

# The Sustainability Framework and the Sustainable Development Agenda

## Why Sustainability?

‘Development is a contested concept. While at a theoretical level it may refer to the increase in human freedom to maximize individual potential, at a practical level it has largely referred to economic growth. Several decades of development focusing mainly on economic growth has not been satisfactory. On the one hand while wellbeing – in terms of income, access to health, education and other services, and mobility for example – have improved, this has taken place within a context of extremely unequal distribution of economic gains. Globally the richest 0.5% hold well over one-third of the worlds wealth.<sup>1</sup> Even in Sri Lanka 45% of the income share is held among the richest of society while the poorest get a meagre 8%.<sup>2</sup> It is also highly questionable if USD 1.25 per day – the bar to cross over for poverty alleviation – allows people to live a decent life. The second concern is that the grow first, balance social needs and then deal with the environment development sequencing has led to the destabilizing of the Earths functions. For example, our human actions have substantially increased the amount of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere, the main reason for the collapse of the climate control functions of the planet that is now leading to multiple problems.



This situation has resulted in a renewed call for sustainable development, which builds on the idea of human wellbeing by adding the importance of the environment and sensitivity to our planets ability to sustain life on earth. Thus sustainable development refers to socially inclusive and environmentally sustainable economic growth, which contributes to the increase in human freedom.

<sup>1</sup> Global Wealth Report - Credit Suisse Research Institute (2010)

<sup>2</sup> Poverty and Equity; Regional Dashboard: South Asia, World Bank (2015)



Empowered lives.  
Resilient nations.

It has three interconnected aspects: economic development, broad-based social inclusion, and environmental sustainability; all supported by good governance.

### The Science behind the Sustainability Concepts

Development achieved by developed nations has come at a cost to the planet. Calculations done by the Global Footprint Network show that these countries have used more than the bio capacity threshold (which is the amount of natural capital used to gain human development improvements) to achieve their status of development<sup>3</sup>. This has then over time lowered the bio capacity availability – so that now countries have to develop with much less resources. However, this also means that poorer nations are compelled to find other ways to develop; for example, if we grow and consume in the same way as the Americans have we will need 4.5 planets<sup>4</sup>.

An alternative frame is provided by sustainability science that can alter how development is conceptualized and applied. It is based on three sustainability principles of ecology (Box 1).

#### Box 1

- For renewable resources: rate of use =/< rate of regeneration
- For non-renewables: rate of use =/< investment into renewable resources that can be substituted
- The rate of waste emission must remain within assimilative capacity of the environment

*Source: Natural capital a limiting factor - J. Farley and H. Daly (2006)*

Using the principles of sustainability, if we are to achieve more equitable development that does not destroy the planet it must be underpinned by:

- Growth that is bound by biophysical limits (resources and waste assimilation);
- Growth that does not compromise ecological functions needed for life; and
- Growth that is inbuilt with better distribution of benefits to address unmet needs.

### Sustainability Framework and the SDGs

By definition, sustainable development is about interconnections and systems thinking. The UN Secretary General's Synthesis Report on the post 2015 agenda<sup>5</sup>, argues that *"sustainable development must be an integrated agenda for economic, environmental and social solutions. Its strength lies in the interweaving of its dimensions. This integration provides the basis for economic models that benefit people and the environment; for environmental solutions that contribute to progress; for social approaches that add to economic dynamism and allow for the preservation and sustainable use of the environmental commons; and for reinforcing human rights, equality and sustainability. Responding to all goals as a cohesive and integrated whole will be critical to ensuring the transformations needed at scale."*

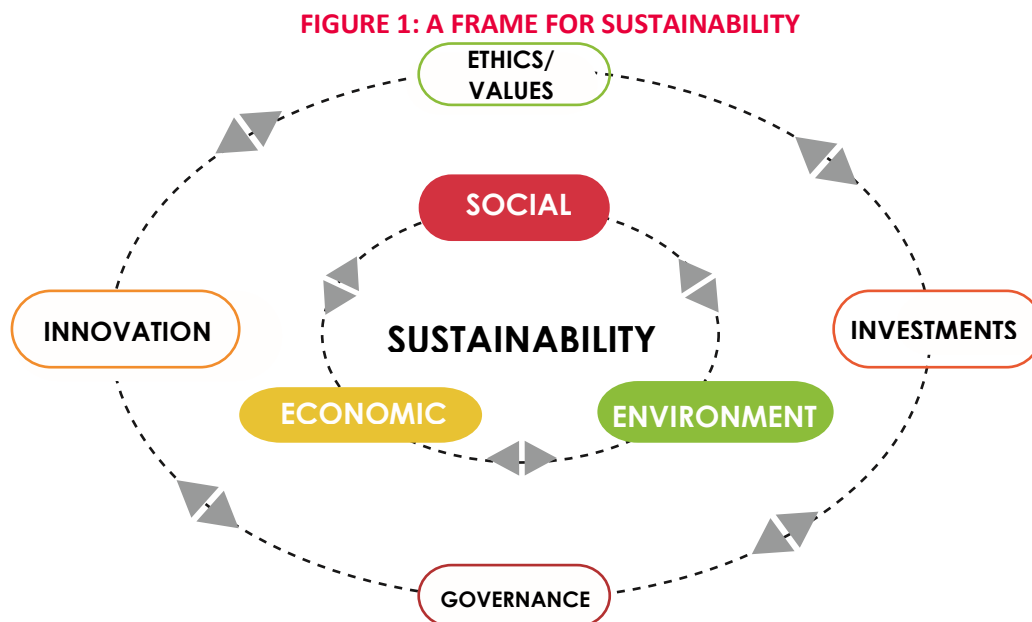
<sup>3</sup> Ecological Footprint Atlas 2010 – Global Footprint Network (2010)

<sup>4</sup> Ecological Footprint Atlas 2010 – Global Footprint Network (2010)

<sup>5</sup> The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending poverty, transforming all lives and protecting the planet – UN (2014)

The Sustainability Framework is a way to organize thinking about sustainability as well as a tool for planning, management, and evaluation of activities relating to the SDGs. Its core brings together three 'domains' of social, economic and environmental wellbeing that is supported by an outer core – the enabling environment created by innovation, governance, investment and ethics (Figure 1).

It is also visualized as a close – cyclic system that does not put one domain before another. It is likened to a space ship where all functions have to take place within that setting. The individual domains need to have inter-dependent characteristics to support the sustainable model: the **economic domain** must acknowledge resource limits; growth capacity must be bound by resource availability and waste assimilation; there should be material/energy balance and resource stocks must be maintained to support use and regenerative capacity. The **social domain** should focus on reducing inequality, among groups, people and countries; the focus should be on multidimensional wellbeing; and development should prioritize benefits to the poor and marginalized. Finally, the **environment domain** requires maintaining the thresholds of ecosystem services; the environment should not be seen as an externality; there should be emphasis on staying within planetary boundaries; and the over use of resources must be controlled.



Source: Derived by the Centre for Poverty Analysis

### Review and Reflection

The sustainability framework should ideally be the basis for developing a project design, but it may also be used to reflect on whether the project design is sustainable, and what actions may need to be taken to bring it in line with the sustainability logic underpinning the SDGs. Further, it may be useful to understand how a portfolio of projects relate to each other and contribute to sustainable development. The framework can be used to identify synergies and complementarities across various projects, as well as opportunities for coordination and collaboration to contribute to various SDGs.

(Conceptualized in collaboration with the Centre for Poverty Analysis, Sri Lanka)