational global targets leaving room for each government to set their own targets according to national circumstances (UNGA 2015, p 13).

Like the MDGs, the SDGs are not binding and their power and significance lie in providing a globally shared normative framework complementing the tools of international law, such as global treaties and conventions (SDSN 2014, pp xi, 34). They are “tools of communication, inspiration, policy formulation and resource mobilisation” (HLP 2013, p 13), and serve to “help the public to understand the critical issues, the solutions, and the urgency of changing course” (SDSN 2014, p 42). The Secretary-General states that universal challenges call for action “broad on shared values, principles and priorities for a common destiny” (UNGA 2014b, p 4), and that all parties in the process have emphasized the need for “norm-based policy coherence at all levels, corresponding reform of global governance mechanisms and a renewed effective global partnership for sustainable development” (ibid, p 12). As the SDSN notes, “setting global goals – even if they are based on shared values – will have little impact unless followed up by concerted action. However, averting the business-as-usual (BAU) trajectory will be nearly impossible without an ambitious and universal set of SDGs.” (SDSN 2014, p 34).
The UN Sustainable Development Goals

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
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
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
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

* Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.

The goals and the accompanying 169 targets can be found in the outcome document of the UN Sustainable Development Summit, *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.*
2.3.4 Transformation as a Key Element

Transformative change is one of the most central themes of the documents in the post-2015 process, as reflected in the title of the outcome document (Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development), as well as in the High-Level Panel report and the Secretary-General’s synthesis report. The word (in variations of transform/transformative/transformation/transformational) appears frequently in the High Level Panel report (62 times), the UNDG report (62), the Secretary-General’s synthesis report (41), the SDSN report (22), the UN System Task Team report (20), and the Secretary-General’s 2013 report (12).

The Secretary-General’s synthesis report states that “[t]ransformation is our aim. We must transform our economies, our environment and our societies. We must change old mindsets, behaviours and destructive patterns.” (UNGA 2014b, p 33). There is consensus that business as usual cannot be an option (UN System Task Team 2012, pp i, 11-12; HLP 2013, Executive Summary, pp 1, 4, 10; UNGA 2014b, pp 5, 33), since it is “abundantly clear” that “[c]ontinuing along historical trends will not be good enough” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 8). The current trajectory is seen as very dangerous for every part of the world (HLP 2013, p 4; SDSN 2014, pp 5, 8), as it “fails to achieve sustainable development in multiple ways” (SDSN 2014, p 4). The SDSN states that today’s problems “will expand dangerously without an urgent and radical change of course” (ibid), and since change on the necessary scale will be “one of the greatest technical, organizational, and financing challenges that humanity has faced” (ibid, p 20), the world needs a framework that can mobilize all key actors in every country to move away from the ‘business as usual’ trajectory towards a sustainable development path (ibid, p 4).

The UNDG report states that people from various walks of life in the national, thematic, and online consultations have asked for a truly transformative agenda (UNDG 2013, pp vi, 5). Their calls for transformation are “not just of the ‘what', but also ‘how’ we do development” (ibid, p 6). In his 2013 report, the Secretary-General posits that “all countries need to recognize the profound transformations required to address the emerging challenges of sustainable development” (UNGA 2013, p 19). The High-Level Panel concludes that a paradigm shift is necessary (HLP 2013, Executive Summary, p 1), that the new global partnership “should encourage everyone to alter their worldview, profoundly and dramatically” (ibid, p 10), and the Secretary-General expresses hope that the post-2015 agenda and the SDGs can provide such a shift (UNGA 2014b, p 6).

The Secretary-General’s synthesis report speaks of transformation as both the aim and the watchword of the post-2015 agenda (ibid, pp 3, 33). Acknowledging that we are at a “historic crossroads” (ibid, p 3), the report states that this is a unique opportunity to “transform the world to better meet human needs and the necessities of economic transformation, while protecting our environment, ensuring peace and realizing human rights” (ibid). It emphasizes that the new threats and opportunities the world is facing demand “a truly participatory, responsive and transformational course of action” (ibid, p 5). People all over the world are looking to the UN to “rise to the challenge with a truly transformative agenda”. The report concludes that “[t]he stars are aligned for the world to take historic action to transform lives and protect the planet” (ibid, p 6).

Having posited that our generation can be the first to succeed in ending poverty and also may the last to have a chance of saving the planet (UNGA 2015, p 12), the outcome document
states that “[w]e are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world on to a sustainable and resilient path” (ibid, p 1). Referring to the Charter of the United Nations from 1945, the post-2015 agenda is described as “a charter for people and planet in the twenty-first century” (ibid, p 12).

3 Theoretical Framework and Related Literature

3.1 Ecological Economics

The imperative to question the feasibility and desirability of continuous economic growth is rooted primarily in the academic discipline of Ecological Economics (EE), which challenges the neoclassical economic paradigm and integrates elements of both natural and social sciences to provide a more holistic and pluralistic perspective on environment-economy interactions. The economy is seen as a subsystem of a larger local and global ecosystem, which sets limits to the physical growth of the economy (van den Bergh 2001, p 13; Venkatachalam 2007, p 551). EE assigns intrinsic value to nature, is guided by the precautionary principle, emphasizes intra- and intergenerational equity, and seeks to shift focus from growth in terms of GDP to development in terms of human well-being. Informal areas of the economy (such as domestic and volunteer work), which are omitted from the conventional economic model, are seen as essential. Importantly, non-monetary aspects of development should be understood and assessed on their own terms instead of being reduced to monetary equivalents (Söderbaum 2008, p 20).

In contrast to the closed, logical-mathematical, positivist framework of neoclassical economics, EE brings in political, ideological, and subjective dimensions. From an EE perspective, the idea that all roles, motives, relationships, activities, and resources relevant to economics are confined to market and monetary aspects is too narrow and simplistic. It fails to recognize the complexity of the larger context, since actors (both individuals and organizations) are part of a society rather than just the market, and may have other considerations than self-interest and maximizing utility. Additionally, as Peter Söderbaum argues, concepts such as rationality and efficiency, which are seen as universal in neoclassical economics, will have different meanings depending on the ideological orientation of the individual, or of a group or other collectivity (ibid, pp 58-59). Therefore, the economic decision-making process is better understood as a matching process between the ideological orientation of an actor and the impacts of each alternative considered, not just on those involved but on other actors, third parties, and society at large.

In contrast to Environmental Economics (ERE), which is primarily concerned with optimal allocation of financial and other resources and largely equates sustainable development with sustainable growth, Ecological Economics assumes a longer timeframe, puts much more emphasis on the optimal scale/size of the economy, and has a more radical interpretation of sustainable development at its core. While ERE is based on weak sustainability, where the aim is to sustain total capital (both economic and natural) and one type of capital can be substituted with another, EE is based on strong sustainability which requires that each type of capital is maintained separately, due to the lack of substitutability of many ecosystem services (van den Bergh 2001, p 17). EE holds that existing neoclassical economic models are unable to adequately address most environmental problems, as they ignore the natural limits to growth and neglect important elements of interdependency between the economy and environment (Venkatachalam 2007, p 551). They are also general and abstract, and thereby neglect historical and spatial aspects and other specific circumstances (van den Bergh 2001, p
Therefore, ecological economists take issue with the assumption of neoclassical economics that environmental and other problems should be understood as cases of ‘market failure’ and ‘government failure’, rather than symptoms of the conventional economic model itself. According to this more radical interpretation of sustainable development, we need major shifts in paradigm, ideology, and institutional framework, since it will not be enough to modify the currently dominating ones (Söderbaum 2008, pp 13-18). For example, ecological economist Herman Daly, who is referenced in this thesis, has argued since the 1970s that the growth-based economic model is unsustainable, and that we need to aim for a ‘steady-state’ economy instead.

From an Ecological Economics perspective, it is crucial to examine whether the post-2015 agenda addresses physical limits to growth and the optimal size/scale of the economy, to assess whether its economic vision is truly sustainable. It is also essential to question the overarching aim of the economy as it is framed in the agenda, to consider whether it actually constitutes transformative change – does it recognize the inherently unsustainable rationale of the growth-based economic system, and does it really represent a shift in priorities from GDP growth to human well-being?

### 3.2 Critical Theory

Addressing the ideological dimension of the growth-based economic system is a key element of the social science perspective of Critical Theory. While there are a number of different strands, my perspective is based on the general characteristics they have in common. By focusing on the intimate connection between ideas and social practices, Critical Theory highlights the importance of the ideational dimension of governance: the role of ideas, norms, culture, communication, and inter-subjective negotiation and dialogue. It is based on the premise that the world should be understood primarily in terms of the major economic and social forces generated by capitalism, since capitalism has developed in conjunction with modernity and the state system to become the dominant form of economic organization, now global in scope. Thus, states and institutions should be understood primarily in terms of the functions they perform in support of global capitalism, such as maintaining conditions conducive to economic growth.

The central concern of Critical Theory is the inequality and exploitation resulting from the accumulation of wealth that is the driving force of capitalism. The system is seen as inherently exploitative as wealthier and more powerful groups are able to capitalize on others, and as natural resources are used unsustainably to maintain excessive consumerism based on profit rather than needs. However, rather than focusing on the structure and processes of the system, Critical Theory places much more emphasis on the role of culture and ideology in perpetuating certain sorts of social relationships, or conversely, challenging them. For the current system to prevail despite inequalities, tensions, and instabilities, it needs to be legitimized as just and fair. Therefore, the dominance of capitalism depends on how successfully the underlying ideas are transmitted and institutionalized, through, for example, education, mass media, governments, and organizations such as the IMF and the World Bank.

Critical Theory holds that it is not enough to just identify the structures and processes which will be the object of study, but also reflect critically on what can be said to constitute

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6 This outline of Critical Theory is primarily based on Chapter 4 of *An Introduction to International Relations Theory: Perspectives and Themes* (Steans et al. 2010, pp 103-128), and Chapter 3 of *An Invitation to Social Theory* (Inglis & Thorpe 2012, pp 62-85).
knowledge of the world, and what that knowledge is for. From this perspective, theory should not only problematize the present, but also develop alternative sets of values and concepts to think about and describe the current ‘reality’ and possible alternatives, with the purpose of furthering the self-understanding of groups committed to transforming society. Once the sources of inequality and oppression are recognized, the challenge for these groups is to realize an emancipatory politics which is socially inclusive and democratic. Rather than providing a ‘blueprint’ of a perfect society, Critical Theorists look at prospects for change which are emerging in the existing order. As society is always undergoing some form of change and transition, it is possible to intervene and influence the direction of change to some extent if these changes are properly understood. Critical Theorists are concerned with how social forces and structures enter periods of transition, so that alternative political, economic, and social arrangements may emerge. Although social action is constrained by structures, these can be transformed by collective action. Counter-hegemonic groups with an alternative set of values, concepts, and concerns (such as intellectuals, grass roots activists, and NGOs) can challenge prevailing institutional and political arrangements.

The point of Critical Theory is to negate the existing order and question the ideology behind it. In this case, instead of asking how the SDGs can be achieved, it is more relevant from a Critical Theory perspective to ask questions such as: why do they exist, who has created them, what kind of social and economic constructions are they based on, how are they communicated, and how are they perceived by different categories of people? Since the idea of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth is fundamental to the post-2015 development agenda, I have chosen to examine what it actually means and what the underlying assumptions are. The idea of transformative change is greatly emphasized in the official documents on the post-2015 agenda, but needs to be defined in this particular context in order to be meaningful; to what extent will the agenda actually be a departure from the ‘business as usual’ trajectory, and in what ways? Therefore, it is especially relevant to examine how ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth relates to the idea of transformation in the post-2015 agenda, and to consider the alternative ways that it could have been addressed. In my literature review and analysis, I particularly refer to scholars Steven Bernstein and Stephen J. Purdey, who have analyzed environmental governance and the growth paradigm from a Critical Theory perspective.

3.3 Related Literature

3.3.1 The Limits to Growth Debate

The Limits to Growth report by the Club of Rome was published in 1972 to great controversy, and has shaped the debate around economic growth ever since. Through models based on available data at the time, the report concluded that according to current trends the limits to growth on Earth would be reached within a hundred years, leading to collapse. It also predicted that it would be possible to alter these trends to achieve a condition of ecological and economic stability with realistic long-term goals and commitment. Crucially, it stated that trade-offs would be necessary in the consumption of resources and generation and cleanup of pollution, because of the simple fact that Earth is finite. However, the authors found that “modern society has not learned to recognize and deal with these trade-offs” (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 27), since “a whole culture has evolved around the principle of fighting against these limits rather than learning to live with them” (ibid, p 28). While garnering enormous attention, the report was harshly criticized by economists, computer modelers, and
others at the time of its publication, for being incomplete, methodologically flawed, ideologically biased, and too alarmist in tone (Purdey 2012, pp 85-86). The main criticism of the report was that it did not take sufficient account of technological development. According to the authors, this was “the most common and the most dangerous reaction” to their findings, as technology would only relieve the symptoms but not address the underlying problem: growth on a finite planet (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 28).

While the report was treated with condescension and even ridicule by many economists, Rockström and Wijkman argue that “the debate is slowly sobering up” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 161). A number of reports in recent years from the UN, the OECD, the European Commission, and others confirm the majority of the Club of Rome’s conclusions (ibid; Haddad et al. 2015, p 3). Tim Jackson states that “the authors’ predictions “turned out to be remarkably accurate” regarding resource scarcity in the first decades of the 21st century (Jackson 2011, p 8). In the view of Sharachchandra M. Lélé, “[t]he limits-to-growth debate, while not conclusive as to specifics, appears to have effectively shifted the burden of proof about the absence of such fundamental limits onto the diehard ‘technological optimists’ who deny the existence of such limits” (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 207). Jørgen Randers believes that there will be a paradigm shift in the direction of a more hesitant view on growth, but “probably several decades into the future” (Randers 2012, p 204).

3.3.2 Sustainable Development

The groundbreaking 1972 UN Conference on the Human Environment (often referred to as the Stockholm Conference) was “the first broadly international effort to evaluate and discuss the environment in systematic, comprehensive terms”, and helped establish the trajectory of future efforts (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 17). One of the central controversies of the conference was the debate over whether economic growth and development are inherently destructive to the environment (ibid, p 179). There was a prevailing view of protection of the environment as a precondition for development (Ivanova 2014, p 139), and “the issue was still largely perceived as a choice between environment or economic growth” (Bernstein 2002, p 49). Solutions for environmental problems, as well as adapting development strategies to address them, “were most often framed in terms of the need for regulation and intervention” (ibid, p 120). However, over the ensuing decades “the focus shifted from environment as a precondition for development to development as a precondition for environmental protection” (Ivanova 2014, p 139). This is reflected in Principle 12 of the 1992 Rio Declaration: “States should cooperate to promote a supportive and open international economic system that would lead to economic growth and sustainable development in all countries, to better address the problems of environmental degradation”.

The most widely used definition of sustainable development, “development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs”, was introduced in the 1987 report Our Common Future by the World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED), which “marked the first real synthesis of the environment and development agendas” (Bernstein 2002, p 29). While the term had sprung up earlier in that decade, the report identified it as a new approach to the relationship between economic and environmental sustainability. It was institutionalized at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, according to Bernstein, and has since been established as the dominant conceptual framework for international environmental governance (ibid, pp 4, 49-50). Thus, “[w]hen ‘sustainable development’ appears as a goal in
international environmental agreements, policy positions of multilateral agencies, or pronouncements of intergovernmental or even many non-governmental fora, it evokes an identifiable set of norms that underlies recent attempts at international environmental governance” (ibid, pp 5-6). As Ken Conca and Geoffrey Dabelko put it, “there is no question that the power of the concept – and in particular, its vision of harmonizing environmental quality and economic well-being – has fundamentally altered the global debate” (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 182).

However, the concept of sustainable development has also been criticized for its vagueness, which makes it “open to a myriad of interpretations” (Bernstein 2002, p 5). In a critical review from 1991, Sharachchandra M. Lélé notes that “[a]ny discussion of sustainability must first answer the questions ‘What is to be sustained? For whom? How long?’” (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 202). Taken literally, sustainable development means a process of directed change that can be continued indefinitely (or for the implicit time period of concern) (ibid, p 196). Since development is often equated with GDP growth and rising living standards, it can rather easily be interpreted as sustaining growth in material consumption indefinitely.

Our Common Future argued that the problem of ‘limits’ was not economic growth per se, but the environmentally destructive character of many economic activities and incentives (ibid, p 180). Therefore, one of the critical goals was to revive growth and change its quality of it in order to make it more equitable and environmentally sustainable, for example by better accounting for environmental impact when measuring it. The report stated that maintaining annual growth levels above 3% was necessary for both developed and developing countries, and that “[s]uch growth rates could be environmentally sustainable if industrialized nations can continue the recent shifts in the content of their growth towards less material- and energy-intensive activities and the improvement of their efficiency in using materials and energy” (ibid, p 188). This approach made for less contestation in the global North-South relationship, since governments of the South considered the North to be responsible for the environmental crisis, and had expressed concerns at the Stockholm conference that “the North, having reaped the fruits of industrialization, now sought to close the door on the South” (ibid, p 18).

In the 1990s the idea of decoupling was further established as the answer to the ‘limits to growth’ dilemma (Randers 2012, p 23), and the 1992 Earth Summit confirmed sustainable development as the new aspiration, “moving the needle of political priorities to the development dimension” according to Maria Ivanova (Ivanova 2014, p 139). She argues that the subsequent Millennium Summit in 2000 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 “shifted the focus further in the direction of development as a precursor to environmental protection” (ibid). While the emphasis on human development in the MDGs has “shifted policy attention well beyond the economic growth objectives that dominated previous agendas” according to the UN System Task Team (UN System Task Team 2012, p 6), economic growth is considered to be one of the key factors in the success of the MDGs (HLP 2013, Executive Summary; UNGA 2013, pp 1, 6-7).

In his book The Compromise of Liberal Environmentalism, Steven Bernstein argues that the Brundtland Commission put economic growth at the center of sustainable development strategies, while proposing a mix of market forces, redistributive policies, and environmental interventions. With the 1992 Earth Summit this shifted towards a stronger focus on market forces and the liberal economic order as the best one suited to achieve environment and development goals (Bernstein 2002, pp 120-121). Thus, he finds that the advent of sustainable development thinking ushered in the institutionalization of the norm-complex of liberal
environmentalism. This form of international governance “predicates environmental protection on the promotion and maintenance of a liberal economic order.” Thus, “a liberal international economic order, privatization of global commons, and market norms are not only perceived as compatible with environmental protection, but also necessary for successful incorporation of concern for the environment in the practices of relevant state and non-state actors” (ibid, p 213). Bernstein finds that this ‘compromise’ was crucial to enable environmental concerns to find such a prominent place on the international agenda, since “the legitimation of environmental concerns in the international political economy has involved a process of introducing ideas about the environment that, to gain legitimacy, required some compatibility with the kind of economic order dominant at any given time” (ibid, p 214). Thus, environmentalism was made compatible with the shift towards neoliberalism during the 1980s.

Similarly, Lélé posits that “[t]he major impact of the SD movement is the rejection of the notion that environmental conservation necessarily constrains development or that development necessarily means environmental pollution” (Conca & Dabelko 2014, p 200). He notes that the WCED sought to revive growth based on two main arguments: the feasibility of decoupling growth from environmental degradation, and the premise that poverty is largely responsible for environmental degradation (ibid, p 201-202). He concludes that “SD is being packaged as the inevitable outcome of objective scientific analysis, virtually a historical necessity, that does not contradict the deep-rooted normative notion of development as economic growth. In other words, SD is an attempt to have one’s cake and eat it too.” (ibid, p 204).

In Lélé’s view, “SD has become a bundle of neat fixes”, including “technological changes that make industrial production processes less polluting and less resource intensive and yet more productive and profitable”, and “economic policy changes that incorporate environmental considerations and yet achieve greater economic growth”. In short, “SD is a ‘metafix’ that will unite everybody from the profit-minded industrialist and risk-minimizing subsistence farmer to the equity-seeking social worker, the pollution-concerned or wildlife-loving First Worlde, the growth-maximizing policy maker, the goal-oriented bureaucrat and therefore, the vote-counting politician” (ibid, p 200).

Stephen J. Purdey argues that “[d]espite many attendant controversies, sustainable development is still the central theme of mainstream environmentalism, the objective of which is the forging of a workable balance between an ever-larger global economy and the environment such that we might continue to enjoy the benefits of growth and at the same time maintain ecological integrity and a stable climate – but that balance has not been achieved” (Purdey 2012, p 88). However, absent a strong counter-hegemonic narrative force and organized social opposition to the growth paradigm, “no international policy or programme – even those intended to protect the long-term viability of human society on Earth – will be complied with if it significantly constrains growth options” (Purdey 2010, p 151).

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7 In Stephen J. Purdey’s definition, “governance, as opposed to mere order, has purpose. It embodies a conscious and systematic effort to compensate in part for the absence of government, to help fill the void with structures responsive to what people need or want, to create and maintain some degree of stability and predictability based on shared expectations. On this view, governance can be summed as ‘order plus intentionality’, and it will be effective as a surrogate or partial government only to the extent that agreement with its premises and intentions can be sustained.” (Purdey 2010, p 3).
The ‘Growth Paradox’ and Normative Roots of the Growth Paradigm

While economic growth took off as a result of industrialization, it only emerged as a policy objective after World War II. It was further established as a goal in its own right, when the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) stated in their charter in 1960 that the aim of the organization would be to “promote policies designed to achieve the highest sustainable economic growth and employment and a rising standard of living in Member countries” (Victor & Jackson 2015, pp 38-39). It has now been “the number-one goal for generations”, as Jørgen Randers puts it (Randers 2012, p 204). The idea that growth is desirable because it is socially useful has now been formally institutionalized both broadly and deeply. As Purdey puts it, economic growth is enthusiastically pursued by virtually all national governments of the world, by major international institutions (such as the World Trade Organization, the IMF and the World Bank, the OECD, and the G8 and G20), by all regional trading blocs in the Americas, Europe, and Asia, by multinational corporations “which pursue growth as a charter responsibility”, and by “people around the world who recognize their important role as consumers of goods and services in the global economy”. (Purdey 2012, p 78).

If policy makers in general are cognizant to some degree of the pressing social and environmental problems of constantly growing material consumption, the underlying question is why there is still such a strong preference for continued growth. There appears to be a ‘growth paradox’: while many economists and policy-makers agree that GDP per capita is not a good measure of welfare, they are very reluctant to abandon it, and “unconsciously see the GDP as a good welfare measure” (van den Bergh 2011, p 886; van den Bergh 2015, p 5). Hence, expectations and predictions about GDP growth continue to have a large influence on the choices of consumers, companies, and financial institutions, and thereby on the economy as a whole (van den Bergh 2015, p 5). Peter A. Victor and Tim Jackson note that reports such as those of the IPCC, the Stockholm Resilience Centre (on planetary boundaries), and the WWF’s Living Planet “suggest that a commitment to economic growth is a hidden threat to sustainability” (Victor & Jackson 2015, pp 37-38), but that “the need for economic growth continues to be unquestioned dogma in most of the world, even in governments that claim to be striving for sustainability” (ibid, p 37).

While economic growth practically has resulted in increased living standards in many countries, Purdey argues that this is only part of the explanation, and that the normative dimension is really at the core of the preference for continued growth (Purdey 2012, p 75). In his view, the normative dimension is rooted in how modern industrialized societies have been shaped by the Enlightenment ideals of progress and freedom (ibid, p 78-79). Purdey finds that “a close link has been forged between unrestrained freedom and economic growth” (ibid, p 79), which is based on the Enlightenment ideal of both negative and positive freedom, i.e. freedom from constraints as well as freedom to realize one’s own conception of well-being (ibid, p 84). However, he argues that this unrestrained freedom can be illusory if it means freedom from the limitations of a finite Earth, that it can be reckless and irresponsible if human betterment is defined in terms of continuous consumption, and that it can be licentious if it absolves decision-makers of the need to make choices “which may constrain growth-driven behavior in favour of the larger, longer-term common good” (ibid, p 79). In Purdey’s view, the growth paradigm essentially “serves as a surrogate for distributive justice, as an easy way to sidestep the difficult ethical choices which governments would otherwise have to make in an economic context circumscribed by physical limits.” (ibid, p 83). He thus
concludes that this “false freedom” and moral laxity are intrinsic to the growth paradigm, and the underlying cause of the climate change problem (ibid, p 79).

According to Purdey, pursuing growth is politically expedient as it “promises everyone access to ever-increasing wealth”, and draws support from all sectors of society as it appears to benefit all social groups “without imposing excessive redistributive costs on anyone”. The objective of creating a larger economic pie is universally appealing since it “offers more wealth to everyone even if the distribution of wealth is left unchanged.” Thus, it is favored by all social sectors, and this shared agenda, in turn, “serves to reduce friction between those sectors”. Purdey argues that this political expediency “provides a compelling explanation for the universal endorsement of growth as a policy priority” (ibid, p 82-83).

Other accounts support Purdey’s analysis that the preference for continued growth is rooted in a normative notion of freedom, where physical limits do not have to entail restrictions or redistribution, as well as the political expediency this path provides. Henry Wallich, former governor of the U.S. Federal Reserve and professor of economics at Yale, stated in 1972 that “[g]rowth is a substitute for equality of income. So long as there is growth there is hope, and that makes large income differentials tolerable” (Newsweek 1972). Eric Zencey concludes in the State of the World 2013 report that “[a] steady-state economy will have to face issues of fairness and justice in distribution that were more easily addressed (or postponed to the future) in a high-EROI, supposedly infinite-growth economy” (Zencey 2013, p 83). Herman Daly argues that “we do not really want to know when growth becomes uneconomic because then we should stop growing at that point”, and we resist this idea since we do not know how to run a steady-state economy and are “religiously committed to an ideology of ‘no limits’”. In his view “[w]e want to believe that growth can cure poverty without sharing, and without limiting the scale of the human niche in creation” (Randers 2012, p 74).

Randers argues that growth will remain a global priority, not only because of “the endless barrage of pro-growth messages” from the media (ibid, p 341), but also because it is “the best-known method to create more jobs and facilitate redistribution” (ibid, p 23). Randers notes that “new jobs are truly important” as they increase the output of goods and services and generate additional tax income, but primarily because they “enable redistribution without revolution” which “makes the life of politicians simpler and more pleasant” (ibid, p 204). He believes that if high employment and redistribution of the added value could be achieved in other ways than through growth, voters would likely prioritize other things than growth, but he does not see any such mechanisms that are readily available. Taxing the highest incomes at high marginal rates might be the simplest solution, as it has been shown to significantly reduce income inequality. Costanza et al. note that there is “a strong correlation between tax rates and social justice”, and that “[h]igh tax rates that contribute to income equality appear to be closely related to human wellbeing” (Costanza et al. 2013, p 138). However, this path is usually not supported by a majority of policy-makers (Randers 2012, p. 204).

Randers also notes that social tensions are easier to subdue when there is rapid growth and everyone gets more in absolute terms. However, when growth stagnates or decreases, which he predicts will be the case for OECD countries within the next forty years, “the tensions can no longer be released through distribution of new pieces from a growing pie. The only solution will be to redistribute the existing pie. To take from the rich and give to the poor.” (ibid, p 167). Therefore, he argues that we will need to learn how to redistribute without

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8 EROI stands for ‘energy return on investment’, i.e. the ratio of the amount of usable energy acquired from a particular energy resource to the amount of energy expended to obtain that energy resource.
growth, e.g. through tax-based public jobs, job sharing, or limitations on the length of the work year (ibid, p 263), and believes that due to the accumulated social tension, forced redistribution will inevitably occur (e.g. through unpaid debts or lower pensions) – “[i]t is only a question of time and circumstance” (ibid, pp 167-169).

3.3.4 Current Growth Patterns

The need for economic transformation is one of the focus areas within the post-2015 development agenda. The Secretary-General states that the new agenda “requires profound economic transformations” (UNGA 2013, p 1). This was also emphasized in the thematic consultation on environmental sustainability (UNDG 2013, p 131). The SDSN calls for “a structural transformation in the way that national and local economies operate” (SDSN 2014, p 34), and the High-Level Panel argues that all countries need to undertake profound socioeconomic transformations to end extreme poverty, improve livelihoods, sustain prosperity, promote social inclusion, and ensure environmental sustainability (HLP 2013, Executive Summary, p 8, 46).

The conditions for the economic system have changed profoundly, as both the global population and the scale of the global economy have increased dramatically since early industrialization. The current mainstream model of the global economy is based on assumptions and premises which arose in a period when circumstances were radically different from now; the world’s population was relatively small and natural capital abundant. Since World War II the world population has tripled, while the world economy is more than five times larger (Jackson 2011, p 13). The IPCC states that global economic and population growth are the most important drivers of increases in CO₂ emissions from fossil fuel combustion. While the contribution of population growth to CO₂ emissions between 2000 and 2010 remained roughly identical to the previous three decades, the contribution of economic growth has risen sharply (IPCC 2014, p 5). The world economy is roughly doubling in size every generation and is thus likely to have doubled by 2030, and with the same pattern it would be 15-20 times larger in 2100 (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 149; HLP 2013, p 18; SDSN 2014, p 2). If the estimated 9 billion people were all to have the same level of affluence as is currently experienced in the OECD nations, the economy would have to be 15 times larger in 2050 than today, and 40 times larger at the end of the century (Jackson 2011, pp 13-14). Thus, it seems very unlikely, if not impossible, that such growth rates can be maintained without the risk of transgressing planetary boundaries and moving away from the Holocene into a state of the Earth system that is much less hospitable to human societies.

The UN System Task Team states that “[c]ontinuation along previously trodden economic growth pathways will exacerbate inequalities, social tensions and pressures on the world’s resources and natural environment” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 19). Johan Rockström and Anders Wijkman find that the current economic model is environmentally unsustainable, untenable in terms of fairness, and unstable, that it underperforms in the provision of necessary jobs and public goods, and that it does not increase well-being (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 131). Kate Raworth argues that “mainstream economic policies have so far failed to deliver inclusive and sustainable economic growth, and policymakers continue to rely on economic indicators – such as GDP growth – that are not up to the task of measuring what matters for social justice and environmental integrity” (Raworth 2012, p 6).

As it is structured today, the global economy is dependent on growth. As Rockström and Wijkman put it, “[o]ur entire societal model is built on the premise that the economy will
continue to expand” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 16). In their 2014 report for Naturskyddsförbundet, Grön ekonomi – genom grön tillväxt eller minskat tillväxtberoende?, Anton Grenholm and Simon Grenholm similarly conclude that the whole system is built around expectations of future growth. Thus, stagnating or diminishing growth results in financial crises, decreasing investment, inflation, increased unemployment, and difficulties in planning ahead (Grenholm & Grenholm 2012, pp 11, 26). In the view of Naomi Klein, measures to avoid catastrophic climate change “are no longer just in conflict with the particular strain of deregulated capitalism that triumphed in the 1980s”, but with “the fundamental imperative at the heart of our economic model: grow or die” (Klein 2014, p 21).

Ecological economist Herman Daly argues that the benefits of growth must be weighed against the cost of resource use, energy consumption, climate change, and other consequences. Thus, there is a point where growth becomes uneconomic, i.e. when marginal costs exceed marginal benefits. According to Daly we are already past this point, but try to hide this fact through faulty, asymmetric national accounting which does not sufficiently include the costs of externalities like pollution, depletion of natural capital, and degradation of ecosystem services (Randers 2012, pp 73-76; Rockström & Wijkman 2012, pp 127, 176; Purdey 2012, p 80; Victor & Jackson 2015, pp 39-40). With natural resources that are mostly finite, depletion inevitably leads to resource constraints and the current economic model cannot continue indefinitely. Daly has therefore argued since the 1970s for a ‘steady-state’ economy, rather than a growth-based one.

Regarding the dimension of equity and social justice, Rockström and Wijkman note that “growth has often come about through a harsh and unfair exploitation of poor people in other parts of the world”. They argue that for a long time industrialized countries were able to enjoy energy and raw materials at abnormally low prices, and now that the world is facing greater resource scarcity and higher energy costs, “the vast majority of poor countries face a tough uphill struggle to get development started among the broad masses of people” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 142). While economists often argue that growth in rich countries is essential in order to help developing countries raise their standards through increased demand and trade, a 2006 UNDESA report showed that less than 1% of the global growth increase went to raising living standards among the poorest (ibid, p 128). Rockström and Wijkman argue that there is little evidence for the idea that growth in itself will contribute to poverty reduction through a ‘trickle down’ effect: “With the exception of China, the statistics in most countries today show a mixed picture, with many examples of an opposite effect, a kind of ‘trickle up’, where the rich get richer, the middle class is shrinking and the poor are left behind” (ibid, p 16). Haddad et al. argue that the poverty reduction argument, which has been “the most reliable refuge of those who protect current definitions of economic growth”, will lose credibility, since “even under the most optimistic of scenarios there will be a slowdown in the ability of growth to reduce $1.25 a day poverty” (Haddad et al. 2015, p 9). Randers predicts that the effects of current growth strategies will be so uneven that in forty years, despite intentions of poverty eradication, “[t]he poorest two billion will be stuck near where they are today” (Randers 2012, p 229).

Given that “[t]here is simply not enough natural capital to sustain the policies of conventional growth”, Rockström and Wijkman argue that “priority must be given to allowing the world’s poorest populations to grow materially”, which means that “people in rich countries will have to constrain their demand for energy and resources” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 129). According to Kate Raworth, ending income poverty for those who live on less than $1.25 a day, providing additional calories to those who suffer from hunger, and bringing electricity to
those who currently lack it, could be done with relatively little demand for additional resources (Raworth 2012, p 19). However, this would require a more equal distribution so as not to increase stress on planetary boundaries. It is also important to devise policies for environmental sustainability that do not exacerbate poverty, such as in the case of carbon cap-and-trade markets leading to land and water grabs, and biofuel production for transport use leading to food-price crises and land grabs (ibid, p 16).

In the State of the World 2014 report, Ed Barry writes that “[t]he gap between what political leaders want in terms of development (the ‘political mandate’) and the resources that are realistically available to accommodate that development (the ‘reality mandate’ often put forth by the scientific community) appears to be wide” (Ivanova 2014, p 150). He argues that while “most concrete efforts to promote sustainability have focused on technological evolution and resilience in the face of a changing environment”, bridging the gap will also require “absolute reductions in consumption and a reversal of population growth”. Thus, the post-2015 agenda “offers an opportunity to begin to close the gap between politics and the reality of the human predicament”, if it goes beyond “economic development ‘as usual’” to “form a new point of departure that leads to a more sustainable world”. However, this depends to a large extent on “whether the proposed SDGs recognize the biophysical limitations to economic growth and the need for governance at all levels to consider the implications of such limits for efforts to eradicate poverty and reduce income inequality” (ibid). Chandran Nair argues that the shift of reducing ecological footprints “will be the biggest challenge of the twenty-first century, as it will require leaders willing to engage citizens in an honest debate about limits and therefore the changing expectations about how they live and what they need and want” (Randers 2012, p 27).

3.3.5 GDP as a Measure of Progress

Over the last half-century, GDP (Gross Domestic Product) has become the dominant measure of economic development. It has also adopted the role of social welfare indicator, even though it was never meant as such. As Jeroen van den Bergh notes (2015, p 2), “[i]f we talk about economic growth, we effectively focus on changes in GDP, and implicitly or explicitly assume that GDP captures social welfare, and thus that GDP growth signals progress”. Whether referring to GDP, GDP per capita, or GDP per hour worked, “there is broad agreement that it must increase over time”. He argues that “[t]he majority of journalists and politicians, regardless of their political affiliation, express themselves uncritically about GDP, and do not make a sharp distinction between ‘(social) welfare’ and ‘GDP (growth)’”.

However, it is also widely recognized that the GDP measure is very problematic in many regards; its uncritical use is an “information failure” that is likely to steer the economy in the wrong direction (ibid, p 2-3). As stated by Simon Kuznets in 1962: “Distinctions must be kept in mind between quantity and quality of growth, between its costs and returns, and between the short and the long term. Goals for more growth should specify more growth of what and for what.” (Kuznets 1962, p 29). GDP measures only the economic transactions of a country, regardless of their quality and consequences, thus “[w]hat in reality is a loss is presented as a credit on the balance sheet” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 128). Externalities such as pollution and the impact of resource extraction are not accounted for, which means that “we count ourselves richer than we actually are” (Jackson 2011, p 179; Rockström & Wijkman 2012, pp 127-128; Grenholm & Grenholm 2014, pp 8-9; van den Bergh 2015, p 3), and in the globalized economy negative impacts often occur in other parts of the world and are not accounted for as costs in those countries where only benefits are recorded (Rockström &
GDP does not account for how income is distributed within countries, thus ignoring the fact that GDP growth can occur while inequality increases, and that marginal utility of income (or money) is higher for poor than for rich people (van den Bergh 2015, p 3). Non-market or informal transactions and activities, such as domestic work and volunteer work which often contribute to societal welfare, are omitted (Jackson 2011, p 179; Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 128; Grenholm & Grenholm 2014, p 10; van den Bergh 2015, p 3).

Importantly, beyond a certain threshold level the rise in GDP per capita does not result in increased welfare and well-being, and the richer a country gets, the less the additional wealth adds to the population’s happiness (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010, pp 5-10; Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 130; Grenholm & Grenholm 2014, p 11). As Richard Wilkinson and Kate Pickett put it, “[s]ooner or later in the long history of economic growth, countries inevitably reach a level of affluence where ‘diminishing returns’ set in and additional income buys less and less additional health, happiness or wellbeing” (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010, p 10). They posit that “[e]conomic growth, for so long the great engine of progress, has, in the rich countries, largely finished its work. Not only have measures of well-being and happiness ceased to rise with economic growth but, as affluent societies have grown richer, there have been long-term rises in rates of anxiety, depression and numerous other social problems.” (ibid, p 5). Therefore, they argue that we need to “find new answers to the question of how we can make further improvements to the real quality of human life” (ibid, p 11). Van den Bergh refers to empirical research on subjective well-being that suggests that “in most Western (OECD) countries the increase in prosperity or happiness stagnated somewhere in the period between 1950 and 1970 or even turned into a negative trend, despite a steady growth in GDP” (van den Bergh 2015, p 2). Studies on alternative indicators of social welfare such as the Index for Sustainable Economic Welfare (ISEW) support this, showing that “in most OECD countries, wealth has stagnated despite the fact that GDP (per capita) has continued to rise” (ibid). Research has also shown that individuals quickly adapt or become accustomed to new conditions, which makes it possible for GDP to grow while welfare remains constant (van den Bergh 2011, p 885; van den Bergh 2015, p 2). To clearly show the fallacy of associating GDP growth with welfare increase, van den Bergh points to the fact that with a 2% average annual GDP growth rate, after 1000 years the GDP will be approximately 400 million times higher than currently; an equivalent increase in welfare is obviously impossible (van den Bergh 2015, p 3).

Rockström and Wijkman note that many attempts have been made in recent decades to develop alternatives to GDP, such as the ISEW, the Human Development Index (HDI), and the Happy Planet Index, “but so far with limited impact” (Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 129). The need for alternative measures was acknowledged in The Future We Want, which helped the idea gain ground and legitimacy, according to Maria Ivanova (Ivanova 2014, p 142). In 2014, the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, established by Nikolas Sarkozy and consisting of Joseph Stiglitz, Amartya Sen, and Jean-Paul Fitoussi, published the report Mis-measuring Our Lives: Why GDP Doesn’t Add Up. They concluded that GDP needs to be revised to take account of “the depreciation of productive assets, and the character of some expenditures as defensive rather than productive (such as cleaning up an oil spill or fixing the damage caused by a natural disaster)”. It also needs to be complemented by “[m]easures that reflect more broadly what is happening to most citizens (measures of median income), what is happening to the poor (measures of poverty), what is happening to the environment (measurements of resource depletion and environmental degradation) and what is happening to economic sustainability (measurements
of debt)” (Rowan 2014). Kate Raworth also notes that “[e]conomic development cannot be assessed in monetary terms alone”. Since it is the impact of economic activity on planetary and social boundaries that determines how sustainable and inclusive it is, we must define this impact “both in natural metrics (such as tonnes of carbon emitted) and social metrics (such as the number of people facing hunger)”. She argues that the economy’s over-arching aim should not be “economic growth in and of itself, but rather to bring humanity into the safe and just space – inside the doughnut – and to promote increasing human well-being there” (Raworth 2012, p 8).

Thus, it is clear that GDP has many shortcomings as a measure of economic development, and especially as an indicator of social welfare. There is a need to develop alternative metrics that better account for the environmental and social impacts of economic activity, including equality. If the Rio+20 conference helped to better establish this idea, as Ivanova argues, the post-2015 agenda should be even more assertive in this area and ensure that there will be concerted action to develop useful alternative measures. Most crucially, the purpose of the economic system in general needs to be reconsidered, to ensure that it is first and foremost about improving human well-being, rather than growth being a goal in and of itself. Given that welfare and well-being do not increase with GDP growth beyond a certain threshold level that many developed countries have already passed, it appears that economic growth is only useful under limited conditions that each time need to be well-specified.

### 3.3.6 ‘Green Growth’ and Decoupling

While CO₂ emissions and global GDP have moved hand in hand for the last two centuries, following an exponential growth trajectory, the hope of many policy-makers is that ‘green growth’ can be achieved by decoupling economic growth from environmental degradation. As van den Bergh puts it, green growth has become “[t]he mainstream solution to environmental and climate challenges” (van den Bergh 2015, p 17), based on a promise of ‘win-win’ that is hard to resist (ibid, p 11). The OECD defines green growth as “fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies” (OECD 2011, p 9).

While there are methods of decoupling (such as shifting from fossil fuels to renewable energy, shifting consumption from goods to services, recycling, digitalization, better product design, and substituting scarce materials), there are several things to consider in order to assess its feasibility. Firstly, it is crucial to differentiate between relative and absolute decoupling. Relative decoupling refers to reductions in throughput per dollar of GDP, while absolute decoupling refers to total throughput (or an important component of it) declining or remaining constant while GDP increases (Victor & Jackson 2015, pp 42-43). Secondly, the scale of decoupling that is required must be determined or at least estimated. Thirdly, the rebound effect (energy efficiency gains and decreasing carbon intensity being swallowed up by increased usage and emissions) needs to be taken into account. Thus far, there is a clear and unambiguous pattern of the rebound effect (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010, p 223; Rockström & Wijkman 2012, p 154).

There appears to be no historical evidence of absolute decoupling ever having occurred, or that there is currently such a trend (Monbiot 2014; Malmaeus 2014; Wetterstrand 2014; Grenholm & Grenholm 2014, p 17; Victor & Jackson 2015, p 44). Mikael Malmaeus argues that all existing studies claiming to show trends of decoupling have left out essential factors, such as consumption of import goods causing environmental impacts elsewhere, or the effects
on other planetary boundaries than climate change (Malmaeus 2014). In the *State of the World 2015* report, Victor and Jackson refer to two studies showing the absence of absolute decoupling. One by Tommy Wiedmann et al. traces the material inputs embedded in the consumption of 186 countries from 1990 to 2008, showing that as wealth grows, countries tend to reduce their domestic material extractions through international trade, while increasing the overall material footprint (i.e. all materials used to support the country’s consumption, regardless of where they are obtained). With every 10% GDP growth, the average national material footprint increases by 6% (Victor & Jackson 2015, p 44). The other study is Vaclav Smil’s book *Making the World: Materials and Dematerialization*, which provides an account of decoupling since the first industrial revolution (ibid, p 42). Smil finds plenty of evidence of relative decoupling, but none of the absolute form. In his view, relative decoupling is unlikely to translate into an absolute one, mainly due to the rebound effect as well as increases in population and the general level of consumption. He posits that global inequality is so large that “even if the aspirations of the materially deprived four-fifths of humanity were to reach only a third of the average living standard that now prevails in affluent countries, the world would be looking at the continuation of aggregate material growth for generations to come” (ibid, p 43).

To achieve the agreed-upon 2°C target in climate policy by green growth policies “would require carbon intensity reductions that seem to be totally beyond reach”, according to Rockström and Wijkman (2012, p 157), who therefore deem it “overly optimistic, if not naive” (ibid, p 152). Tim Jackson states that “[i]n a world of 9 billion people all aspiring to western lifestyles, the carbon intensity of every dollar of output must be at least 130 times lower in 2050 than it is today. By the end of the century, economic activity will need to be taking carbon out of the atmosphere not adding to it.” (Jackson 2011, p 187). He concludes that “the evidence that decoupling offers a coherent escape from the dilemma of growth is far from convincing” (ibid, p 68). Haddad et al. conclude that to avoid overshooting the 2°C goal of global warming “would practically mean constraining the economic system to a global average ‘growth as we know it’ close to 0”. As they put it, “[g]rowth as we know it thus faces a physical impossibility that policy-makers around the world do not seem to fully realize” (Haddad et al. 2015, p 5).

Victor and Jackson note that “the greater the rate of economic growth, the faster must be the decline in the rate of throughput (i.e., throughput per unit of GDP) to achieve any desired level of total throughput reduction” (Victor & Jackson 2015, p 42). Since our biocapacity has already been exceeded in several ways, “some decoupling is required even in the absence of economic growth. But even more decoupling is required if economies grow, and the faster they grow the faster must be the rate of decoupling”. To illustrate the scale of decoupling that is needed, they point to the fact that an economy with a 3% growth rate will increase tenfold in GDP after 78 years, which means that throughput per dollar of GDP must shrink to 10% of its current value during that period to avoid an increase in total throughput. In order for growth to continue at the same rate for another 78 years with no increase in throughput, the throughput per dollar will have to be only 1% of what it is today. They conclude that “[a]t some point, this process must come to an end and economic growth must cease if sustainability is to be achieved” (ibid).

In their 2014 report for Naturskyddsföreningen, Anton Grenholm and Simon Grenholm systematically examine all the premises of green growth and conclude that it is not feasible. The decreases in carbon intensity (CO₂ emissions in relation to GDP) which have been achieved over the last four decades in the Swedish economy have been swallowed up by
economic and population growth. With the goals to cut emissions by 80% by 2050 and maintain an annual growth rate of 1.7%, as well as an estimated annual population growth rate of 0.7%, the CO₂ intensity would have to decrease by 7.2% per year; more than five times higher than the average annual rate of 1.3% since 1970 (Grenholm & Grenholm 2014, pp 30-31). They see no indication that such a drastic increase can be achieved, for several reasons. One is the trend of the rebound effect which has not yet been broken, as people still use the money that is saved for other consumption rather than shorter working hours (ibid, pp 32-33). There has been no significant shift so far towards a more service-based economy, and even if that were the case, most services are still tied to material resources. Technological innovation and efficiency gains also have the effect of making services relatively more expensive (ibid, pp 33-35). Regarding the potential for recycling materials, they note that there are both theoretical and practical limits. If growth is to continue exponentially, it is not enough to even recycle all existing materials; new materials are still needed in the equation. The amounts of material that individuals would have to recycle may not be practically feasible either (ibid, p 38). The shift to renewable energy is necessary to achieve a low-carbon economy, but while it is environmentally benign in itself, there is also a risk that as it becomes cheaper it will be used to exert pressure on natural resources and biodiversity in other ways (ibid, pp 38-39). In conclusion, they find no historic or scientific evidence, even in theory, that decoupling would be possible on the scale that is necessary (ibid, p 42).

4 Research Question, Methodology and Material

4.1 Research Question

The purpose of this thesis is to examine how economic growth is presented and framed in the UN post-2015 development agenda, with a focus on the Sustainable Development Goals. Through qualitative content analysis of nine documents that are central to the process, it seeks to answer three main questions:

- What does ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ growth mean?
- How does it relate to the aim of a transformative agenda?
- How does the agenda address the relationship between growth and the environment?

4.2 Methodology: Qualitative Content Analysis

This policy analysis of economic growth in the UN post-2015 development agenda was carried out through a qualitative reading of official documents. The main purpose of qualitative content analysis is to systematize the text (to clarify, logically organize and classify, e.g. through different categories), and/or to critically examine the ideas, ideology, or discourse that can be discerned (Esaïsson et al. 2012, pp 210-211). To examine what the post-2015 agenda says about economic growth, and the specific aspects that are relevant to my research question, I have chosen to systematize my findings (Chapter 5) in three categories – Sustained, Inclusive, and Sustainable Growth, Going Beyond the GDP Measure, and ‘Green Growth’ and Decoupling. The first category was predetermined and based on SDG 8 (“Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”) which makes it clear from the outset that these words are central to the framing of economic growth. The other categories were identified through the literature review in Chapter 3.3 as relevant aspects of economic growth in relation to sustainability and transformation.
The literature review and the discussion in Chapter 6 are also organized around these categories, with additional sections in the literature review on historical and theoretical context, and an additional section in the discussion which relates the findings to the aim of transformation in the post-2015 agenda. There are several topics that are related and relevant to my research questions, which I have chosen not to include as they are not the focus here; e.g. recommendations for alternative ways of economic organization, and the influence of the private sector in the post-2015 process.

4.3 Material

The following documents were examined:

- *Realizing the Future We Want for All* from June 2012 is the report of the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda to the Secretary-General
- *The Future We Want* from September 2012 is the outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development
- *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development* from May 2013 is the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda
- *A Life of Dignity for All: Accelerating Progress Towards the Millennium Development Goals and Advancing the United Nations Development Agenda Beyond 2015* is the Secretary-General’s report from July 2013
- *A Million Voices: The World We Want – A Sustainable Future with Dignity for All* from September 2013 is the report of the UN Development Group resulting from national consultations in 88 countries, 11 thematic consultations, as well as online platforms, altogether reaching over 1 million people
- *An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development* from May 2014 is the report of the UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network to the Secretary-General
- *Report of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals* from July 2014 contains the proposed goals and accompanying targets
- *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming all Lives and Protecting the Planet* from December 2014 is the Secretary-General’s synthesis report
- *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* from September 2015 is the outcome document from the UN Sustainable Development Summit (the summit of the General Assembly to adopt the post-2015 development agenda)

These nine documents are the most significant official ones emanating from the different work streams in the SDG process and its main ‘actors’: the UN General Assembly, the UN Secretary-General, the UN Development Group, the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

The first three are previously established UN bodies:

- The General Assembly was established in the 1945 Charter of the United Nations as the main deliberative, policymaking and representative organ of the UN. Each member state has one vote and decisions are made through simple or two-thirds majority, depending on the issue.

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- The Secretary-General, also established in the UN Charter, is the head of the UN Secretariat and serves as leader and spokesperson of the UN.
- The UN Development Group was created in 1997 and serves as a high-level forum for joint policy formation and decision-making on development. It consists of 31 members and seven observers, all of which are UN entities (funds, programs, specialized agencies, departments, and offices).

The UN System Task Team, the SDSN, the High-Level Panel and the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals were created specifically to work with the post-2015 development agenda. The first three were established in 2012 by the Secretary-General, while the Open Working Group was established in 2013 by the General Assembly.

- The UN System Task Team consists of more than 60 UN entities and agencies and international organizations, with the purpose of supporting system-wide preparations and multi-stakeholder consultations by providing analytical inputs, expertise and outreach.
- The SDSN is an independent global network of research centers, universities and technical institutions aiming to mobilize scientific and technical expertise for problem-solving in relation to sustainable development. It is headed by Jeffrey Sachs, UN Special Advisor on Millennium Development Goals.
- The High-Level Panel consists of 27 leaders from civil society organizations, the private sector, and governments from all regions of the world. It is headed by Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono (President of Indonesia), Ellen Johnson Sirleaf (President of Liberia), and David Cameron (Prime Minister of the United Kingdom).
- The Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals has 30 members and is co-chaired by Csaba Kőrösi (Permanent Representative of Hungary) and Macharia Kamau (Permanent Representative of Kenya).

The outcome document from the UN Sustainable Development Summit (*Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*) is the most central as it contains the final text and adopted SDGs. The other documents have been included in order to give a more comprehensive view of how economic growth has been addressed, especially since the outcome document is largely limited to listing the goals and targets and does not provide much reasoning on how the goals were selected and formulated. While I have used the mentions of economic growth that are relevant to my research question, all mentions of economic growth have been examined. The focus is on the SDGs, although some of the documents that are examined concern the post-2015 agenda as a whole.

The purpose is to critically analyze the UN post-2015 development agenda as it is officially presented, and to analyze the outcome rather than the process itself. For these reasons, as well as time constraints, only official documents from UN bodies are examined. While some of the documents are resolutions and some are reports, which means they differ somewhat in form and content, I would argue that they all follow similar rules and norms of expression, and therefore can be examined in the same way.
5 Results

5.1 ‘Sustained, Inclusive, and Sustainable’ Economic Growth

There were two official themes at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro: the institutional framework for sustainable development, and a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication (UNGA 2012, p 3). The conference decided that the green economy “should contribute to eradicating poverty as well as sustained economic growth, enhancing social inclusion, improving human welfare and creating opportunities for employment and decent work for all, while maintaining the healthy functioning of the Earth’s ecosystems” (ibid, p 10). However, as mentioned in Chapter 2.2, the ‘green economy’ was a contested idea, which never received strong support and was largely abandoned in favor of the SDGs, which are more clearly linked to the concept of sustainable development. Therefore it is not surprising that after The Future We Want, the green economy concept almost completely disappeared in the subsequent documents. Instead, the ideas of transformative change, ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth, and ‘sustainable patterns of consumption and production’, became central. While these concepts have been easier to build consensus around and to communicate, the overall vision of the economy and its purposes remained the same as in the agreed-upon definition of ‘green economy’. This approach appears to better integrate the economic dimension of sustainability with the social and environmental dimensions and the agenda as a whole, while the ‘green economy’ was referred to more separately as “one of the important tools available”, which can “provide options for policymaking” (ibid).

The need for ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth has thus become one of the most important elements of the post-2015 development agenda. It is seen as essential for prosperity (UNGA 2015, p 8), and is frequently mentioned in many of the documents, with some variations such as “sustained, inclusive and equitable” (UNGA 2012, pp 2, 12, 21, 29, 48), “inclusive, equitable and sustainable” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 19), and “stable, equitable and inclusive” (ibid, p 29). SDG 8 is to “[p]romote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all” (UNGA 2015, p 19). Growth is seen as a key requirement for eradicating poverty and hunger and achieving the MDGs (UNGA 2012, p 21), and also as interlinked and interdependent with social development and environmental protection, which are all seen as essential for achieving sustainable development (UNGA 2012, pp 2, 5; HLP 2013, p 27; UNGA 2013, pp 1, 3; UNGA 2015, p 4).

The UN Secretary-General’s synthesis report states that all participants in the post-2015 process have called for “meaningful transformations of our economies” by “making our patterns of growth more inclusive, sustained and sustainable” (UNGA 2014b, p 12). The report concludes that “[t]he strength of an economy must be measured by the degree to which it meets the needs of people, and by how sustainably and equitably it does so. We need inclusive growth, built on decent jobs, sustainable livelihoods and rising real incomes for all, measured in ways that go beyond GDP and account for human well-being, sustainability and equity.” (ibid, p 18). The UN System Task Team sees an “urgent need to find new development pathways that encourage creativity and innovation in the pursuit of inclusive, equitable and sustainable growth and development” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 19), while the UNDG report states that transformative change must call into question “economic growth that is voiceless and jobless and attaches no cost to the depletion of natural resources” (UNDG 2013, p 39). The High-Level Panel argues that “[t]here must be a commitment to
rapid, equitable growth” that can be sustained in the long-term and overcome the challenges of unemployment, resource scarcity, and adaptation to climate change (HLP 2013, p 8).

The aim of sustained growth is most obvious in target 8.1, which is to “[s]ustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries” (UNGA 2015, p 19). The Secretary-General argues that sustained growth is necessary “in order to keep pace with growing populations and longer life expectancies and to generate employment, wages and revenues for social programmes” (UNGA 2014b, p 28). The High-Level Panel states that it is its vision and responsibility “to have in place the building blocks of sustained prosperity for all” (HLP 2013, p 5), and that we cannot take growth for granted, and “must redouble our efforts” to ensure that it can continue at current levels, and be made more inclusive and sustainable, through structural transformations (ibid, p 18). The panel argues that we should “constantly strive to add value and raise productivity, so that growth begets more growth”, and that some growth patterns “offer more opportunities than others for future growth” (ibid, p 9).

The need to make growth more inclusive is emphasized in all of the documents, and is seen by the High-Level Panel as a key aspect of a transformative agenda (HLP 2013, Executive Summary, pp 3, 46). The UN System Task Team states that reducing inequalities and raising basic standards of living are essential to sustainable development, not only for ethical reasons but for the sake of development, peace, and security (UN System Task Team 2012, p 23). The outcome document similarly states that sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth will only be possible “if wealth is shared and income inequality is addressed” (UNGA 2015, p 8). The right to development and the right to an adequate standard of living are recognized as essential human rights (UNGA 2012, p 2), and the Secretary-General finds that inclusive growth has been one of the key drivers for success in achieving the MDGs (UNGA 2013, p 1). In his synthesis report he argues that economic growth should lead to shared prosperity, and that “[t]he world’s richness of natural resources provides a formidable economic opportunity” if it is translated into shared benefits instead of just GDP growth (UNGA 2014b, p 18).

Inequality is directly addressed in SDG 10, with the aim to “[r]educe inequality within and among countries”. The first target is to “[b]y 2030, progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average”. It also includes targets to ensure equal opportunity (e.g. by eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices), adopt fiscal, wage, and social protection policies, improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions, and ensure enhanced representation and voice for developing countries in decision-making in global international economic and financial institutions (UNGA 2015, p 21).

The UN System Task Team defines inclusive economic development as eradicating income poverty and hunger, reducing inequalities, and ensuring decent work and productive employment (UN System Task Team 2012, p 24). It argues that “[i]nclusiveness is broader than just a pro-poor focus. It implies universality and focuses not only on those defined as poor, but also on vulnerable populations in precarious livelihoods”. Therefore, it is “a dynamic concept as people can move out of poverty, but may still remain vulnerable”, and this requires “an approach that aligns the imperatives of macroeconomic stability and financial sustainability with broader structural development policies” enabling productive employment and decent work, reduction of poverty and inequalities, and welfare protection
The need to protect labor rights, including for migrant workers and those in precarious employment, is underscored, especially in target 8.8 (UNGA 2012, p 51; UNGA 2015, p 20). In the outreach efforts of the High-Level Panel, there were requests for sustained access to productive assets by poor communities as well as specific benefits and safeguards for the informal sector and innovative ways for them to organize, e.g. through unions and cooperatives (HLP 2013, p 60).

In the view of the SDSN, sustainable development requires that all individuals have equal opportunities to share in progress and benefit from economic growth (SDSN 2014, pp 5, 10), while growth offers opportunities to strengthen social inclusion by investing in the poor (ibid, p 32). The report emphasizes that every country has a right to development, “meaning the right to enjoy rising living standards and the eventual convergence of living standards with today’s high-income countries” (ibid, pp 5, 10). Thus the network argues for a global norm of convergence where all regions are able to have economic growth and continue to raise living standards, and as poorer countries experience higher growth rates the gaps between rich and poor countries will narrow substantially over time (ibid, pp 5, 32). The SDSN considers economic growth to be a key dimension of the right to development (ibid, p 39), and argues that through broad-based and sustainable growth, all countries should reach at least the next income level (as defined by the World Bank) by 2030 (ibid, pp 10, 28).

Job creation is intimately tied to economic growth throughout the documents, which is highlighted in SDG 8 and target 8.5, to “achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all women and men” by 2030 (UNGA 2015, p 19). The Future We Want states that a green economy should drive job creation, particularly for women, youth, and the poor (UNGA 2012, pp 12, 28-29), while the Secretary-General argues that ensuring decent jobs is a key element of inclusive economic transformations (UNGA 2013, p 13). The SDSN notes that current growth patterns are not providing enough decent work and are leading to widespread unemployment (SDSN 2014, p 3), while the UN System Task Team argues that “[g]rowth strategies for the future should give immediate priority to dealing with the global jobs crisis and support productive activities to create full employment and decent work” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 29). The High-Level Panel notes that supporting job-creating growth is one of the biggest universal challenges of the 21st century (HLP 2013, p 5), and state that “[t]he first priority must be to create opportunities for good and decent jobs and secure livelihoods, so as to make growth inclusive and ensure that it reduces poverty and inequality” (ibid, p 8). In the panel’s outreach efforts, a goal for decent work with targets on employment creation and reduction of vulnerable work was requested (ibid, p 60).

The dimension of environmental sustainability is most visible in the frequent linking of growth to ‘sustainable patterns of production and consumption’ throughout the documents and discussions of the post-2015 process. Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns constitutes SDG 12, which includes targets to “achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources” by 2030, “substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling and reuse”, and “[r]ationalize inefficient fossil-fuel subsidies” (UNGA 2015, pp 22-23). Shifting to sustainable production and consumption is seen as fundamental to environmental sustainability as well as to sustained, inclusive, and equitable global growth, and therefore in need of urgent action (UNGA 2012, p 12; UN System Task Team 2012, p 29; HLP 2013, Executive Summary, p 8). The Secretary-General states that this shift is a key element of a transformative agenda (UNGA 2013, p 13), and that “[t]he international community must reconcile the challenges of mitigating and adapting to climate change while supporting the growth of developing countries” (ibid, p 14).
The High-Level Panel recognizes that growth must respect the environment (HLP 2013, p 3), but at the same time argues that “[w]ithout building prosperity, we cannot tackle environmental challenges”, since this requires “massive investments” in new and more sustainable technologies (ibid, p 5). The SDSN report underscores that the right to development must be within planetary boundaries, ensure sustainable production and consumption patterns, and help to stabilize the global population by mid-century (SDSN 2014, pp 10, 28, 32, 39). Thus “all countries must recognize that development, including the convergence of living standards, needs to take place within a sound environmental framework” by adopting sustainable technologies, policies, and business models (ibid, p 10). They emphasize that “[c]oncerns over the environment must not provide an excuse for today’s high-income countries to frustrate the economic aspirations of developing countries” (ibid); instead all countries must grow differently and sustainably (ibid, pp 5, 10). Since developed countries have higher per capita resource use, both currently and historically, they have a particular responsibility to decouple resource use from incomes and economic growth, as well as provide support to developing countries with financing and technology transfer (ibid, pp 7, 10).

Many strategies to achieve sustained, inclusive, and sustainable growth are mentioned in the documents⁹, although in many instances growth cannot be separated from development in general. As with the post-2015 agenda at large, these strategies are aimed at achieving greater coherence in macroeconomic and development policies, while at the same time respecting national policies and priorities.

Strategies that are emphasized or mentioned include:

- increased productivity and diversification
- innovation and technology, including the diffusion and transfer to developing countries
- investments in modern and sustainable energy and physical infrastructure
- education and skills training
- empowering women
- trade (increasing activity, creating access to markets, ensuring fairness in the system)
- stability in the financial system
- financial inclusion, especially access to financial services in developing countries
- long-term debt sustainability in developing countries
- ensuring that the private sector is dynamic, well-functioning, and responsible
- transforming business models for creating shared value
- supportive policies for micro, small, and medium sized enterprises
- strengthened partnerships among governments, the private sector, and civil society

In conclusion, the concept of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth is defined in a way that is largely clear and coherent. Overall, the same type of language and argumentation is used in all the documents, and there is almost complete consensus on the topic of economic growth; the only discernible difference is that the High-Level Panel report puts slightly more emphasis on the role of the private sector.

Sustained economic growth is described as necessary in all documents, mainly as a requirement for poverty reduction and job creation, but also to accommodate growing populations and longer life expectancy. The emphasis is therefore on changing the quality of

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⁹ A complete presentation of these findings including quotations and references can be found in the Annex.
growth rather than the quantity, by making it socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable. The right to development and an adequate standard of living as essential human rights are underscored, as well as the need to reduce inequalities through convergence of living standards between high-income and low-income countries. This convergence is to be achieved mainly by higher growth rates for developing countries, while developed countries can continue to grow their economies and raise their living standards. The agenda is greatly concerned with allocating more resources and means to the poorest segments of the global population, by growing the overall economic pie rather than redistributing existing wealth and resources. It does not address the optimal scale/size of the economy, and no physical limits to growth are recognized. Instead, economic development is to be kept within planetary boundaries by ensuring ‘sustainable patterns of production and consumption’. The SDGs include a target to “achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources” by 2030, however this needs to be specified with indicators in order to have any meaning in concrete terms. The High-Level Panel sees prosperity as a requirement for tackling environmental challenges, in order to afford the necessary investments in sustainable technology. From this reasoning, it appears that the means for ‘green’ investments are to be acquired through conventional fossil fuel-based growth strategies.

5.2 Going Beyond the GDP Measure

The need to improve measures of progress and use alternative ones to complement GDP has been recognized by member states (UNGA 2014b, pp 8, 28), and is addressed to some extent in the post-2015 agenda. *The Future We Want* and the Secretary-General’s synthesis report both state that alternative measures are necessary in order to better inform policy decisions (UNGA 2012, p 8; UNGA 2014b, p 8). *The Future We Want* requested that the UN Statistical Commission, in consultation with relevant UN system entities and other organizations, launch a program for broader measures of progress, building on existing initiatives (UNGA 2012, p 8). The Secretary-General’s synthesis report states that “[t]he strength of an economy must be measured by the degree to which it meets the needs of people, and by how sustainably and equitably it does so” (UNGA 2014b, p 18). Thus “our understanding of economic performance, and our metrics for gauging it, must be broader, deeper and more precise” (ibid, p 28). It concludes that “work on developing alternative measures of progress, beyond GDP, must receive the dedicated attention of the United Nations, international financial institutions, the scientific community and public institutions”. These new metrics should focus on measuring “social progress, human well-being, justice, security, equality and sustainability” (ibid).

Changing how economic growth is measured was identified as a key driver of transformation in the national, thematic, and online consultations: “the way we measure progress has to go beyond solely GDP indicators and also take related environmental and social implications into consideration” (UNDG 2013, p 131), “using people-centred and environmentally sensitive measures as well, if not instead” (ibid, p 39). Alternative measures were also requested in the outreach efforts of the High-Level Panel (HLP 2013, p 60).

The SDSN finds that GDP per capita and national income “generally do not reflect the environmental and social consequences of a country’s development path, nor do they accurately capture wellbeing at an individual or household level”. Therefore, they are “poorly suited to serve as stand-alone measures for tracking progress towards sustainable development and must be revised and complemented with more broad-based measures that take into account all dimensions of sustainable development, including subjective wellbeing” (SDSN
The High-Level Panel wants societies to “focus on how well the economy is performing, through a measure that goes beyond GDP or its growth”, such as the share of paid employment by sector and the share of informal and formal employment (HLP 2013, p 46).

As a result of these requests, target 17.19 in the SDGs is to “[b]y 2030, build on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement gross domestic product, and support statistical capacity-building in developing countries” (UNGA 2015, p 27). No existing alternative measures are used in any goals or targets, and target 17.19 seems to suggest that it is because they are not considered well-developed or useful enough.

There are two kinds of alternative measures that are primarily emphasized in the documents, namely accounting for subjective well-being and social capital, and accounting for natural capital and ecosystem services.

Subjective wellbeing is defined by the SDSN as “an individual's own report of his or her sense of happiness or life satisfaction”, while social capital refers to “the levels of trust, cooperation, friendship, and favorable social connections (contrasted with isolation) in the community or nation”. The report finds that these factors are informative of the conditions that are conducive to a high quality of life, and suggests that countries systematically monitor both subjective wellbeing and social capital (SDSN 2014, p 16). The Secretary-General states that “[n]ew measures of subjective well-being are potentially important new tools for policymaking” (UNGA 2014b, p 28), and that the SDGs “should embrace the emphasis on human well-being and include the use of metrics that go beyond standard income measures, such as surveys of subjective well-being and happiness” (UNGA 2013, p 18). As mentioned, however, no such metrics are used in the SDGs.

Regarding natural capital, the High-Level Panel acknowledges that using GDP as the standard measure of progress “leaves out the value of natural assets” and “does not count the exploitation of natural resources or the creation of pollution, though they clearly effect [sic] growth and well-being”. The report notes that work on some new tools has started and that these should be fully in practice by 2030, however “[m]ore rapid and concerted movement in this direction is encouraged” (HLP 2013, p 48). The SDSN argues that countries should quantify their contributions towards each planetary boundary, and “incorporate them, together with other environmental and social indicators, into expanded GDP measures and national accounts” (SDSN 2014, pp 11, 28).

The UNDG report posits that the core problem of current measures of progress is that traditionally natural capital is unaccounted for, and thus not incorporated into economic decision-making. As a result, it is greatly undervalued and used unsustainably. Participants in the thematic consultation on environmental sustainability called for a stronger focus on valuing environmental externalities, e.g. through existing methods such as natural capital accounting, green accounting, and payments for ecosystem services (PES). It is noted that this must be a joint effort where governments need to steer the course through “taxes, incentives, quotas and more”, but are also able to count on the private sector and consumers taking their responsibility (UNDG 2013, p 131).

Existing initiatives that are mentioned in the documents (but not used in goals or targets) include the World Happiness Report, national and OECD surveys on subjective well-being, corporate sustainability accounting, the Inclusive Wealth Report, the Resource Efficiency
Evaluations, the work of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress, the UN System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, the Wealth Accounting and Valuation of Ecosystem Services, and the adjusted net saving and environmental accounting framework developed by the World Bank (HLP 2013, p 48; UNGA 2013, p 18; SDSN 2014, p 11).

To conclude, there is a clear consensus in the documents that GDP and GDP per capita must be revised to better account for externalities. They must also be complemented by other measures that account for social well-being and equality as well as environmental sustainability. The SDGs include a target to develop more useful alternative measures by 2030, which seems to imply that either the existing ones are considered inadequate, or there is a reluctance to change course in practice. In any case, the way the target is formulated effectively postpones this challenge into the future. This is also apparent from the fact that no existing alternative measures are used in the SDGs, despite the Secretary-General’s urging that measures of subjective well-being should be embraced and included. The UNDG report points to existing ways of accounting for externalities, however these are not included either. The overall message seems to be that alternative measures are crucial and must be employed, but this is not yet possible as the existing ones are not adequate, and better ones need to be developed over the next 15 years. Thus, GDP remains dominant in the agenda and the only metric used in the SDGs.

5.3 ‘Green Growth’ and Decoupling

The need to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation is recognized in some of the documents, although to a varying degree. The Secretary-General’s synthesis report and the UNDG report both state that decoupling must be achieved (UNDG 2013, p 131; UNGA 2014b, p 18), while the outcome document uses the word ‘endeavor’ instead of ‘must’ in target 8.4: “Improve progressively, through 2030, global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavor to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, in accordance with the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production, with developed countries taking the lead” (UNGA 2015, p 19).

The High-Level Panel report posits that “[d]one right, growth does not have to bring huge increases in carbon emissions” and that “we must ensure that countries can continue to grow, but use all the tools at our disposal to promote less carbon-intensive growth” (HLP 2013, p 44). It states that for developed countries there is an urgent need to re-imagine growth models, which can be achieved through changing incentives and mindsets (ibid, pp 5, 8). The panel argues that there are many examples of “smart, feasible, cost-effective, green economy policies”, but that “incentives – taxes, subsidies and regulations – must be in place to encourage this – incentives that are largely not in place now” (ibid, p 8). Developing countries, on the other hand, must make smart choices to avoid ‘lock-in’ effects in energy and infrastructure, and “the chance to leapfrog the old model of development and choose more sustainable growth” provided they get proper access to technology and financing (ibid, pp 5-6, 45). The High-Level Panel argues that global limits on carbon emissions do not mean that either developed or developing countries would have to sacrifice growth. In its view, such trade-offs are not necessary, since “[m]ankind’s capacity for innovation, and the many alternatives that already exist, mean that sustainable development can, and must, allow people in all countries to achieve their aspirations” (ibid, p 8). Further research on decoupling was requested in the outreach efforts of the High-Level Panel (ibid, p 60).
The SDSN report addresses decoupling to a larger extent, and in a more direct manner, than any of the other documents. It notes that both resource use and pollution must be brought down to sustainable levels, but that “the key question is not the level of ‘consumption’ or ‘production’ per se, but their primary resource, pollution, and ecosystem implications”. Thus consumption and production in an economic sense can continue to grow, provided that they are decoupled from resource use and pollution (SDSN 2014, p 39). For example, the current rate of emissions from fossil fuel use should decline by more than half, even as the world economy expands perhaps three-fold in the same period, thus “the CO$_2$ per dollar of world output must decline by more than 80 percent by 2050”, with rich countries taking the lead (ibid, p 20). The report states that current growth rates will be impossible to sustain without decoupling, and “[t]he framework for sustainable development must therefore place a central emphasis on decoupling living standards and economic growth from unsustainable resource use and pollution” (ibid, pp 2-3).

The SDSN acknowledges that decoupling is an immense challenge, which “will require deep changes to technologies, production systems, and individual behaviors in every country that must be sustained over the long term” (ibid, p 3). However, it argues that it is possible, mainly by shifting to low-carbon energy; improving efficiency of energy, water, and other resource uses; adopting sustainable technologies for agriculture, water, transport, power, industry, buildings, and other sectors; dematerializing production (e.g. through digitalization); restraining destructive or wasteful behavior; and ensuring proper economic incentives (ibid, pp 10-11, 39). According to the report this is feasible if investment in research and teaching is increased (ibid, p 11), and new approaches are fostered “through concerted action and practical problem solving by governments, businesses, civil society, science, and academia” (ibid, p 7). It also posits that the necessary reductions in greenhouse gas emissions can help to promote ‘green growth’ (ibid, p 20).

The SDSN concludes that it disagrees with the “many pessimists” who think that “the only way to limit resource use is to limit overall economic growth”. The report notes that decoupling “has not yet been tried as a serious global strategy”, and argues that “advances in areas such as information and communications technologies, energy technologies, materials science, advanced manufacturing processes, and agriculture will permit continued economic growth combined with a massive reduction in the use and waste of key primary commodities, a sharp drop in greenhouse gas emissions and other forms of pollution” (ibid, pp 39-40).

Thus, there is consensus that decoupling should be strived for in the documents that address it, although they vary slightly in terms of the urgency and commitment they assign to it. Notably, while there is a target in the SDGs to “achieve the sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources” by 2030, the target on decoupling is less assertive and the word ‘endeavor’ is used. Since only the SDSN report, and to some extent the High-Level Panel report, address ‘green growth’ and decoupling in any detail, it is unclear how representative these views and assumptions are of the agenda as a whole.

The SDSN and the High-Level Panel both state that decoupling will be challenging, but are optimistic and confident in the belief that it is fully possible. Therefore, neither developed nor developing countries will have to sacrifice growth to achieve environmental sustainability. This assessment is based on a strong belief in technological innovation, increased efficiency, and economic incentives. However, the only estimate given of the scale of decoupling required is in relative terms (lowering the CO$_2$ intensity per dollar of world output by more than 80 percent by 2050), despite the fact that, as shown in Chapter 3.3.6, absolute decoupling
is crucial to the feasibility of ‘green growth’. There are no mentions of the rebound effect, or of other types of emissions and resource use than CO₂.

6 Analysis

6.1 ‘Sustained, Inclusive, and Sustainable’ Economic Growth: Continued Growth Dependency

The meaning of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth in the UN post-2015 development agenda is expressed in a way that is, overall, clear and internally coherent. Sustained growth is seen as necessary and desirable for developed and developing countries alike, and therefore a universal goal. Many strategies are presented to maintain and increase current growth rates. However, great emphasis is placed on making current growth patterns more inclusive, so that prosperity is shared to a greater degree, and more sustainable, so that it will result in less environmental degradation. Economic growth is considered crucial to reducing poverty and inequality, and there is consensus that all countries have a right to development, which must not be hampered. Rather, there should be a global convergence of living standards by aiming for higher growth rates in developing countries than in developed ones. Economic growth and environmental sustainability are not seen as conflicting goals, and no physical limits to growth are acknowledged, since there is a strong belief that ‘green growth’ can be achieved by changing to more sustainable patterns or production and consumption. While stated that developing countries should take the lead on ‘sustainable patterns of production and consumption’, in accordance with the CBDR principle, no major trade-offs are necessary and no country will have to ‘sacrifice’ growth.

This is entirely in line with the sustainable development concept as established by Our Common Future: the problem is not economic growth per se, but the destructive character of many economic activities and incentives, and so the quality of growth must change to become more equitable and sustainable. Sustained growth is seen as necessary for both developed and developing countries, and can be made sustainable through decoupling. Thus, the post-2015 agenda reinforces ‘sustainable development’ as the dominant framework of global environmental governance and of the debate around economy-environment interaction. The strong emphasis in the documents on the private sector as a force for sustainability, seems to support Bernstein’s assessment that a liberal economic order and market norms “are not only perceived as compatible with environmental protection, but also necessary for successful incorporation of concern for the environment in the practices of relevant state and non-state actors” (Bernstein 2002, p 213).

In a 2005 study, Sabina Andrén examined how economic growth was framed in the Lisbon Strategy for economic development in the EU. She found that, much like sustainable development, the idea of ‘sustainable growth’ is difficult to take a stand on, given that the meaning and premises are vague and contested, and the interpretations are dependent on frame of reference, ideological viewpoint, and underlying assumptions (Andrén 2005, p 106). In the post-2015 agenda, the three dimensions of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ growth provide a better-rounded concept, corresponding almost directly with the three key dimensions of quality of growth as defined by Haddad et al.: growth that manages environmental tradeoffs, supports equity and inclusiveness (rather than exacerbating inequality and making the benefits of growth ‘exclusive’), and is less susceptible to shocks (Haddad et al. 2015, p 3).
However, as mentioned in Chapter 3.3.2, goals for sustainable development are only meaningful if they clarify what is to be sustained, for whom, and for how long. Notably, any discussion of the time frame of sustained growth, beyond the 15-year time frame of the agenda itself, is completely absent in the documents. This could be due to a clear belief that open-ended growth is feasible and unproblematic and therefore no such discussion is needed, but it is also possible that it represents a more agnostic position on infinite growth, since any recognition of limits to growth by necessity entails a discussion that policymakers may consider too complex. Thus, they may find it more expedient to postpone any confrontation of the issue beyond the 15-year timeframe of the agenda.

Crucially, the documents examined do not in any way question the dependence on exponential growth within the current economic system. Since the social stability of the current system is dependent on constant expansion of the economy, the system is essentially locked into this trajectory. Once growth stagnates or diminishes, it often triggers a vicious circle of negative feedback mechanisms such as unemployment, lower consumer spending, lower investment, diminishing tax revenues, and greater budget deficits which may result in debt and cuts in social spending. As Tim Jackson puts it: “Once the economy starts to falter, feedback mechanisms that had once contributed to expansion begin to work in the opposite direction, pushing the economy further into recession” (Jackson 2011, p 64). He posits that “[i]f halting growth leads to economic and social collapse, then times look hard indeed. If it can be achieved without collapse, prospects for maintaining prosperity are considerably better.” (ibid, p 62).

Although the post-2015 process has been unprecedentedly broad and inclusive, it does not include more critical or skeptical views on growth dependency and the feasibility of ‘green growth’. While most policy-makers may not yet have fully realized the physical impossibility of ‘growth as we know it’, there are many critical voices within academia who are cognizant thereof, but they are not represented. Among the documents examined, the academic sector is mainly represented in the SDSN report, which is completely aligned with the general pro-growth message. This raises the question of the extent to which critical voices have been considered, and whether they have been excluded for the sake of consensus, or if any of the actors involved have refrained from expressing critical views out of concern that breaking the consensus might result in a less influential role in the process. To some extent, the pro-growth message of the agenda likely reflects the dilemma of growth dependency, namely that social stability in the current model rests fundamentally on growth as we know it, and that other means of distribution appear too radical. Thus, there is seemingly no option but to continue to strive for growth and justify it, at least in the near future.

Inclusiveness is at the core of the post-2015 agenda. It takes a strong stand on the notion that prosperity must be shared, and it widens the idea of inclusive economic development to address not only poverty but also vulnerable groups in precarious livelihoods. While developing countries struggled to have the CBDR principle reaffirmed at the Rio+20 conference, they were ultimately successful, which is reflected in the documents of the post-2015 process. There are frequent mentions of the need for climate justice, especially in terms of high-income countries providing financial and technological support to developing countries, as well as taking the lead on sustainable production and consumption patterns. However, inequality is largely addressed in the context of raising the living standard of low-income countries and vulnerable groups (e.g. by removing obstacles of discrimination), and of a global convergence of living standards achieved through higher growth rates in developing countries. Given that very little of the global growth increase currently goes to raising living
standards among the poorest, there would have to be an enormous shift in this ratio to even begin to close the gap. Notably, none of the documents mention the other side of the spectrum – extreme concentrations of wealth – despite the fact that is has increased drastically in recent years, and that poverty and wealth are dependent on each other. SDG 10 include targets to adopt fiscal, wage, and social protection policies for greater equality, and to improve the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets, although without indicators it is difficult to assess their potential impact.

The post-2015 agenda is based on the premise that growth is a necessary condition for greater equality. However, since growth can be considered a substitute for income equality, and since poverty is to a large extent the result of extreme wealth accumulation and overconsumption by the wealthy, one could argue instead that greater equality makes growth less necessary, and is therefore a precondition for a steady-state economy (Wilkinson & Pickett 2010, p 226). Additionally, “[t]he evidence strongly suggests that narrowing the income differences within countries will make them more responsive to the needs of poorer countries”. Thus “[i]t looks as if the inequalities which affect the way people treat each other within their societies also affect the norms and expectations they bring to bear on international issues” (ibid, pp 235-236).

6.2 Going Beyond the GDP Measure: Lacking Alternatives?

There is a clear consensus in the documents that GDP is not sufficient as a stand-alone measure of economic development, or as an indicator of social welfare. The documents recognize that it must be revised to account for the economic and social impacts of economic activity, and complemented with alternative measures of human well-being and sustainability. Starting with The Future We Want, there are several requests for concerted action by the UN system and other actors to develop better metrics by 2030. The implication is that existing alternative measures are not useful enough and need to be improved, especially since none are used in the SDGs. However, there may also be a reluctance to change actual course at present, and instead the target is formulated in such a way that the challenge can be postponed. Despite the consensus that the economy should improve human welfare, and the Secretary-General’s urging that the agenda should embrace measures of subjective well-being, no such measures are included. Therefore, GDP remains the dominant metric and the only one to be included in the SDGs.

Notwithstanding the widespread recognition that GDP growth must not be confused or conflated with development (see Chapter 3.3.5), the notion of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ growth is so intertwined with sustainable development in the post-2015 agenda that it becomes almost impossible to separate from it. While GDP growth and development may not be seen as synonymous, growth is integral to the vision and understanding of sustainable development that underpins the agenda, which is emphasized by the lack of a clear distinction between the intrinsic and instrumental value of GDP growth. The documents all have a clear aim to sustain GDP growth and even increase it, while at the same time acknowledging that GDP is poorly suited to measure progress and well-being and requesting alternative measures to complement it. While this may be partly because existing alternative measures are not considered well-developed or useful enough, it also seems to be in line with the observation that “[m]any economists agree that GDP per capita is not a good measure of social welfare but are then still unwilling to set it aside” (van den Bergh 2011, p 886; van den Bergh 2015, p 15). According to van den Bergh, this is due to the belief that “despite its shortcomings as a welfare indicator, GDP information still serves a number of very useful
purposes” (van den Bergh 2011, p 886). He further argues that “one can easily become pessimistic and even cynical” about many of the statements in favor of going ‘beyond GDP’. In his view, most of these are rather trying to save the GDP indicator, by suggesting adaptations (which will be inadequate, especially in the limited time frame of solving the climate change problem), or complementary indicators (GDP is already one of a set of indicators, so adding alternative measures is not a novel idea). He concludes that “[n]obody dares suggesting to entirely remove GDP information from political debate and economic policy reports”, instead opting for terminology such as ‘green growth’ (ibid, p 887).

One of Andrén’s conclusions regarding the Lisbon Strategy was that economic growth is seen both as a goal in itself and a means to achieve social and environmental goals (Andrén 2005, p 97). This duality is also notable in the UN post-2015 agenda. Growth is seen as a means and condition to achieve employment, reduce poverty, and raise living standards, among other things. However, it is also a goal in itself, as evident from SDG 8: to promote sustained, inclusive, and sustainable economic growth. The accompanying target 8.1 is to “[s]ustain per capita economic growth in accordance with national circumstances and, in particular, at least 7 per cent gross domestic product growth per annum in the least developed countries”. While SDG 8 is partly about changing the quality of growth, this objective is not separated from that of achieving continued growth.

This raises the question of why economic growth in itself is a universal goal in the post-2015 agenda, rather than one of the tools available to achieve development and improve quality of life, depending on the circumstances. Since well-being does not increase with GDP beyond a certain threshold level, which many developed countries have already passed, it follows that economic growth will only contribute to increased well-being for certain countries and social groups. Whether growth contributes to welfare also depends on whether benefits are shared in way that reduces inequality. Thus, the desirability of growth seems to depend on specific circumstances rather than being universal. SDG 8 does state that growth should be sustained “in accordance with national circumstances”; however, the only specification (in target 10.1) is that the income growth rate of the bottom 40% of the population should be higher than the national average. If growth was seen as merely instrumental, it could be argued that it would have been sufficient to have goals on employment, poverty reduction, and other aspects of development, leaving it to decision-makers at various levels to determine how growth would factor into meeting the goals. Rather, the quest for continued growth seems to be part of the normative foundation of the agenda, as evidenced by the formulation in the outcome document that “[s]ustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth is essential for prosperity” (UNGA 2015, p 8).

As Kate Raworth puts it, we need a framework where “social and environmental stresses are no longer portrayed as economic ‘externalities’”, and instead “the planetary and social boundaries are the starting point for assessing how economic activity should take place” (Raworth 2012, p 8). Degrowth proponent Giorgios Kallis argues that replacing GDP with other measures is important but not enough, since “economists' and politicians' fixation with GDP is a manifestation, rather than a cause of society's ‘growth fetishism’. In his view, “[t]he fetishism of growth is broader than the fetishism of GDP and has deep structural (political–economic) and cultural roots that interconnect the macro level of financial, property or labour

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10 Proponents of the degrowth concept work from the basic assumption that reduced GDP growth is both inevitable and desirable, and that it can happen in a socially and environmentally sustainable way of downshifting and reorienting the economy through institutional changes, so that humanity can collectively manage a “prosperous way down” (Kallis 2011, p 875).
institutions to the micro level of individualistic, utilitarian values and imaginaries”. He posits that if governments were to replace GDP with well-being indicators without reforming the system itself, it would not lead to much change since individuals, corporations, and governments would stay in a competitive mode and the growth imperative would remain (Kallis 2011, p 877).

6.3 ‘Green Growth’ and Decoupling – but not Absolute

There is consensus among the documents that economic growth must be made more environmentally sustainable by decoupling it from emissions and resource use, although the SDGs represent a less assertive stance by stating that we should ‘endeavor’ to achieve decoupling. The SDSN and the High-Level Panel reports are the only documents to address it in any detail, which is quite remarkable given that it is fundamental to the notion of sustainable growth and thereby to the agenda as a whole.

The SDSN and the High-Level Panel express great confidence that ‘green growth’ is possible, based on a strong belief in technological innovation, increased efficiency, and economic incentives. However, none of the documents sufficiently account for aspects that are crucial to determining the feasibility of decoupling. The strategies mentioned, as well as the only estimate of the scale of decoupling required, are described in relative terms; thus, absolute decoupling is omitted despite the fact that total throughput is what ultimately determines the impact on planetary boundaries. As shown in Chapter 3.3.6, there appears to be no historical evidence of absolute decoupling ever having occurred. Moreover, relative decoupling is unlikely to translate into an absolute form due to the rebound effect, increased total consumption, and population growth. Thus, the correlation between increased GDP and an increased material footprint remains.

As noted by the SDSN and Jeroen van den Bergh, a serious and concerted green growth strategy has not yet been tried. The SDSN sees this as a reason for optimism. However, the estimates by Tim Jackson and others show that decoupling on an almost unfathomable scale is required, especially if the entire global population is to reach and maintain the current living standards of high-income countries. In this scenario, the carbon intensity per dollar of output must be at least 130 times lower in 2050, according to Jackson, and by the end of the century, economic activity must be taking carbon out of the atmosphere instead of adding to it (Jackson 2011, p 187). The rate of decoupling must also increase as the economy grows, in order to avoid an increase in total throughput, which means that eventually this process must come to an end unless absolute decoupling can be achieved on a very large scale. Hence, from a mathematical perspective, exponential green growth appears to be a physical impossibility.

According to Vaclav Smil, global inequality is so large that “even if the aspirations of the materially deprived four-fifths of humanity were to reach only a third of the average living standard that now prevails in affluent countries, the world would be looking at the continuation of aggregate material growth for generations to come” (Victor & Jackson 2015, p 43). The aim of a global convergence of living standards to the level of high-income countries, which is described as fully possible and desirable in the post-2015 agenda, thus appears to be incompatible with the aim to stay within the ‘safe operating space for humanity’. The inescapable conclusion is that total emissions and resource use must decrease, and from a social justice perspective and the CBDR principle, this should take place in high-income countries first and foremost, though not exclusively.
Given the lack of historic or scientific evidence, even in theory, that decoupling would be possible on the scale that is necessary, it is highly problematic that policy-makers believe so strongly in its feasibility. While ‘green growth’ is an appealing solution due to its ‘win-win’ message, it does not appear to be a very credible one. Therefore, I concur with Grenholm and Grenholm’s conclusion that the burden of proof should be placed on those advocating green growth rather than those who are questioning it, and that the answer to a sustainable economy is to do away with the notion that continued exponential growth is the only path, or even the best path, to development.

6.4 Economic Growth and Transformation in the Post-2015 Agenda

As shown in Chapter 2.3.4, transformation is a central theme of the post-2015 development agenda; it is frequently mentioned and referred to by the Secretary-General as both the aim and the watchword of the agenda. With three high-level international meetings in one year, the Secretary-General’s synthesis report states that 2015 is the most important year for global development since the founding of the UN itself (UNGA 2014b, p 34), and a unique opportunity to transform the world to better meet human needs, protect the environment, ensure peace, and realize human rights (ibid, p 3). The documents acknowledge that we are at a historic crossroads, that business as usual cannot be an option, and that we need a radical change of course. The Secretary-General hopes that the new agenda will mark a paradigm shift (UNGA 2014b, p 6), and the High-Level Panel argues that it “should encourage everyone to alter their worldview, profoundly and dramatically” (HLP 2013, p 10).

The SDG framework is meant to provide a more holistic perspective than the MDGs, to better integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development and recognize their interlinkages. With increased awareness of planetary boundaries, and humanity approaching or transgressing them at increasing speed, sustainability is now seen as the “fundamental principle for all aspects of development” (UN System Task Team 2012, p 25). As opposed to being a separate goal in the MDGs, the environmental dimension is now “articulated across the whole sustainable development agenda” according to the Secretary-General (UNGA 2014b, p 10). In that regard, I would argue that the formulation of the agenda has been successful; environmental sustainability is consistently included in the vision and stated purpose of the agenda, and in more than half of the SDGs, many of which acknowledge the interlinkages between the three dimensions. Thus, there is no doubt that the agenda represents a major shift in awareness and ambition.

While the world envisioned in the agenda is radically different from today’s, the question is whether shifting to a path of ‘sustainable development’ actually represents transformative change. There is a strong emphasis that the quality of economic growth must be changed to make it more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable, partly by developing alternative measures to complement GDP. This is of course an enormous challenge in itself and will require significant changes in the current economic model. However, the agenda does not in any way question the dependence on exponential growth that is the underlying premise of the current economic system; instead it is presented as necessary and desirable, and ‘sustained growth’ is included as a universal goal in the SDGs. There is an ardent belief in ‘green growth’ as the solution; by decoupling growth from environmental degradation, it does not have to be restricted. This is entirely in line with the sustainable development concept as it has been established over the last three decades, which is based on the idea that economic growth and environmental sustainability are fully compatible. Similar to the Lisbon process, the post-2015 agenda aims to achieve dynamic economies, social welfare, and environmental
sustainability at the same time, with no recognition of any major tradeoffs. Everyone will benefit – there are no ‘losers’ in the equation. To some extent this naturally reflects the nature of the UN and the purpose of the agenda, however, as Andrén concludes about the Lisbon process, there is also an element of “having the cake and eating it”.

It may be argued that focusing on green growth instead of limits to growth is an easier way to garner the necessary support for the first steps towards a more sustainable economy, especially from the private sector. The UN Global Compact, which represents the private sector, published its own report on the post-2015 agenda in 2013 (Corporate Sustainability and the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda) placing a strong emphasis on economic growth and strategies to increase it. The report argues that “business is at the heart of virtually any widespread improvements in living standards” (UN Global Compact 2013, p 16), with private financial flows now far exceeding official aid or grants (ibid, p 3). In the Compact’s view, “there is enormous potential for the private sector to help advance sustainable development on a broad scale” (ibid, p 16). The post-2015 agenda is therefore an “opportunity to shift to a new paradigm in development thinking by fully recognizing the central role of business” (ibid, p 3). The report recognizes that investment and business activity must shift from the ‘business as usual’ trajectory and deliver value “not just financially, but also in social, environmental and ethical terms” (ibid, p 16). However, growth is still seen as a top priority, especially in connection to poverty reduction. According to the Compact’s local consultations with corporate participants, the best way for the post-2015 agenda to address poverty is to “[e]nsure economic growth that is fairly consistent over the years and benefits everyone” (ibid, p 7).

This suggests that it would be difficult to garner support from the private sector with an agenda that would not fully embrace the idea of continuous economic growth. Therefore, in order to not alienate business leaders, it might be strategically necessary to focus on steering growth patterns and strategies in a more sustainable direction. However, as Mikael Malmaeus points out, compromising on the message is still problematic since it is difficult to find the right solutions if the diagnosis of the underlying problems does not correspond with reality (Malmaeus 2014). This is of course especially relevant to an agenda that will guide global development for the next 15 years. Given the lack of evidence that ‘green growth’ is feasible on the scale that is required, I concur with Tim Jackson’s argument that “there is as yet no credible, socially just, ecologically sustainable scenario of continually growing incomes for a world of 9 billion people” (Jackson 2011, p 86).

Overall, it seems that the actors involved in the post-2015 agenda understand the pressing social and environmental problems, and the fact that “20th century conceptions of growth do not deliver on the issues we care about in the 21 century” (Haddad et al. 2015, p 9), yet they are not willing to question growth dependency. For some, it is likely due to a genuine conviction that “the pursuit of economic growth is both the most practical, and the most morally sound approach” to solving these problems (Purdey 2012, p 91). However, it may also be that they have some insight into the problems, but find the discussion on limits to growth too complex and are hesitant to confront the issue. Since social stability in the current model rests fundamentally on growth as we know it, making redistribution less urgent and difficult, it is likely that many fail to see any viable alternatives, at least in the near future.

As Purdey points out “a frank discussion about alternative developmental trajectories” is missing from today’s international agenda (Purdey 2012, p 93). He argues that tensions and contradictions within the growth paradigm are “clear and abundant”, however “none has been
seized upon by social groups with the specific intention of opposing economic growth as such”, thus “[t]he paradigmatic hegemony of the commitment to growth has not been, and is not being, actively or coherently opposed by any organized faction of national civil societies or transnational civil society”. In his view, a counter-hegemonic narrative requires an “intersubjectively shared image of the new order” which is currently lacking (Purdey 2010, p 150). Herman Daly’s idea of the steady-state economy remains one of the most influential, although, it appears, mainly within the academic sphere. The degrowth movement, which has gained visibility and a degree of influence over the last few years, has managed to some extent to go beyond academia and become a social movement driven by a moral appeal. However, it is still a rather unstructured movement which advocates an umbrella approach gathering many different viewpoints and strategies.

As Victor and Jackson put it, the growth debate comes down to one essential question: “Can economic growth be designed in a way that reduces its ‘uneconomic’ costs, even as growth continues indefinitely? Or must growth be abandoned in order to put the world’s economies on a sustainable path?” (Victor & Jackson 2015, p 41). In my view, the answer to this question determines whether the idea of ‘sustained, inclusive, and sustainable’ economic growth can be considered transformational. As mentioned, my own conclusion is that we need to move away from the growth-based economic model in order to achieve a truly sustainable one. Therefore, in my view, the agenda represents more of an adjustment of the economic system than a ‘transformation’ or ‘paradigm shift’.

7 Conclusion

The world is at a historic crossroads in 2015, with three high-level international development conferences and the adoption of a new development agenda that will set the course for the next 15 years. Humanity is facing enormous challenges of poverty, inequality, and overreaching the Earth’s carrying capacity. It has already transgressed two ‘planetary boundaries’ and is dangerously close to transgressing several others, such as climate change. To move humanity towards a space that is both safe, in terms of maintaining the Holocene planetary state, and just, in terms of ensuring decent living standards for all, requires a highly ambitious agenda. The UN has tried to achieve such an agenda through an unprecedentedly broad and inclusive consultation process. In the process it has reformed the institutional framework for sustainable development and creating the UN System Task Team, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network, and the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. At the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015, the General Assembly adopted a set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals with 169 accompanying targets to succeed the Millennium Development Goals and guide policy-making at the regional, national, and local levels. The new agenda is meant to build on the MDGs, while being more extensive and better integrating the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of development. Thus, it provides a significant opportunity to steer the world in a more sustainable direction, especially since many of the global challenges require urgent action, and climate change in particular must be addressed within a limited timeframe. Throughout the post-2015 process, the need for transformation has been strongly emphasized. ’Business as usual’ cannot be an option. Bold and transformative steps must be taken, and a paradigm shift must take place.

In this study, I set out to examine how economic growth is framed in the post-2015 development agenda, and particularly the SDGs. Through qualitative content analysis of nine documents central to the process, I sought to answer what ’sustained, inclusive, and
sustainable’ growth really means, since SDG 8 is dedicated to this objective and it is central to the agenda as a whole. The purpose was also to find out how it is related to the aim of transformative change, and how the agenda addresses the relationship between the economy and the environment. The study showed that there is a clear consensus among the documents on the topic of economic growth, and that it is addressed in an internally consistent manner. It is also very consistent with the ‘sustainable development’ concept that was established in the 1987 Brundtland report and reinforced at the 1992 UN Conference on Environment and Development, the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, and the 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development. This concept shifted the focus of international environmental governance; instead of environmental protection being a precondition for development, development was now seen as a precondition for environmental protection. The concerns over limits to growth were sidelined by the enthusiasm over ‘green growth’ as the solution to environmental sustainability. The post-2015 agenda is a continuation of this path, which has proved to be the easiest to find consensus around, as it is based on the notion that no major compromises or restrictions on growth are required.

In the post-2015 agenda, continuous economic growth is seen as universally necessary and desirable, and many strategies are presented to ensure that current growth levels can be maintained and increased. There is a strong emphasis on the need to change the quality of growth to make it more socially inclusive, so that benefits are shared and growth contributes to poverty reduction and job creation. Greater equality is to be achieved mainly by higher growth rates for low-income countries and an eventual convergence in living standards with richer countries. However, the effectiveness of this inclusive growth strategy should be called into question, given that very little of the global economic growth increase currently goes to raising living standards among the poorest, and most of the gains of growth are restricted to the top few percent of the population (Victor & Jackson 2015, pp 47-48). Thus, there would need to be an enormous shift in these ratios in order to achieve significant poverty reduction within a reasonable timeframe. Because it is focused on total economic growth rather than wealth redistribution, while avoiding any acknowledgement of extreme wealth as part of structural inequality, the agenda ultimately serves to legitimize the current economic model as just and fair, which it is not. By strongly linking growth to reduction of poverty and inequality, and arguing that it can be made environmentally benign, the agenda paints it as a solution to the global challenges rather than an underlying cause.

The agenda places much hope in ‘green growth’. This is to be achieved by making sure that growth is decoupled from environmental degradation, mainly through SDG 12 (ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns). High-income countries are expected to take the lead in accordance with the CBDR principle, and provide financial and technological assistance to developing countries. The great optimism about green growth as a solution is based on a strong belief in technological innovation, increased efficiency, and economic incentives. Therefore, no limits to growth are recognized. However, the documents fail to distinguish properly between absolute and relative decoupling. They neglect the fact that there is no evidence of absolute decoupling ever having occurred, and that relative decoupling is unlikely to translate into absolute decoupling (for several reasons, such as the rebound effect). They also fail to provide any estimations of the scale of decoupling effort required, except for one relative estimation in the SDSN report. As discussed in Chapter 3.3.6., the green growth concept itself is based on a number of fallacies. Most importantly, decoupling would have to be achieved on a scale that appears to be physically and mathematically impossible (see Chapter 3.3.6), especially since the rate of decoupling must increase as growth increases. If a global population of 9 billion people is to have the same living standards as the current
average living standard in high-income countries, carbon intensity per dollar of output must be at least 130 times lower in 2050 than is currently the case, according to Tim Jackson (Jackson 2011, p 187). The post-2015 agenda provides no specifics of how this will be achieved. The fact that it expresses such confidence in the feasibility of green growth is very problematic considering the lack of historical or even theoretical evidence.

Despite the widespread recognition that GDP growth should not be conflated with development, the two concepts are very much intertwined in the post-2015 agenda; they may not be seen as synonymous, but growth is clearly integral to the vision of sustainable development. There is consensus that GDP is not a suitable measure of welfare and well-being, and therefore must be complemented with alternative measures that better account for social and environmental impacts and subjective well-being. Nevertheless, no existing alternatives measures are used in the SDGs, although they do contain a target to develop better ones by 2030. The fact that GDP is the sole metric used in the SDGs seems to reflect the ‘growth paradox’ of policy-makers being aware of its shortcomings, but still unwilling to set it aside. In the post-2015 agenda, economic growth is framed as a universal goal in itself, as well as a means to achieve various development objectives. This suggests that the quest for continuous growth is part of the normative foundation of the agenda.

Crucially, the agenda does not question the dependency on exponential growth that is fundamental to the current economic system. Neither does it question the lack of resilience inherent in this ‘lock-in’ trajectory. Voices that are critical or skeptical on this topic are not represented or acknowledged in any of the documents, despite the fact that the consultation process has been unprecedentedly broad and inclusive. It appears that such views have been excluded, or that actors have refrained themselves from expressing them, in order to achieve consensus and ensure the cooperation and involvement of the private sector. Overall, the pro-growth message likely reflects the normative roots of the growth paradigm as discussed in Chapter 3.3.3. While growth is a relatively new policy objective, it has become a politically expedient way of increasing living standards without redistribution, and allows politicians to grant themselves freedom from the constraints of living within limits and the difficult decisions that it would entail. However, the consensus at the institutional level may have different explanations at the individual level; it may be that some actors are genuinely convinced of the necessity and desirability of exponential economic growth, and may not have fully realized its physical impossibility, while some might have a more agnostic view, though eschewing the idea of taking on such a complex and contentious discussion.

Ultimately, the failure to address growth dependency is why the agenda, in my view, also fails to live up to its promises of transformative change. The agenda envisages a radically different world which must be a clear departure from the ‘business as usual’ trajectory, yet it proposes mainly the same methodology. Making growth patterns more socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable would certainly be a great challenge in itself, but it arguably constitutes an adjustment of the system rather than a transformation thereof. It represents a modification of the prevailing paradigm rather than the creation of a new one. Given that GDP growth does not result in increased welfare and well-being beyond a certain threshold level (which was reached in most OECD countries four or five decades ago), an actual paradigm shift would be to reorient the economy towards an over-arching goal of human well-being within planetary boundaries.

More than 40 years ago, the authors of the Limits to Growth report concluded that modern society had not yet learned to recognize and deal with the fact that Earth’s physical limits
require trade-offs in resource use and pollution; instead, a whole culture evolved around the principle of fighting these limits. Based on the results of this study, I would argue that their assertion is just as accurate today, and that the post-2015 agenda represents a lost opportunity to steer the world onto a truly sustainable course.

8 Postscript

My data gathering period started in February 2015 and ended with the outcome document from the UN Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015. After the zero draft of the outcome document was released in June 2015, some articles have been published which analyze the post-2015 agenda from a similar angle. While my conclusions are independent of theirs and based on documents from the whole process, these articles provide additional perspectives on the topic, and a few of them are therefore listed below.


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Annex: Strategies to Achieve ‘Sustained, Inclusive, and Sustainable’ Economic Growth

Many strategies to achieve sustained, inclusive, and sustainable growth are mentioned in the documents, although in many instances growth cannot be separated from development in general. As with the post-2015 agenda at large, these strategies need to achieve greater coherence in macroeconomic and development policies, while at the same time respecting national policies and priorities. Among the most emphasized are increased productivity (UNGA 2012, p 51; UN System Task Team 2012, p 29; HLP 2013, p 9; UNGA 2013, p 14; UNGA 2015, p 8), and diversification (HLP 2013, p 46; UNGA 2013, p 14), which are both part of target 8.2 in the proposed SDGs (UNGA 2015, p 19).

Innovation and technology are also part of target 8.2 and mentioned frequently, including their diffusion and transfer to developing countries (UNGA 2012, p 13; UN System Task Team 2012, p 30; HLP 2013, Executive Summary, pp 9, 56; UNGA 2015, pp 10, 26). Here, the contributions of scientists and academics are seen as essential by the High-Level Panel, since “[e]very country that has experienced sustained high growth has done so through absorbing knowledge, technology and ideas from the rest of the world, and adapting them to local conditions. What matters is not just having technology, but understanding how to use it well and locally.” (HLP 2013, p 11). Investments in modern and sustainable energy provision (UNGA 2013, p 14; UNGA 2015, p 8) and physical infrastructure (UN System Task Team 2012, p 29; HLP 2013, p 9; UNGA 2013, p 14; UNGA 2015, p 8) are also cited as basic enablers of growth.

Education and skills training is seen as one of the most crucial areas to improve, especially as a way out of poverty (UN System Task Team 2012, pp 30, 35; UNGA 2013, p 14; HLP 2013, pp 8-9; UNDG 2013, p 37). Empowering women is described as both an essential requirement for equitable progress and a driver of growth (UNGA 2012, p 51; UN System Task Team 2012, p 35). The High-Level Panel sees opportunities in the trend of rapid urbanization, since “cities are the world’s engines for business and innovation” (HLP 2013, Executive Summary), and “inclusive growth emanates from vibrant and sustainable cities, the only locale where it is possible to generate the number of good jobs that young people are seeking” (ibid, p 18).

Trade is also one of the most emphasized factors, both in terms of increasing it and creating access to markets, and ensuring that the system is fair (UN System Task Team 2012, p 30-31; HLP 2013, pp 3, 8, 9, 54; UNGA 2013, p 14). This is reflected in targets 17.10-17.12 (UNGA 2015, p 27). Target 17.11 is to “[s]ignificantly increase the exports of developing countries, in particular with a view to doubling the least developed countries’ share of global exports by 2020” (ibid), and target 8.a is to increase Aid for Trade support for developing countries, particularly the least developed ones (ibid, p 20). Stability in the financial system is seen a requirement to achieve sustained and inclusive growth, as it enables stable, long-term private financial investment (UN System Task Team 2012, p 29, 30-31; HLP 2013, pp 3, 8, 54-55), which is reflected in target 17.13: “Enhance global macroeconomic stability, including through policy coordination and policy coherence” (UNGA 2015, p 27). Financial inclusion, especially access to financial services in developing countries, is also seen as crucial (UNGA 2013, p 14; HLP 2013, p 47; UNGA 2015, pp 15, 19, 20). This is reflected in target 8.10 (UNGA 2015, p 20) and target 8.3 (ibid, p 19). Target 17.4 is to “[a]ssist developing countries in attaining long-term debt sustainability through coordinated policies aimed at fostering debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate, and address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries to reduce debt distress” (ibid, p 26).
Since the private sector is the world’s main source of economic activity, it has a crucial role and must be dynamic, well-functioning and responsible (UNGA 2012, p 51; HLP 2013, pp 3, 9, 47). Business models must be transformed for creating shared value (UNGA 2014b, p 18). Supportive policies for micro-, small-, and medium-sized enterprises are encouraged, especially among the poor, and part of target 8.3 (HLP 2013, p 9; UNGA 2015, p 19). The High-Level Panel highlights the potential of the private sector to contribute to sustainable development, especially in terms of poverty reduction and sustainable production and consumption (HLP 2013, Executive Summary), and argues that governments must create an enabling environment for it to flourish (ibid, pp 9, 46).

The UN System Task Team argues that it will require “strengthened partnerships among governments, the private sector and civil society” to ensure that trade and investment contribute in inclusive and sustainable ways (UN System Task Team 2012, p 35). The UNDG report posits that partnerships with the private sector “can be a tremendous driver of change if there are appropriate regulatory safeguards coupled with recognition that sustainable production processes also make business sense” (UNDG 2013, pp 39-40).