

Draft UN HLPF intervention Jul 2016 – UN Stakeholder
"Scientific Community on Natural Limits"

It's particularly relevant on this last day of discussion, addressing multi-stakeholder engagement in beginning to implement the SDG's, that we openly discuss difficulties with impact accounting. **Here's a very compact but clear way to explain a present problem**

As a research scientist I've been one of those who long understood that any growth system has to change to fit in with its environment as it meets natural limits. It's very much to the UN's credit that it shaped the SDG's intending to end development that exceeds natural boundaries and to remain open to shortcomings in the plan's design.

The method we use to measure sustainability, to predict future impacts that a project or business would cause, was meant to assure projects would be measurably sustainable. It still includes old methods, now being found to actually result in very large omissions from what we count. Most kinds of both direct and indirect impacts actually still go uncounted. We are only counting impacts within project boundaries and still ignore those external to it, where most uncontrolled economic impacts accumulate. Any firm, city or state actually has global impacts, but the rules still say not to count their external impacts, left uncounted as if nature would take care of them as before. Today it spreads global strains making the poor poorer and leaving more and more people behind.

It's really the ever rising competition that spreads impossible demands for productivity that pushing struggling people beyond their limits. Growth leaders invent "disruptive innovation" to profit from, unaware that the lives disrupted that increasingly won't recover in a world pressed to its limits. With our truly global economy every competitive pressure is really closely connected. When we count only impacts within our planning boundaries, people making sustainability decisions are totally unaware of the growing external impacts their decisions cause. More detail is in a short essay called "societal impacts uncounted"**.

So the SDG's still rely on "still doing the same thing as before and expecting a different result. We need true holistic accounting (where every part matters) and to see the SDG's more as "cultural development" than as "economic", as it's growth itself that has become so disruptive. Our best intended policies are backfiring badly, like advances in agricultural productivity thought to be such a boon. Now we see it globally connected to the competitive failures of sustainable agricultural communities around the world, made uneconomical, and the great migrations of newly impoverished people to live in slums or desperately seek other refuge. This is not right.

Holistic accounting is not so hard to do, really. It starts with having responsibility for the costs of the economy in proportion to your share of it. What it really means is likely to be some shock, of course. So we need to assure that that learning occurs and is practiced, and act to ease the strain of shifts taking place so people can feel supported in their effort to adapt. Those seem among the kindest and more useful things for us to do.

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