We need to build a decent life on a crowded planet.

According to the UN Population Fund, the human population reached 7 billion in October 2011. The earth is getting crowded, and fast; it was only 12 years ago that the population arrived at 6 billion and, if the UN is correct, in 2024 it will reach 8 billion.

What kind of world awaits the new arrivals? A complicated and challenging one. While we do not know where the 8-billionth person will arrive, the most likely place is low-income Asia or sub-Saharan Africa, as it is these places that have high birth rates and rapid population growth. Unfortunately, these are also the regions where poverty, disease, civil conflict and environmental degradation make life for many a daily struggle for survival.

Yet it is also true that the newest arrivals in the human family will have many advantages that earlier generations did not. Today’s newborns in remote rural villages are most likely to become a part of a globally connected information age. The revolution in information and communications technologies (ICTs) has ended economic and social isolation almost everywhere. For instance Somalia, a country in the agony of warlords, terror, piracy and famine, is also very well covered by highly competitive and low cost mobile phone services.

ICTs and other technologies are improving many aspects of daily life – health, education, social networking, emergency alerts and response – and in many parts of the world are also supporting a pace of economic development unmatched in previous history. It is no accident that China has achieved roughly 10 per cent per year economic growth since the late 1970s, implying a doubling of the economy every seven years. Advances in technology plus globalisation make that torrid pace of economic growth feasible for decades at a time.

Yet not all the development news is good. Ecologists and geologists warn us that our species is now so numerous, and such heavy users of the earth’s primary commodities, that humanity has overtaken nature.

The future of development goals

Jeffrey Sachs, Director of the Earth Institute urges the world’s nations to share the heavy burdens of leadership, and support the establishment of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).
as the main driver of core earth processes, such as
the cycles of carbon, water, and nitrogen. The earth
scientists have therefore christened our age the
‘Anthropocene’, a new geological epoch of the planet
in which the earth’s processes are driven by humanity.
Another way to put this is that humanity is trespassing
over key ‘planetary boundaries’, thereby risking major
destabilization of the very ecosystems that sustain
human life and well-being.

A novel challenge

Humanity’s destabilisation of the climate system,
depletion of fossil water and fossil energy reserves, and
destruction of habitats (typically to make room for new
farms and pasturelands) will indeed have dire and long-
lasting implications for the planet. These unsustainable
practices are making it increasingly difficult for our
generation to achieve the Millennium Development
Goals (MDGs), much less to ensure that generations to
come will have the benefit of vital ecosystem services.

The Anthropocene marks an unprecedented
challenge for humanity, one that is so novel and
complex that almost none of the world has begun to
respond adequately to the challenges. Moreover, the
unprecedented environmental threats are occurring at
a complicated transition in geopolitics as well.

The world’s powers are already in the midst of
intensifying global scrambles for food, energy,
and minerals that can spill over into dangerous
conflicts. We are in the midst of international
financial instability as well, due to national failures
in financial regulation combined with the inherent
difficulties of regulating highly mobile capital on a
global scale.

Time for Sustainable Development Goals

Can we combine further economic development
and environmental sustainability? In short, can the
world achieve Sustainable Development? I believe we
can. Yes, we are living at a time of great stress, but
also in an era of great ingenuity and monumental
Technological advance. A world in which volunteers
can rapidly produce open-source breakthroughs like
Wikipedia, in which mobile phone adoption can
quickly reach 6 billion subscribers, is also a world that
can team up in creative ways to renovate our global
economic system in line with ecological imperatives.

It was in this spirit of common responsibility and
international co-operation that the UN agreed to the
MDGs. Now it is time for the world community to
adopt a set of SDGs to help humanity to coalesce
around urgently needed problem solving and
breakthroughs in sustainable development.

First and foremost, we need SDGs to help us to
navigate the Anthropocene efficiently and equitably.
We need a shared understanding of the ‘right to
development’ of today’s poor countries, combined
with an obligation of every country to pursue
environmental sustainability through the promotion
of effective technologies and social arrangements. The
rich world should agree to standards of behaviour to
help ensure that there is the ‘ecological room’ for the
poorer countries to develop and eventually close the
technology gap with the richer countries.

Second, we must address the world’s still-burgeoning
population so that this can be stabilised by mid-
century. The most effective way to accomplish this
is to encourage households in today’s poor countries
to choose lower fertility rates, combined with more
investments per child in nutrition, healthcare and
education. We should help poor households to have
fewer children with the confidence that each child
will survive and thrive. By promoting a rapid and
voluntary reduction in fertility in the remaining high
birth rate regions, we would help to boost the well-
being of the poor, break the poverty trap of the low income countries and ease the growing environmental pressures on the planet.

Third, we must renew our commitment to shared global goals, as the MDG period ends in 2015. The MDGs have been a powerful motivator of action to fight poverty, hunger and disease. While the MDGs have not achieved all that was hoped – as we might have expected in our noisy and distracted world – they have achieved an enormous amount. They have helped the world’s governments and civil society to focus on what is truly important: growing more food, supporting rural households, getting children into school, empowering women and girls, and fighting diseases. SDGs for the period after 2015 can do the same, first by committing the world to continue the fight against poverty, and by combining the anti-poverty efforts with bold actions to save the earth from human-caused environmental destruction.

Fourth, we need to find new ways to finance ‘global public goods’ such as the fight against pandemic diseases and climate change. Foreign aid is unpredictable, unstable and unpopular. I believe two new methods of predictable financing could be enormously helpful. First, a financial transactions tax (FTT), and second, a modest levy on carbon dioxide emissions.

An FTT would add a small fraction of one cent to each dollar of financial transactions, generating tens of billions of dollars in revenues while helping to bring the world’s ‘casino finance’ under some control. A small carbon tax (of say US$3-5 dollars per tonne of carbon dioxide emissions in middle-income and high-income countries, graduated by income level) would not only help to shift investments towards low-carbon energy, but would also collect up to US$100 billion per year worldwide, funds that could be invested in climate change mitigation and adaptation in the poorest countries. Such global funding is especially critical for countries highly vulnerable to global climate change, such as the drylands of the Horn of Africa and Sahel; and small-island states – such as Maldives, Seychelles and Kiribati – that are jeopardised by the rise of sea levels.

**A harrowing and profound task**

Managing a very crowded planet to achieve sustainable development will be a harrowing and profound task that will fall on all parts of society and all parts of the world. Humanity is facing complex risks unknown in our history. We will need to look farther into the future, and farther across national borders, than ever before. We will need to understand that in the midst of our diversity, our common interests on the planet are truly paramount.

Nobody said this better than President John F Kennedy in 1963, when he urged Americans to adopt a positive and proactive attitude towards global peace. His beautiful words resonate as powerfully for us today:

“… if we cannot end now our differences, at least we can help make the world safe for diversity. For in the final analysis, our most basic common link is that we all inhabit this small planet. We all breathe the same air. We all cherish our children’s futures. And we are all mortal.”