The paper proposes a pragmatic proposal for monitoring sustainability within the affordable limits, through Sustainable Human Development Index.

It builds on a specific understanding of ‘sustainability’ as “ability to sustain the achieved level of human development without relying on debt of any kind” (inter- or intra-generational). It looks into two aspects of development: the achieved status (the level of well-being reflected in the HDI) and the process (the way the status has been achieved).

The status is the development aspect captured in the four dimensions of the HDI, the traditional three plus one dimension covering the environmental aspects of development, as the state of the natural environment has an intrinsic value similar to the other three dimensions of HDI.

However, numerous examples show that countries can improve their current development status in ways that often boil down to ‘borrowing from future generations, saddling them with debt (monetary, demographic or environmental, just to mention a few). We factor this in by adding the second – sustainability – aspect defined as ‘ability to sustain’ the status in each human development dimension. The index reflects the ‘ability to sustain’ through a loss function deflating the reported status for unsustainability.

Using the conceptual framework outlined above, we developed and tested an index of sustainable human development based on the existing HDI with an additional ‘environmental’ component and deflating the reported achievements in each dimension for unsustainability. The proposed index is a pragmatic response to necessity of measurement of sustainable development in a meaningful way.