SURENDR SHAHRESTHA
DIRECTOR, UN FOCUS POINT FOR SUSTAINABLE
DEVELOPMENT GOALS

ROAD TO SUSTAINABILITY

A

s the 2015 target date for
achieving Millennium Devel-
opment Goals (MDGs) ap-
proaches, world leaders have
begun to consider a new
development agenda for the coming decades.
At the United Nations Rio+20 conference in
June, government delegates agreed that a
framework based on sustainable develop-
ment goals (SDGs) must be the new over-
arching goal for the 21st century. Surendra
Shrestha, Director of the UN Focal Point
for Sustainable Development Goals at the
Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Devel-
opment, spoke with Tempo English report-
er Rachel Rivera at a recent gathering of
development experts at the Asia Europe
Foundation in Singapore, about the new
priorities for development beyond 2015.

When you speak of sustainable develop-
ment goals, what do you envision?
This new set of goals is based on grow-
ing concerns about a growing world pop-
ulation. Natural resources are finite and
growing depleted at a very fast rate. So we
need a new development paradigm to car-
y us forward into the next century – one
in which poverty eradication continues to
be a priority but which also addresses con-
sumption.

When the Millennium Development
Goals (MDGs) were established, the devel-
opment framework behind that used an
approach that focused on the world’s poor-
est nations, which were given money and
told what to do by the developed countries.
Today, there’s a growing awareness of how
we are all interconnected, and that devel-
opment cannot just focus on the poorest of
the poor.

We have to look at development in a
more holistic way. Sustainable develop-
ment is based on the idea that we should
aim not just to eradicate poverty, but we
must take into account the planet’s limit-
ated resources in order to ensure the well-be-
ing of the planet as a whole. We cannot just
consume, consume, consume and expect
there will be more to come. We don’t have
other planets to support us. We have only
this one. So we need to address both con-
sumption and poverty together.

How will environmental sustainability be
addressed in this new sustainable develop-
ment framework?
The MDGs were focused on poverty al-
leviation, and environmental sustainabil-
ity was one of the eight goals. But there was
very little attention, if any, given to that.
The SDG agenda aims to prioritize environ-
mental protection and slow down the de-
ploitation of environment services from land
and water resources. The idea is to build a
new development roadmap based on the
concept that equal attention must be giv-
en to economic growth, social equality and
environmental sustainability. So it’s a tall
order.

There is plenty of talk in Indonesia about
developing a green economy. Can you ex-
plain what exactly is meant by green
growth in the context of development?
There are two forces that make our
world go round. One is Mother Nature, and
the other is Markets. They have been on di-
vergent paths and have not been talking to
each other. So we need to bring these two
forces together.

If we want to achieve sustainable devel-
opment, we must begin to look at econom-
ics and markets in a different way. Current-
ly, the production chain and markets give
no value to natural resources or the envi-
ronment. Natural resources on the planet
are finite, but markets don’t regard these
resources as finite. They are seen as infi-
nite and they’re free.

Today we have a middle-class global
population of about one billion. In 10 years
time, we’ll have three billion, who will be
concentrated in Southeast Asia, India, Chi-
na, Brazil and South Africa. What kind of
lifestyle will this growing middle class as-
pire to? If they aspire to achieve the cur-
rent American lifestyle, clearly there are
not enough resources. And resource wars
will start. So if we know that is coming, we
need to change now.

But a middle class that is buying more
products and spending more is generally
regarded as a positive sign of econom-
ic growth.

Well, that’s the change we need to bring
about – the idea that if we want economic
growth we have to buy more stuff, wheth-
er we need it or not. And then the econo-
my goes up. Because as you buy more stuff
and throw away more stuff, people pro-
duce more stuff. And that’s employment,
and that’s seen as positive. But as you go
further down the supply chain, that will re-
quire more natural resources, more ener-
gy. So as we move forward, clearly the phi-
losophy that ‘greed is good’ cannot work in
the 21st century.

So you’re talking about measuring econ-
omic growth and measuring wealth in a dif-
ferent way. Is this new way of thinking what
you hope will be incorporated in the new de-
velopment agenda after the MDG timeframe
expires in 2015?

That is the hope, yes – to have a new de-
velopment paradigm based on new indi-
cators that measure growth and progress
in terms of sustainability. We need to find
a way to measure the whole human well-
being, as opposed to just measuring in-
dustrial production or GDP (gross domes-
tic product). If we’re talking about sustainable development, we must look at the economy in a different light.

What kinds of challenges do you think that will pose for nations to come together to agree on new development indicators for measuring human well-being?

The challenges are many. First of all there are 193 countries that need to sit and agree. And the divides among all these countries are wide and deep.

That’s why we need the media to inform the public. At the end of the day, it is only through public pressure that we will bring about change that political leaders will support.

Can you comment on the special challenges Indonesia faces around sustainable development, for instance on how it relates to REDD+?

The President of Indonesia was very bold in declaring a commitment to cut carbon emissions by 26 percent, and by 41 percent with international assistance. That’s a huge commitment to translate into action. But if you look at countries like Bhutan and several others that are doing sustainable forest management, clearly there are ways to do sustainable forestry. One year you can take half a hectare here, but plant another hectare somewhere else. So mining and oil palm plantations can continue their operations, but they must be given guidelines to do it in a sustainable way, without depleting all the forests and peatlands. There must be policy and action and partnership between the private sector and the government whereby it’s a win-win for all.

The other key factor that has not yet been explored fully in Indonesia and other parts of the region is the carbon market. We must engage both the government and the private sector, with the carbon market as the meeting point. Each time Indonesia can save a ton of carbon, there is value to that.

And we must engage the individual farmer and the local community. It’s the only way a program like REDD+ can succeed. They have to participate in it. Yes, we have to change the local, provincial and national institutional setups. But we have to give priority to the individual farmer to participate. Try it in one village and make it a success. Then get the other provincial governors to replicate it.

So what has to happen to bring the international community together to agree on a set of sustainable goals for all nations to aim for?

While there are many challenges at the global level there is more cohesion at the local, national and regional levels. But we can come down and focus at the local community and country level, which can then be taken as examples for an international agenda to be set at the global level. Indonesia has a special role to play in this effort because the President of Indonesia has been appointed by the UN Secretary General to co-chair, along with the President of Liberia and the UK Prime Minister, the UN’s High Level Panel that is coordinating regional and global consultations for a new development framework that will prioritize SDGs.

You were previously the Asia Pacific Director for the UN Environment Program. What special challenges do you think the region faces in terms of sustainable development?

Asia is going to be the leader in the 21st century - in economic terms, in production terms, in population terms. Asia is now the manufacturing hub for the whole world. You go to markets in US or Europe and where are the products made? They’re made in China and Laos, Cambodia, Bangladesh. Asia is on its way to being #1.

The challenge is in the leadership. So we need to focus on informing the public to move our political leadership – leadership that is bold and leadership that is going to look ahead, not just for the length of an election term but for another two or three generations, which is another way of saying ‘sustainable development.’

How can sustainable development play a role in creating an attractive business climate for investors? How do you engage the private sector to participate in this effort?

We cannot go to the private sector and just tell them to cut emissions and expect them to agree. We need to promote a dialogue and engage companies in discussions about how a product can be more efficiently produced. And we need more efficient production systems that will reduce resource and energy use. The private sector will participate if they know they are going to make a profit.

Indonesia has the resources for economic growth. But it needs an educated, skilled labor force to develop the technology and industry to make that happen. So government must invest more in education and in R&D (research and development) for green technologies. We must invest for the future generations.

DECEMBER 23, 2012 | TEMPO | 77