

The SDGs – a paradigm shift towards more equality

The Sustainable Development Goals differ radically from the current Millennium Development Goals in many aspects. Our author demonstrates the challenges that departing from a donor-oriented development framework poses – particularly for the North, and also with a view to its own development.

The first goal of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) promised to reduce by half by 2015 the proportion of people living with under one US dollar a day, with 1990 as the base year. This focus on extreme poverty is the essence of the MDGs. When the discussion about a new development agenda started, Mark Lowcock, permanent secretary of the UK Department for International Development asked “What about the other half?” in an opinion piece titled “After the MDGs: What next?” (Bond, 2012). The obvious answer for most of the development cooperation community was that the post-2015 agenda should “finish the task” (an expression frequently used in the MDG context).

And this is precisely what the first target of the first SDG Goal states: “by 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day”. It is also reflected in Goal 2.2. on ending all forms of malnutrition, or 6.1 on ensuring affordable drinking water for all. Thirteen of the 169 targets commit governments to ending hunger, reducing infant and maternal mortality and providing access to primary school and safe water “for all”, and they can be seen as addressing “the other half”.

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■ New challenges for the North

If the SDGs stopped there, the mandate for the UN system and the development agencies would basically be to continue doing what they are doing now until the year 2030. This is more or less what many traditional development actors have been proposing. The major innovation they have suggested is that, considering the “aid fatigue” and the crisis in donor countries, “partnerships” should be established to engage big corporations in the task.

But the SDGs go way beyond the narrow MDG agenda, which basically only concerns the poorest of countries having to achieve a minimum standard largely met already by middle and upper income countries, with the traditional and new donors as supporters. Thus, the very second target of the first Goal promises “to reduce at least by half by 2030 the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to na-

tional definitions”. This target is also a challenge for some of the richest countries of the world. In the United States, poverty has been increasing in the last two decades and currently affects some 50 million people, by the official threshold of 23,850 US dollars a year for a family of four. UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon proposed in his 2013 report titled “A Life of Dignity



In the United States, some 50 million people are currently affected by poverty.

for All” to “eradicate poverty in all its forms” as the first and main goal of the new agenda. The Open Working Group (OWG) raises the bar by proposing to “end poverty in all its forms **everywhere**” (emphasis added).

In a similar logic, target 3.8 demands all countries to ensure universal health coverage, and target 8.8 requests to protect labour rights, including those of migrant workers. Goal 5 of the SDGs, on the empowerment of women and gender equality, explicitly uses the word “everywhere” again, and its provisions on equal pay, recognition of the value of unpaid work, more political representation and sexual and reproductive health and rights were supported by women’s organisations from all continents and will require efforts in all countries. Even in Scandinavian countries that rank first in all gender indexes, the wage disparity between men and women is still at around 15 per cent.

In summary, over seventy of the 169 targets request developed, middle-income and transition countries to do something in their own domestic spheres, and that does not count those targets that request them to support the efforts of the countries with less resources.

The paradigm shift is also visible in Goal 16, on governance issues, which is a clear example of how the OWG departed from the mainstream vision of a donor-oriented development framework. This chapter was initially titled “Build peace and effective governance based on the rule of law and sound institutions”, where “peace” meant no domestic armed conflict in fragile states (and not, for example, the abolition of nuclear weapons), “sound institutions” were equated with unregulated markets, and “rule of law” was universally understood as a conservative plea to keep protesters out of the streets. That goal evolved and downgraded “rule of law” to a target, balanced with reference to “equal access to justice for all” in the same line. “Justice” was elevated to the title and the soundness of institutions was spelled out as meaning that

they should be effective, accountable and inclusive. Finally, different targets suggest that same principles should apply to global institutions. Thus, instead of seeing “good governance” as a development issue (implying that countries are poor because they have corrupt governments) this goal becomes universal both in the sense of applying to all countries but also in its application to global governance.

■ The question of inequality

The goal on inequalities was a much debated one and is probably the most innovative and transformative one. Ban Ki-moon framed his proposed action to “tackle exclusion and inequalities” basically as promoting “equality of opportunity” and only recommended national-level solutions: “access to decent employment, legal identification, financial services, infrastructure and social protection, as well as societies where all people can contribute and participate in national and local governance”.

Instead, the OWG changed the title of Goal 10 to read “reduce inequality within and among countries”. It calls to “ensure equal opportunity” and also to “reduce inequalities of outcome” (target 10.3). The goal starts by providing the same indicators and actions suggested by the World Bank (looking at the income of the bottom 40 per cent and having it grow faster than national average) to address domestic inequalities. But the OWG goes further, and in order to address inequalities of outcome, it recommends “eliminating discriminatory laws, policies and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies and actions”, including “fiscal, wage, and social protection policies” (10.3 and 10.4).

While this would progressively achieve greater domestic equality, in order to address global inequalities, the OWG proposes to “improve regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions” and “enhanced representation and voice of developing countries in de-

cision-making in global international economic and financial institutions”, meaning the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the World Bank (targets 10.5 and 10.6).

The increase in voting power in the Bretton Woods institutions was already debated in the “Finance for Development” Conference of Monterrey in 2002, and the G20 agreed to it in 2010, but US Congress opposition has prevented it from being implemented.

Unregulated finances have been identified in many studies both as a factor of inequalities and an obstacle to development, but so far, developed countries have blocked any participation of the UN in this issue. On September 9 2014, a couple of weeks after the OWG concluding its work the governments demonstrated their commitment to this target by voting at the General Assembly to initiate a process for the creation of a debt workout mechanism with only eleven votes against (the United States, United Kingdom and Germany, followed by Ireland, Finland, Hungary and the Czech Republic). The vast majority of European Union Member States abstained from voting, as did some traditional allies of the US, such as New Zealand. This is not a fully comprehensive regulation of global financial markets, but definitely represents a first step in the right direction.

Finally, “regular and responsible migration and mobility of people” is promoted by target 10.7. The argument that migration would help reduce inequalities was already made by Adam Smith in 1776 in “The Wealth of Nations”:

“(…) the policy of Europe, by obstructing the free circulation of labour and stock, both from employment to employment, and from place to place, occasions, in some cases, a very inconvenient inequality (...)”

and workers suffered more than “stock” (capital) of that inequality because



Women in industrialised countries too still earn less pay than men for doing the same work. On “equal pay day” women – pictured here is US Senator Barbara Mikulski in Washington – draw attention to the gender wage gap.

be and in terms of reminding developed countries of their responsibilities in areas beyond the traditional development cooperation frameworks.

■ Firm commitments or empty promises?

During the preparations of the Rio+20 Summit, twenty-two UN independent human rights rapporteurs wrote a letter to the leaders saying that “real risk exists that commitments made in Rio will remain empty promises without effective monitoring and accountability” (OHCHR, 2012). This is a danger that extends to the Sustainable Development Goals. In the MDG framework, donor countries made recipients of ODA accountable as a condition to get their funding. This leverage is much less powerful now, since countries are less dependent on foreign aid to meet their budgets and the BRICS (Brasil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) offer alternative sources of funding with fewer policy conditionalities.

If the SDGs are to have effective monitoring and review (the word “accountability” has been dropped from the table), developed countries have to take the lead and commit themselves to be reviewed not just by their own citizens (which should be the primary accountability line for every government, rich or poor) but also to some UN mechanism. The High Level Political Forum of the United Nations is the adequate institutional space, and a Universal Periodic Review on sustainable development could be established, taking mechanisms of the Human Rights Council as a model.

This is the challenging extra step that is needed to make the admirable consensus already reached around the SDGs a working reality.

“corporation laws, however, give less obstruction to the free circulation of stock from one place to another, than to that of labour”.

This asymmetry between capital and labour in terms of mobility is as true today as in the 18th century, and the OWG deals with migration both as a potential remedy against inequalities as well as a positive factor in sustainable development – a courageous consensus in a world where this issue has become so politically sensitive in many countries.

■ Common but differentiated responsibilities

In the MDGs it was only Goal 8 that dealt with obligations for developed countries, and these were formulated only in terms of what they would do to support developing countries to reach the other goals. The SDGs are very different, following the Rio mandate for universality and taking into account the Rio principle of “common but differentiated responsibilities”. Developed countries are still required to support the efforts of developing countries, now with some indicators, for example on volume of Official Development Assistance (ODA) in relation to the Gross Domestic Product

(GDP), which were absent in MDG 8. But the SDGs also spell out goals and targets for all countries within their own borders. Meeting the targets of the social pillar commented above would require for many middle and high-income countries to reverse their current austerity policies, which in turn would provide a locomotive for the economic growth needed by Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and other low-income countries to reduce global inequalities.

At the same time, in order for this economic growth not to overburden the planet, target 8.4 requests to “improve progressively through 2030 global resource efficiency in consumption and production, and endeavour to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation (...) with developed countries taking the lead”. This leadership is also requested in Goal 12 on sustainable consumption and production patterns. As with climate (Goal 13), the debate around a definition and targets on sustainable consumption and production is happening elsewhere in the UN and the OWG was careful not to prejudge or interfere with those negotiations. The inclusion of Goals 12 and 13 is still relevant as a signal that these two issues are key in any global articulation of what sustainable development should

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