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Sustainable development and the making and unmaking of a developing world

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Abstract. The idea of a group of developing countries with shared characteristics, challenges, and needs, distinct from those of developed countries, has been central to sustainable development discourse and policy for decades. However, in the years since the original Rio conference it has become increasingly apparent that it is difficult to sustain this notion of a single developing world. Within the context of unfolding diversity, a central claim of the present paper is that lumping all countries together under the expansive category of 'developing' risks obfuscating the complex challenges, solutions, and fragmented geopolitics of sustainable development. Instead, it is necessary to use the terms developing country, countries, or world far more selectively, mindful that they may conceal just about as much as they reveal. In the paper I proceed to consider a number of alternative national, subnational, and transnational spatial categorisations which might be deployed to better describe and/or analyse the evolving nature, effective governance, and politics of sustainable development challenges across space.

Keywords: sustainable development, developing world, developing country, geopolitics

Introduction

This paper is motivated by dissatisfaction with the generalised and uncritical use of the term *developing country*, and associated catch-all taxonomic category of *developing world*, within debates surrounding sustainable development (SD). Examples of their usage are not hard to find. They are therefore often deployed in a descriptive sense to refer to a group of states which—because of their economic, social, and political status—confront certain types of environment and development challenges (Ahmia, 2011; UN, 2012a). Developing countries/world is also used as an analytical spatial category when thinking about the context for particular approaches and policies for realising more sustainable forms of development (Blackman, 2008; Wallace, 1996). Ideas of a developing world have also been deployed geopolitically as a self-defined or externally-defined group which acts collectively in global politics, reflecting a shared identity, set of perceived interests, and collective demands (Adams, 2009; Ahmia, 2011; Najam, 2005). Typically, the descriptive category of developing countries (or related terms) is conveyed as constituting one side of a binary world, distinguished from an assumed developed world with very different characteristics (Vanolo, 2010).

In the wake of Rio+20, I reflect on the continued usage of developing countries/world within the context of SD discourse, scholarship, and practice, and whether it still makes sense to lump a diverse set of countries together. Moreover, I look forwards, asking whether other categories, demarcations, or spatial metaphors might serve us any better in thinking about the challenges, solutions, and politics of sustainability. Three key arguments are advanced. First, it is becoming increasingly difficult to unproblematically refer to a single group of developing countries, such that the term should be used far more selectively. A second argument is that alternative, more disaggregated schemes which classify countries into smaller subgroupings offer a number of possible advantages over the more expansive category of developing countries. A third argument is that, in analysing the challenges of and policies to address (un)sustainable development, it may be productive to start thinking outside the epistemological box of state territoriality to focus on particular categories of subnational spaces, communities, and transnational networks.

These arguments unfold as follows. First, I document how SD has been instrumental in generating unity amongst countries, and for propelling the imaginary of a single developing space. Second, I explore how ongoing changes are rendering the generalised usage of developing countries/world increasingly problematic, though not entirely redundant. Third, I proceed to explore alternative, more disaggregated classifications of country groupings, as well as categorisations which move beyond the dominant territorially scaled framing of developed or developing countries.

While the paper is centrally concerned with SD, the main emphasis is on environmental sustainability and governing key environmental challenges. These challenges include issues which have dominated SD politics over recent decades, such as energy and climate change, sustainable agriculture, forests, land degradation, sustainable transport, and pollution management.

Defining developing countries

The choice of developing countries/world as the focus of the present paper is partly semantic. Other terms exist which are, to a greater or lesser extent, deployed interchangeably (Duffy, 2013). These include underdeveloped countries, less-developed countries, poor countries, industrialising countries, the Global South, and the Third World. However, many of these terms have fallen out of favour, whereas developing country, countries, or world are widely used in SD discourse and practice (*The Economist* 2010).

As acknowledged in the literature, geographic categories such as the developing world not only attempt to describe material realities but also serve as important geographic imaginaries (Power, 2003; Sidaway, 2011). Core to any conception of the developing world, therefore, is an imagined binary in the cognitive map of the world and an axis of inequality which separates developing from developed countries according to their level of development (Vanolo, 2010).

An important issue, of course, is how this line is drawn. One common way, popularised by development agencies, is through the use of income measures (Todaro and Smith, 2011; World Bank, 2012). According to the World Bank, developing countries are defined as low-income and middle-income countries, equating to states with gross national income (GNI) per capita of US $12 475 or less (calculated using the Atlas method[(1)]). Another way of demarcating the developing world has been with reference to countries' common origins and/or development processes (Potter et al, 2004; Smith, 2009). Hence, the developing world can be seen as comprising a group of countries, once subject to colonial rule, which are developing from a position of underdevelopment, economic dependence, political instability, and weak institutions.

A third way in which the contours of the developing world have been drawn is around a real or imagined political community of states, bound together by a sense of marginalisation, disempowerment, and injustice in the global economic and political order (Najam, 2005; Williams, 2005). Within this context the developing world conveys the idea of a set of countries with a shared identity, common interests, and a sense of solidarity. This conception found expression geopolitically during the 1950s and 1960s in organisations such as the

[(1)] The Atlas method uses a convertion factor to mitigate the effect of exchange rate fluctuations. Other methods, most notably purchasing power parity, are also used to compare the national incomes of different countries.

nonaligned movement and G-77,[2] which have provided a platform for growing demands from a political community of developing states. Indeed, the idea of a distinctive group of developing countries has its origins in political nonalignment by a Third World, separate from a capitalist First World and a socialist Second World (Power, 2003).

SD and the construction of difference

A somewhat paradoxical starting point for this paper is the observation that the international politics of SD have been instrumental in constructing, reproducing, and popularising the idea of a single developing world. As should be clear from the above, this idea predates the Stockholm Conference in 1972, often seen as a watershed in the evolution of SD. However, international politics have helped to strengthen it, drawing on many of the principles, ideas, and imaginaries forged during the 1950s and 1960s.

The Stockholm Conference raised fears among many countries which saw themselves as part of a developing world, that prioritising developed country environmental imperatives (such as industrial pollution) might endanger their freedom to pursue economic growth (Adams, 2009; Linnér and Selin, 2013). Developing countries went to particular lengths to emphasise the particular nature of their major environmental challenges which, in the words of the influential 1971 Founex Report, lay in "the poverty and very lack of development in their societies" (de Almeida, 1972). In doing so, they helped to craft the idea of a developing world with distinctive conditions, problems, and needs, distinct in character from those of wealthy, industrialised countries. To be sure, many of these differences had a material reality, but debates in the run-up and during Stockholm did a great deal to imagineer a sharp dividing line between a developing and developed world. The conference also fuelled a sense of collective struggle, identity, and unity amongst countries which opposed the efforts of developed countries to monopolise proceedings over the evolving global SD agenda (Najam, 2005).

These divisions were reinscribed into subsequent applied contributions to the debate on SD. The Brandt Report of 1980, which examined the challenges of international development, clearly articulated the idea of a chasm between a North (ie, developed) and a South (ie, developing countries). Likewise, the highly influential Brundtland Report adopted the imagined binary between developed and developing countries (WCED, 1987). The report, while couched in terms of 'common challenges', nevertheless pointed to particular characteristics of developing countries which made achieving SD especially difficult. It also identified policy measures, such as enhanced flows of finance, which were enframed in a developed–developing world mould.

The dualistic distinction between developed and developing countries was also progressively written into international environmental law. Most famously, the 1987 Montreal Protocol on Substances that Deplete the Ozone Layer established differential commitments, with developing countries granted a ten-year extension to comply with its requirements (Benedick, 1998). Led by China and India, a largely self-defined group of developing countries was also successful in persuading the developed countries to create a Multilateral Fund, intended to help qualifying countries cover the incremental costs of implementing the Protocol. The special status of developing countries was also explicitly recognised in the 1989 Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes (Rajamani, 2012).

[2] Founded in 1964, the Group of 77 (or G-77) is, in its own words, the

"largest intergovernmental organization of developing countries in the United Nations, which provides the means for the countries of the South to articulate and promote their collective economic interests and enhance their joint negotiating capacity on all major international economic issues within the United Nations system, and promote South–South cooperation for development" (G-77, no date, unpaginated).

The Rio conference in 1992 further cemented the idea of a single developing world occupied by states with shared environment and development problems. It reignited fears which surfaced at Stockholm twenty years earlier about how a developed-country-centric environmental policy agenda might threaten countries' efforts to industrialise (Adams, 2009; Najam, 2005). Against this backdrop, the conference provided an opportunity for developing countries to unite behind, advance, and institutionalise a set of principles which would recognise their particular conditions, needs, and assumed rights, and "to use whatever collective leverage they had on the environment to drive a hard bargain to help level what they otherwise considered a vastly unequal global playing field" (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012, page 468). Amongst others, these included the right to develop (principle 2 of the Rio Declaration), the special priority given to the needs of developing countries (principle 6), "common but differentiated responsibilities" (principle 7), and the "polluter pays principle" (principle 16). Following on from the Montreal Protocol, the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change ascribes different rights and responsibilities to developed (annex I) and developing (annex II) countries.

Many of the distinctions between developed and developing countries continued to be a feature of SD politics during the 1990s and 2000s. At the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, for example, tensions resurfaced between the two sets of countries over the perceived failure of wealthy states to provide additional financial resources. Moreover, as discussed below, evidence of a binary geopolitics of SD carried on into Rio+20.

What is striking is how much academic work has played a role in geographically (re)producing the dichotomy between an assumed group of developed and developing countries. A great deal of scholarship concerned with SD has therefore overtly situated itself within the context of one or other of these groups (Adams, 2009; Halsnæs and Verhagen, 2007; Lopez and Toman, 2006). Implicit or explicit has been the notion that conditions found in developing countries render insights from developed ones uncertain or inappropriate (eg, Blackman, 2008; Dasgupta, 2000; Perkins and Neumayer, 2009). Again, there may be good grounds for such a division, but it has nevertheless played into the imaginary of two worlds.

The developing world as a diversifying space

The idea of a developing world confronting broadly similar environment and development challenges, and acting collectively in global politics, has not been without foundation. It has also proved analytically useful, providing a widely recognised, malleable spatial category for empirical, conceptual, and theoretical investigation, as well as comparative study. Yet, an important question is whether the idea of a developing world occupied by countries with similar features is valid, either descriptively or analytically.

A key argument of this paper is that the notion that the term developing countries/world can be unproblematically used is increasingly untenable. The term struggles to contain, capture, or portray the growing diversity of countries typically classified as developing. Of course, diversity has long been a feature of the developing world (variously defined), and the idea of a set of countries with common origins, trajectories, conditions, capacities, and interests has always tended to downplay important differences (Miller, 1995; Randall, 2004; Smith, 2009; Williams, 2005). What is apparent, however, is that this diversity has widened and deepened significantly. Five sources of diversity are discussed here: (a) uneven economic development; (b) diversifying SD challenges; (c) uneven governance capacities; (d) geopolitical diversity; and (e) internal heterogeneity.

Figure 1. Variations in gross national income per capita (US $, Atlas method), 2011 (source: data from World Bank, 2012).

(a) Uneven economic development

A much commented upon source of diversity is uneven economic development. The past three decades have witnessed significant divergence in rates of growth across large parts of what is traditionally defined as the developing world. An important consequence of these disparities is that large variations now exist in per capita income. Hence, while many parts of Sub-Saharan Africa and South Asia remain poor in per capita terms, large parts of East Asia and Latin America have now reached upper-middle-income status (figure 1). A number of countries (eg, Singapore and South Korea with a GNI per capita of US $42 930 and US $20 870, respectively, in 2011) have even officially joined the ranks of the developed or advanced countries, as evidenced by their membership of the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Hence, the popular imaginary of a single developing world, mired in widespread poverty, no longer stands up to scrutiny.

(b) Diversifying SD challenges

Accompanying (uneven) economic development have been changes in the range, extent, and significance of SD challenges confronting countries. Addressing basic human development needs—such as adequate nutrition, reducing child mortality, energy poverty, and the provision of schooling—remains central to many states which are conventionally defined as developing. Yet, notwithstanding recent progress made by countries at lower levels of human development (UNDP, 2013), it is nevertheless apparent that significant differences exist with the developing world in the degree to which individual countries have tackled many of the human development issues traditionally associated with poverty (UN, 2012b).

Moreover, economic growth in certain countries has brought forth new major sustainability challenges, although the nature of these has varied according to the particular (and diverse) trajectories of different countries. Amongst others, these challenges are related to industrialisation, as well as environmental problems arising from agroindustrial development (Koh and Wilcove, 2008; Timmons Roberts and Thanos, 2003). The challenges are also increasingly related to rising personal affluence, and therefore reminiscent of environmental issues facing developed economies, such as consumption, pollution, and waste (Chong et al, 2012; Hobson, 2013; UNDP, 2011).

Certainly, this does not mean that such problems affect only countries which have experienced (or are experiencing) rapid rates of economic growth, or that more conventional human development issues are no longer a major challenge for many such countries. Nor should this downplay diversity in environment and development issues affecting countries which remain comparatively poor (Childs, 2008; Le Billon, 2012; Mason et al, 2011; Todaro and Smith, 2011). Yet the range of sustainability challenges has become more diverse across the range of countries within the conventionally defined developing world; and, more to the point, their relative significance varies considerably.

(c) Evolving governance capacities

A common assumption is that conditions found across the developing world preclude the effective state, civil, or market governance of environmental sustainability. These include low demand for environmental protection, a weak civil society, limited bureaucratic capacity, high levels of corruption, and incomplete or poorly enforced property rights (Blackman, 2008; Dasgupta, 2000; Lopez and Toman, 2006). To be sure, some, or even all, of these characteristics can be found in many countries belonging to the conventionally defined developing world (Mol, 2009; Puppim de Oliveira, 2008).

Yet such broad-brush characterisations hide considerable heterogeneity. Recent work has therefore highlighted significant cross-national differences in many of the domestic characteristics known to influence countries' willingness and ability to effectively address aspects of environmental sustainability (Eakin and Lemos, 2006; Fuhr and Lederer, 2009; Lopez and Toman, 2006). As is the case for developed countries, cross-national variations are directly related not always to levels of economic development, but also to underlying institutional, societal, and political characteristics. To take one example: variations in press freedoms, legal mechanisms for the protection of public interests, and government controls over NGOs have led civil society in India to greater exercise influence over a range of environmental policy issues than in China (Perkins, 2007; Tang and Zhan, 2008).

At the same time, however, many countries which have experienced significant economic development over recent decades have also witnessed improvements in capacities for environmental governance (Mol, 2011). This is perhaps unsurprising in that quite a few of the characteristics which have supported economic growth, such as goal-directed bureaucracies and export pressures, are also known to have supported more effective environmental governance (Jenkins, 2001; Perkins and Neumayer, 2011). More generally, rising incomes (and educational levels) have increased domestic demand for environmental and social protections, including from amongst the ranks of the expanding middle-classes in many rapidly growing economies (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012; UNDP, 2013; Véron, 2006). Wealthier countries, too, have been better able to shoulder the costs of environmental and/or social protections.

In fact, contrary to the image of all governments in the developing world grudgingly addressing aspects of environmental degradation in response to external pressures, a growing number have embraced environmental protection as integral to their economic and developmental interests (Rock et al, 2009). Hence many of the very same countries which have experienced rapid growth over recent years—including Brazil, China, and South Korea—have placed particular emphasis on energy-based economic development (Carley et al, 2011; Mol, 2011). These countries are also emerging as important hubs for the manufacture and innovation of environmentally sound technologies (de la Tour et al, 2011; Furtado et al, 2011).

(d) Geopolitical diversity

Another source of diversity amongst developing countries lies in the geopolitics of sustainable development. Divisions, disagreements, and different positions are not new (Miller, 1995; Williams, 2005). Yet the solidarity that was a feature of global environmental politics during the decades from the 1970s onwards is showing growing signs of fracturing—a trend which has been particularly apparent in the area of climate change.

Two factors have played a role in these dynamics. One is shifts in geopolitical power. Recent economic growth has meant that, together with their considerable economic and military power, large developing economies such as China, India, and Brazil have acquired considerable geopolitical influence (Kasa et al, 2008). The growing weight of these 'emerging powers' means that they can increasingly hold their own alongside developed economies in multilateral negotiations without necessarily having to rely on solidarity with other countries. This, in turn, has undermined the functionalist logic of the G-77[(3)] grouping forged around the idea of exclusion, marginalisation, and quest for influence through collective representation within the UN system.

A second closely related factor is that perceived responsibilities are beginning to change. Rapid industrialisation, population growth, and rising affluence have meant that major developed economies are becoming the source of increasing environmental degradation (Hashimoto et al, 2012). This has come to fore within debates about SD in the context of climate change, with energy-related carbon dioxide (CO_2) emissions tripling between 1990 and 2009 in two of the largest emerging powers, China and India (IEA, 2011). At the same time, there is growing recognition that these economies increasingly possess the resources to address these challenges, and may be less in need of international assistance than poorer developing countries (Bailey and Compston, 2012).

These dynamics have been instrumental in dissolving some of the unity which has historically bound different developing countries together. A much commented-on development in the run-up to the Copenhagen Conference of the Parities (COP) in 2009, for example, was the decision of the BASIC countries (comprising Brazil, South Africa, India, and China) to commit to mitigation targets. While only voluntary, these pledges nevertheless were highly significant, signalling a shift in the traditional developed–developing axis of assumed responsibility for addressing global environmental change. They also served to undermine the historically united front of the G-77 on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012; Vihma et al, 2011). The Copenhagen and subsequent Durban COP also witnessed the emerging powers cooperating geopolitically and assuming a significantly enhanced role in agenda setting, negotiations, and exercising decisional power (Bailey, 2010).

Other developing countries, too, have increasingly sought to represent their interests as part of smaller subgroupings. A prominent case is the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS) which, because of its particular vulnerabilities, has proved a staunch advocate of binding measures by all competent parties to reduce their emissions. Indeed, the AOSIS has increasingly found itself at odds with various BASIC and OPEC states over their intransigence to commit to such action (Vihma et al, 2011). Another significant group are the forty-eight least developed countries (LDCs) which, at the Durban COP, cooperated with the AOSIS and the European Union to form a coalition pressing for firm mitigation commitments.

Similar dynamics amongst the members of a supposed developing world were also evident at Rio+20. Again, the BASIC countries (and especially Brazil, China, and India) seized the initiative to seek to shape the conference agenda and proceedings, particularly in the absence

(3) Whilst not a regular member, China has frequently allied itself to the G-77 in international SD politics.

of any leaders from the G7 (Gray, 2012). Rio+20 was also marked by action on the part of both the LDCs and the AOSIS to draw attention to their unique position, vulnerabilities, and needs. Moreover, these were explicitly recognised in the final conference outcome document, albeit with few additional commitments for assistance (UN, 2012a).

(e) Internal heterogeneity

Growing diversity within countries also increasingly challenges the idea of a single developing world. A striking feature of many developing countries is the existence of highly uneven patterns of development within the boundaries of the state—manifest in variegated 'internal' worlds of development and underdevelopment (Deleuze and Guattari, 1988). There is nothing new about these sociospatial disparities. Within the context of economic globalisation, however, 'fragmented', 'splintered', and 'enclave' forms of uneven development have increased (Sidaway, 2011). Apposite in the context of SD, for example, are wealthy communities within a wider context of 'internal Third Worlds' of widespread poverty, underdevelopment, and marginalisation (Gandy, 2006; UNDP, 2013).

The significance of these variations lies in the way that it is increasingly difficult to think singularly about SD challenges, politics, or solutions. Multiple and highly variegated spaces, communities, and trajectories of sustainability or unsustainability exist within countries as well as across them. Many of the challenges associated with wealthier residents in cities such as Cape Town, Jakarta, or Bogota (eg, rising volumes of residential waste, vehicular pollution, obesity), for example, may be different from the sustainability imperatives of poor slum dwellers (eg, access to clean water and sanitation). Underscoring the overlapping spaces of (un)sustainability, SD issues for certain wealthy groups may have much in common with their counterparts in developed economies. To take one example: levels of per capita CO_2 emissions from China's wealthy cities are similar to those in developed countries (Chong et al, 2012). Moreover, the politics of sustainability of different social groups may be different, broadly (but crudely) encapsulated in terms such as environmentalism of the rich and poor (Guha and Martínez Alier, 1997; Véron, 2006).

Changing times, changing conceptions?

The above suggests that there are a number of compelling reasons for abandoning the term 'developing countries' when discussing SD. First, it is clear that using the term 'developing' to describe a group of countries with a common set of contextual conditions and sustainability challenges is increasingly problematic. The group of countries are becoming more, and not less, diverse. A second reason for abandoning the term developing countries is that its continued usage risks reproducing an unhelpful, sometimes pejorative stereotype of large parts of the globe. Within the context of SD, developing often conjures up images of a world mired in poverty, ravaged by environmental degradation, whose institutions are not up to the job of addressing the challenges, and of a world dependent on assistance from developed economies. Indeed, there is something of a dystopian imagineering of conditions in many developing countries within popular portrayals (Fahn, 2003), concealing a great deal of diversity and genuine progress towards SD (Zhang, 2010).

A third reason for doing away with developing countries is that it risks supporting inappropriate policy solutions. Hence, the idea that all countries share common characteristics tends to lead us towards to 'one-size-fits-all' approach for large parts of the globe. The reality is that the most appropriate set of policy instruments, approaches, or programmes are likely to depend on specific country characteristics (Fuhr and Lederer, 2009). There is simply too much diversity to generalise (Childs, 2008; Espach, 2006).

Finally, retaining the idea of a single developing world may be counterproductive from the point of view of global politics. In particular, it helps to reduce the politics of sustainability into an enduring developed–developing world dichotomy, one in which one group of countries are pitted against another. Set up in this way, the global politics of sustainability has tended to reinforce divisions, stifle progress, and lead to symbolic political action. The propensity of developing countries to 'stick together' has meant that emerging powers and other influential countries (eg, OPEC members) which are part of the G-77 have dictated the agenda (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). This has allowed certain countries to avoid taking action by hiding behind a united front cloaked in the collective imagineering of a developing world, struggling under the weight of poverty and lacking in financial, bureaucratic, and technological resources. The idea of a developing world has also led certain weaker countries to set aside their immediate self-interest in order to align themselves with the agenda set by more powerful states within the G-77 (Barnett, 2008; Vihma et al, 2011). For their part, developed country governments have often resented the intransigence of certain developing countries, and especially the emerging powers, which they have seen as preventing more ambitious global actions from being realised (Falkner et al, 2010).

This said, it may be premature to retire the developing world to the garbage can of spatial terminology altogether. Most importantly, perhaps, the term retains its salience in a geopolitical sense. Thus, despite evidence of growing fragmentation, the idea of a developing world remains relevant as a signifier of identity, shared interests, and normative principles and as the basis for collective action. Returning to Rio+20, it would be difficult to understand the conference without recourse to the more inclusive category of developing countries. As at Rio twenty years earlier, core 'developing country' concerns and demands emerged, centred on topics such as economic development, poverty alleviation, and technology transfer (Linnér and Selin, 2013; UN, 2012a). Moreover, notwithstanding the prominent role played by emerging powers such as China and Brazil in defining aspects of the Rio+20 agenda, many of the major fault lines continued to be structured along a conventional developed–developing world axis.

Another reason for not doing away with the idea of a developing world is that it remains useful in bracketing a set of diverse countries which, despite their multiple trajectories, continue to bear the historical legacy of underdevelopment. Few countries which are conventionally defined as developing do not therefore contain internal spatial and/or social worlds of poverty, deprivation, and marginalisation. The term therefore remains useful in capturing countries which continue to confront SD issues internally which, although different in relative degree, share similarities in kind.

Exploring alternative typologies

If we accept that the terms developing country, countries, or world remain problematic in certain contexts, how can the spaces of development be usefully reconceptualised and remapped? In this section I explore two different sets of approaches which provide answers to this question: one set which maintains a focus on the state as the unit of analysis and another which goes beyond territorially scaled typologies.

More disaggregated territorial groupings

One way of advancing on the expansive category of developing countries is to further disaggregate the geomap, classifying (developing) countries into smaller subgroupings. A number of such subgroupings have been deployed in academic and applied debates surrounding SD. We categorise these into two broad types according to the main criteria used to differentiate groups of countries (table 1).

A first broad set of classificatory schemes are predicated on the use of various statistical measures to categorise countries into more discrete groupings. Examples include the World Bank's income classification and the LDC grouping. A second set are based on more

Table 1. Alternative country groupings (source: author).

Type of division	Criteria	Example
Statistical measures	income (per capita)	low income [gross national income (GNI) per capita of US $1025], lower middle-income (US $1026–4035) and upper middle income (US $4036–12 475) (World Bank, 2012)
	human development	very high, high, medium, and low levels of the human development index, comprising a "composite index measuring average achievement in three basic dimensions of human development—a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living" (UNDP, 2011, page 134)
	low levels of development	least-developed countries categorised according to: (a) GNI per capita, (b) human assets index, and (c) an economic vulnerability index
Generic characteristics	macroeconomic performance	newly industrialising economy: broadly defined as countries which, as a result of industrialisation and integration into global markets, have experienced rapid rates of economic growth (vis-à-vis other 'developing' countries), have sustained increases in per capita income, and have become significant economies in their own right; also, emerging economy and emerging markets: countries with significant investment and growth potential, currently undergoing transition, but facing ongoing volatility (eg, see Mody, 2004)
	economic/political power; allied geopolitical groupings	BRIC (comprising Brazil, Russia, India, China), BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa), and BASIC (Brazil, South Africa, India, and China)
	physical and/or economic disadvantage/ vulnerability	Small Island Developing States: broadly defined in terms of "smallness and remoteness, constraints in transport and communications, distance from market centers, low resource endowment/narrow resource base, dependence on few commodities as sources of foreign exchange earnings, limited internal markets, and vulnerability to natural and environmental disasters" (Hein, 2004, page 5).
	location; allied macroregional groupings	World Bank (2012) regional subdivision: Sub-Saharan Africa, East Asia and Pacific, Europe and Central Asia, Latin America and the Caribbean, Middle East and North Africa, and South Asia ASEAN (Association of Southeast Asian Nations), Mercosur, or SADC (Southern African Development Community)

generic features of countries which describe general economic, geopolitical, and geographic characteristics. Within debates on SD, therefore, particular attention has been paid to categories such as emerging economies, BRICS, and Small Island Developing States (SIDS).

This twofold typology should be seen as indicative rather than definitive; and, moreover, the categories are not mutually exclusive. For example, emerging economies could be defined statistically, as well as being delineated more generally according to assessments of economic dynamism and future market potential. Additionally, within each of these classificatory frames, countries can also be categorised according to economic and/or political organisations which represent their interests. As well as geographic descriptors, the LDCs, BASIC, and SIDS (in the form of AOSIS) are recognised political entities, while a number of economic and political organisations exist at the macroregional level.

While the list of subgroupings in table 1 is by no means exhaustive, it does highlight the range of alternative classificatory schemes available. As should be apparent, they should be seen as a possible disaggregated refinement to the expansive descriptor of the developing world, as opposed to presenting themselves as radical alternatives for demarcating and reimagining the geomap. Indeed, as shown in figure 2, the distribution of countries which are classified as LDCs and emerging markets and economies together make up a significant proportion of countries belonging to the more conventionally defined developing world. The question posed here is whether alternative territorial classificatory schemes provide a better way of thinking about, describing, and analysing countries outside of the core of rich, industrialised economies. To answer this question, we examine the ability of classificatory schemes to: (a) capture characteristic SD challenges facing groups of countries; (b) provide the basis for more effective policy approaches, interventions, and solutions; and (c) capture the unfolding geopolitics of SD.

Disaggregated statistical classifications, based on measures of income or human development, are likely to better capture characteristic sets of environment and development challenges facing countries than the more expansive category of the developing world. As an example, the key energy and environment challenges confronting upper-middle-income countries (ie, addressing rapidly rising electricity demand from residential and industrial consumers in ways which do not significantly add to local and global environmental damage) may differ from the key imperatives of many low-income countries (ie, addressing basic access to modern, efficient energy sources, together with associated pollution problems from cooking with biomass and coal) (UNDP, 2009). Likewise, categorisations based on generic characteristics (eg, macroregion) are more likely to bundle together countries facing broadly similar challenges than the more expansive category of the developing world, often underpinned by common sets of unsustainability drivers (UNDP, 2011).

More disaggregated categorisations—including those based on both statistical measures and generic characteristics—can also help analytically in thinking about policy interventions to address sustainability challenges in ways which are more attentive to characteristic sets of problems, needs, and governance capacities (Jenkins, 2001). To take one example: in discussing policy frameworks, models, and targets for sustainable transport, Jeon et al (2006)

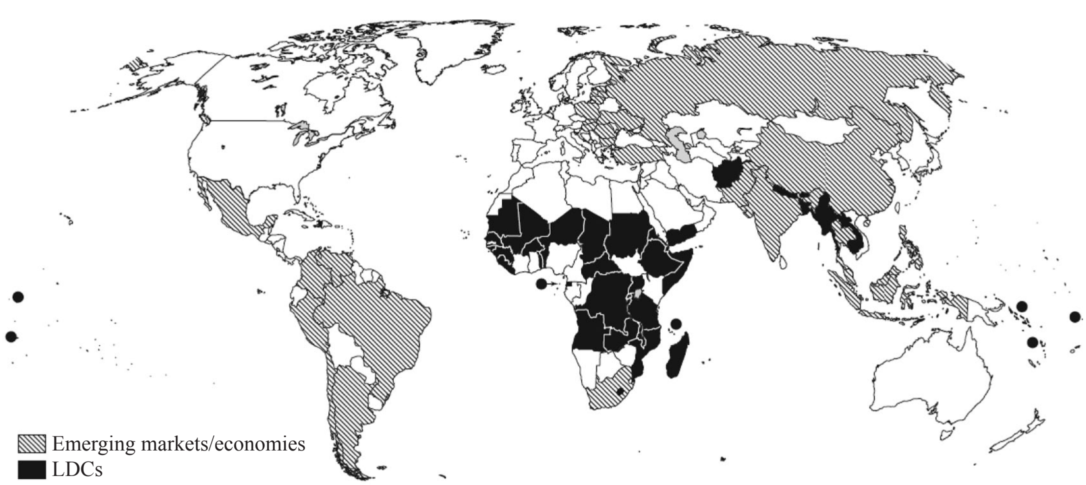

Figure 2. The geomap of two groupings: the least-developed countries (LDCs) and emerging economies (source: data on LDCs from World Bank, 2012; emerging economies as defined by IMF, 2012).

argue that it may be more productive to focus on groupings of countries at similar levels of development or located in similar regions, in that they are more likely to share common challenges, priorities, and constraints. In fact, such subgroupings could provide a context in which to implement the Sustainable Development Goals championed at Rio+20, in that they lend themselves to more appropriate comparisons between different countries.

Moving away from an exclusive focus on the G-77 to acknowledge the role played by groupings such as AOSIS, BRICS, and LDCs is also instructive geopolitically. Over the past decade, in particular, these geopolitical entities have become increasingly important for understanding the structure, processes, and outcomes of global environmental politics (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012; Vihma et al, 2011).

However, as generalised descriptors, one should not expect too much from more discrete categories. Within particular groupings, significant political, institutional, and social differences mean that, though countries may share similarities (eg, in income per capita), the challenges of putting particular policies into effect may nevertheless vary (Espach, 2006; Rock, 2002). Indeed, some alternative schemes bundle together countries which differ significantly and straddle conventional schemes. Many lists of emerging markets therefore include countries which are conventionally defined as developing, but also include countries (typically, ex-socialist European countries) which are now classified as developed in per capita income terms (see figure 2).

Further, it is not always the case that the above categorisations necessarily offer significantly more in the way of understanding the geopolitics of sustainability or refining our understanding of shared identities amongst countries. Even amongst BASIC and BRICS, considerable variations exist in the position of individual countries, and they do not always operate as a coherent geopolitical bloc in SD politics (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). Moreover, as Papa and Gleason (2012, page 921) observe, "Rhetorically, the BRICS remain strongly anchored in the G-77", and it is far from clear that they can be conceptualised as an entirely separate political entity.

Likewise, alternative classificatory schemes may underplay large internal diversity within countries, granting the impression of homogeneity across states. India may well be classified as an emerging market economy and one of the BRICS and BASIC countries. Yet some 55% of its people remain poor, and widespread variations exist within the country across various measures of deprivation (UNDP, 2011). Alternative classificatory schemes are also not without their dangers. A focus on emerging markets or BRICS, for instance, runs the risk that countries outside these groupings (eg, in Sub-Saharan Africa) are marginalised from view (Bailey and Compston, 2012; Blackman, 2008; Rock, 2002). That is, these new classifications provide a way to reimagine the developing world, albeit in a selective way which privileges a focus on spaces of neoliberal market 'potential', 'success' or 'size' (eg, see O'Neill, 2011). Hence, while alternative classificatory schemes certainly have advantages, they are not without shortcomings of their own.

Moving beyond national territories

Common to the above 'alternative' classificatory schemes is the idea that the territorial state is the most appropriate unit of analysis. At one level this methodologically nationalist approach to classification is perfectly understandable, especially when we compare the external actions of countries. The territorial state is, after all, the key authoritative agent in international relations. Moreover, it is sovereign, with potentially extensive powers governing SD-related issues over state territory. Yet, particularly when identifying challenges of and solutions to SD, it may nevertheless be worth entertaining thinking outside the epistemological box of state territoriality.

There are a number of possible ways to proceed in this direction. One is to think in terms of sustainability or unsustainability within the context of particular types of subnational spaces. At the broadest level this includes rural or urban spaces, but can also include (possibly in combination) dimensions such as the physical environment (eg, desertified or degraded land), wealth (eg, income per capita), human development or deprivation, economic dependence (eg, agro-export-based region), and capacity (eg, institutional, regulatory, or managerial). An example might be middle-class urban enclaves or institutionally weak rural spaces.

Another way forwards is to focus on particular social groups. In practice, the conceptual waters between spaces and communities can sometimes be more a question of semantics, in that attempts to describe particular groups often requires recourse to the particular spaces that they inhabit. A case in point is indigenous forest dwellers. Yet given that certain groups (eg, income) may be distributed across different environments, retaining a distinction between communities and spaces may nevertheless prove useful, such as when thinking about differentiated responsibilities for greenhouse gas emissions (UNDP, 2011).

A third, arguably more radical, approach is to organise classifications around networks which shape sustainable or unsustainable development (Evans, 2012). A distinctive feature of network-based typologies is that they expand the focus beyond territorially bounded spaces or communities. Instead, the units of analysis are networks which (in many cases) transcend the borders of different countries, including conventionally defined developed and developing ones. A network approach opens up the possibility of analysing SD within the context of the network as a whole or, alternatively, in particular places where the network is grounded in space. Applied in the present context, a range of commodity chains, production networks, and value chains—which have particular consequences for SD—can be used as the basis of classificatory schemes (Crang et al, 2013; Gereffi et al, 2001; McCarthy et al, 2012). An example of the former would be a timber commodity network which, in an analytical form, sheds light on the flows of timber within and between countries; the governance of these flows by actors in particular spaces (eg, major retail buyers in developed countries); how price and other requirements are transmitted through supply chains (eg, including certification requirements); and how these are remapped in particular spaces as they interact with place-based characteristics (eg, capabilities of local communities) (Klooster, 2005).

As above, these three approaches (or schemes) need not be interpreted as a straight substitute for the use of territorially scaled descriptors. They can therefore be applied as complements, in that subnational spaces and communities (in particular) offer more refined ways to think about sustainability or unsustainability within the context of particular country groupings, be it developing countries or various other subgroupings. Hence, it may be useful to discuss wealthy urban enclaves within the context of emerging economies, or institutionally weak rural spaces in LDCs.

There are nevertheless several potential advantages of moving beyond country-level descriptors alone. The above schemes provide a way to categorise the particular context, conditions, and challenges facing characteristic spaces, communities, and networks which may exist across a diverse range of countries. Indeed, space-based and/or community-based categorisations avoid the generality of territorially scaled descriptors, which potentially conceal a great deal of subnational diversity. An upper-middle-income country such as Mexico, for example, may contain wealthy urban enclaves, but also poor rural spaces, whose sustainability challenges may have a great deal in common with those confronted in similar areas in low-income countries. To the extent that nonterritorial schemes help to categorise distinctive contexts, they may provide more suitable units at which to assess key SD needs, as well as measure progress towards sustainability, than their territorially scaled counterparts.

A move away from territorial scales of analysis also potentially better lends itself to the development of place-sensitive policy responses to forms of unsustainable development. A focus on subnational scales and communities is therefore likely to be consistent with more locally appropriate solutions which take account of relevant needs, incentives, and capacities. As an example, recognition of the particular challenges of energy access facing isolated, low-density rural areas of developing Asia and Sub-Saharan Africa has led to growing policy interest in off-grid renewable energy (Bhattacharyya, 2013). In fact, approaching SD governance at scales other than the country level is consistent with 'small development' thinking, which is

> "inspired less by transformational visions of entire countries and more by the immediate plight of particular demographic groups (AIDS orphans, child soldiers, 'the poor') living in particular geographic places (disaster zones, refugee camps, urban slums)" (Woolcock, 2012, unpaginated).

A network typology, meanwhile, has the advantage of being issue based: it draws attention towards the underlying production, consumption, and power relationships which drive particular forms of (un)sustainable development, and particularly those which span national boundaries. Additionally, it opens up the scope for thinking about new governance possibilities which transcend the boundaries of the state, and therefore recognise the globalisation of environmental responsibilities. Network thinking, for example, has inspired growing interest in various forms of ethical and sustainable supply chain management initiatives to govern the distributed environmental and social impact of consumption activities rooted in richer economies.

The above typologies are not without their limitations. They trade simplicity for accuracy and, in populating the lexicon of SD with multiple, possibly confusing categorisations, risk concealing basic deep-seated structural inequalities across the globe. Putting nonterritorial policy approaches into effect is also not without its problems—as exemplified by concerns about the legitimacy, accountability, and impacts of nonstate forms of network governance (Duffy, 2013; Evans, 2012; Klooster, 2005). Additionally, whilst refining understanding of subnational sustainability politics, they have less relevance for the international politics of SD. Nevertheless, nonterritorial schemes are potentially transformative, redefining conceptions of the relevant scales for analysis, diagnosis, and practical action in ways which might usefully advance SD.

Opportunities and constraints

An important question is whether it is politically feasible to redraw the traditional boundaries of the developing world to embrace new classificatory schemes. Within the context of *alternative country groupings*, the fact that states are already pursuing new alliances suggests that there is an appetite for doing so. For less-developed countries, identifying themselves as part of smaller geopolitical groupings such as LDCs and AOSIS allows domestic governments to leverage their special status for capacity building—for example, by requesting financial assistance for the additional costs of complying with international environmental commitments. Meanwhile, positioning themselves as part of a special group of dynamic economies (ie, BRICS or BASIC) willing and capable of addressing environmental challenges provides an opportunity for larger, wealthier countries to project themselves as responsible, progressive, and powerful states (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012).

Alternative ways of grouping the world map of countries also potentially serve the interests of other states engaged in international SD politics. Institutionalising a clear divide within the self-identified developing world between a set of fast-growing, industrialising countries and a group of less-developed, disadvantaged economies is therefore increasingly favoured by governments of developed countries. A division of this sort could help to overcome the impasse created by the united front of the G-77 (and China) on many critical aspects of international SD negotiations. It would provide a spatial framework for differentiating burden sharing in international agreements and, furthermore, for developed-country governments to pursue more ambitious commitments with a subset of industrialising countries capable (and possibly more willing) of doing so (Falkner et al, 2010).

Yet there remains a powerful attachment to the imaginary and political articulation of a single developing world reflecting, in part, ongoing interests of national governments in the status quo. For smaller, poorer countries, aligning themselves with the larger group of the G-77 enhances their bargaining power, while larger, wealthier states gain from unity and being able to trade off their special status as part of a developing world (Barnett, 2008). At the same time, working under the umbrella of the G-77 does not preclude states from going it alone, or collaborating as part of smaller groupings.

A unitary conception of a developing world also remains deeply institutionalised in international SD law—enshrined in differential rights and obligations within key international agreements. To be sure, there is a growing willingness by the emerging powers (and especially China) to acknowledge the particular needs of the most vulnerable countries, as evidenced by their support for enhanced assistance for LDCs. However, judging by ongoing debates about the proposed US $30 billion Sustainable Development Fund at Rio+20 which pitched the G-77 (and China) against developed countries, moving wholesale away from the pre-existing binary approach to differential treatment in international environmental negotiations and policy is likely to prove difficult.

Yet such continuity should not simply be read as rent-seeking opportunism. One reason why governments of increasingly powerful, industrialising economies such as India have been reluctant to divorce their identity from a developing world is that they continue to house large numbers of poor, vulnerable people (Hurrell and Sengupta, 2012). Indeed, this reality partly underpins the ongoing recognition of a wider group of developing countries by international organisations such as the United Nations Environment Programme and the World Bank, which are aware that aggregate macroeconomic statistics may conceal disadvantaged spaces and communities at the subnational level in need of assistance (eg, to help poor farmers invest in more sustainable forms of agriculture). It also partly underpins the ongoing reproduction of the idea of a developing world by nongovernmental or civil society organisations as a term which draws attention to significant ongoing environmental, social and economic inequalities between large numbers of people living in poverty across the ‘South’ and a smaller number living in affluence in the ‘North’.

Unlike more disaggregated country groupings, deploying alternative *nonterritorial categories* has less to do with redrawing geopolitical boundaries and more about reconceptualising space in ways which potentially enhance understanding of the relevant challenges and solutions to (un)sustainable development. Amongst the chief proponents of reframing the scales of SD action have been international and bilateral donors through, for example, their work in promoting the decentralisation of natural resource management (Larson and Soto, 2008). Likewise, particularly through their involvement in various forms of transnational network governance, non-governmental organisations have also contributed to conceptions which move beyond the territorial framing of SD (Klooster, 2005). Momentum to redefine the scales of SD governance has also come from regional and/or municipal governments seeking greater powers from central government and, furthermore, attempting to liberate themselves from the confines of the nation-state to achieve greater external recognition, leverage resources, and cooperate with their counterparts in other jurisdictions (eg, through transnational municipal networks such as the C40 Cities). None of the above means that the territorial state will not remain the central actor in governing SD—in terms of both domestic and international policy—or that it will not resist efforts to recast the sources and scales of authority. Yet it is nevertheless apparent that there are growing demands, opportunities, and actors with vested interests in applying new spatial and social frames in understanding and acting on SD.

Conclusions

While the achievements of Rio+20 were a disappointment to some (Biermann, 2013; Pearce, 2012), the conference nevertheless provided an important opportunity to reflect on developments over the past two decades since the original summit. One such set of developments is growing diversity within and between what continues to be termed developing countries. Within the context of these changes, a central argument of the present paper is that far greater caution needs to be exercised in deploying the catch-all terms developing country, countries, and world in relation to SD discourse and practice.

An obvious retort to this line of argument is that descriptive labels such as 'developed' and 'developing' are convenient geographic categories, offering a way of making sense of complexity, and containerising spatial diversity within the bounds of certain commonalities. As such, it is naive to expect countries bracketed as developing to be identical, just as there is significant diversity in the challenges, capacities, and interests for SD amongst developed countries. Yet this misses an important point. Notions of a single developing world can hinder more than they help in understanding the nature, causes, and solutions to SD. Lumping a highly diverse set of countries together plays into negative imaginaries of a developing world where the problems of SD are simply related to poverty, in which countries lack the willingness and means to address sustainability, and are dependent victims of high consumption in rich countries. Unitary conceptions also potentially hamper efforts to address unsustainable development by devaluing the importance of place in shaping the appropriateness of particular interventions. What is more, by cementing an unhelpful dichotomy, geopolitical articulations of a single bloc of developing countries stifles progress in key areas of international SD politics (Falkner et al, 2010).

This is not to say that the developing world is no longer a meaningful category. It remains important in a geopolitical sense as a signifier of collective identity and, notwithstanding recent fractures, as a political bloc which continues to articulate a fairly unified position in international fora concerned with SD. More generally, it conveys something about a group of countries which, for the most part, continue to feature internal 'worlds' of poverty, underdevelopment, and marginalisation.

Accepting the limitations of the ongoing usage of developing countries/world in a range of contexts, however, the real question is how we might proceed to label, describe, and analyse the geomap. One is to use more disaggregated county-level descriptors which containerise distinctive parts of the more expansively defined developing world into subgroupings. It would therefore be more helpful to deploy more refined categories (eg, LDCs or emerging economies) when, for example, describing the key challenges of SD facing countries or thinking about the context for policy interventions. Another way to proceed is to transcend the territorial scale to approach SD within the context of particular categories of subnational spaces and communities. Along similar lines, understanding the nature, causes, and possible policies for addressing environmentally unsustainable development could be facilitated by a focus on characteristic types of transnational production and consumption networks which straddle territorial borders.

Going forward, changing orthodox conceptions of a developing world requires multiple actors—academics, journalists, policy makers, and so on—to think, talk, and act in more refined ways in relation to the spaces and communities of (un)sustainable development. It also involves moving beyond the dominant dichotomous framing of the international politics of SD, and for national governments to embrace more flexible approaches wherein responsibilities, capacities, and commitments are differentiated amongst subsets of developing countries. Additionally, it implies facilitating greater learning, cooperation, and problem solving on SD amongst subgroupings of developing countries with broadly similar characteristics, possibly involving a greater role for regional and/or other political entities. Recognising the diversity of developing areas in the pursuit of sustainability further requires policy approaches which advance on territorially scaled forms of governance to embrace, for example, interventions targeting characteristic subnational spaces.

The very politics of SD helped to create the idea of a single developing word. Yet it is increasingly apparent that sustaining this idea may not always be in the best interests of addressing the challenges of meeting SD. There is not one developing world, but many, and internal diversity may be just as important as external diversity. Acknowledging this diversity, and thinking of ways of responding to it, remains an important task over coming years.

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