



SDGs: Can they promote sustainable development?



One of the key outcomes of the Rio+20 summit will be the definition and agreement towards sustainable development goals (SDGs), similar and supportive of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Indeed, this is already being considered by some as a possible successor framework to the MDGs. The UN Secretary-General for instance has backed this approach, saying in his opening to the General Assembly in 2011, “Let us develop a new generation of sustainable development goals to pick up where the MDGs leave off.” Such an approach, say proponents, could allow the MDGs’ focus on poverty reduction to be matched by complementary targets on the environment.

Discussions on the possibility of formulating goals for SDGs started even before the Rio+20. SDGs were first proposed by the government of Colombia during the UN General Assembly on September 2011. The government of Guatemala endorsed the proposal and convened an informal consultation on SDGs in November 2011. Currently, the governments of Peru and the United Arab Emirates also support Colombia’s SDG proposal. **Box 1** summarizes their updated proposal.

Some quarters are concerned that replacing MDGs with SDGs may imply that resources will be drawn away from meeting many of the unmet targets of the MDGs. There is also little clarity yet as to what the SDGs would cover and how they will be determined. The question of universal applicability, differentiated responsibility and policy space remains a wide open question. Then there is the question of implementation framework, accountability mechanisms, and the roles of various stakeholders in the determination of these goals and in their implementation.

Addressing these questions and concerns therefore have immense relevance to the post-2015 development agenda not

only for the United Nations System but for members states and all development actors including civil society.

Box 1. Updated proposal of the Government of Colombia

Overarching goal: Poverty eradication

Principles: Agenda 21 principles in general
 — Common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR)
 — Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)

Initial, preliminary and indicative list of SDGs:

Food security: production, access and nutrition

Potential issues areas

- Reduction in food waste and food losses.
 - Achieve zero net land degradation (Increase in productive land)
 - Increased global food production (Close yield gaps in agriculture and achieve MSY in fisheries)
 - Improved provision of daily nutritional requirements for all
- MDG Linkage: Halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger*

• **Integrated water management for sustainable growth**

Potential issue areas

- Increased access to water supply and sanitation
- Improved quality of water resources and ecosystems
- Increased water efficiency
- Reduced health risks from water-related diseases

MDG Linkage: Halve, by 2015, the proportion of the population without sustainable access to safe drinking water and basic sanitation

• **Energy for sustainable development**

Potential issue areas:

- Ensured access to basic energy services for all
- Improved energy efficiency
- Increase in the share of renewable energy in the global energy mix (differentiated approaches)

• **Sustainable and resilient cities**

Potential issue areas:

- Improvements in quality of life (water, energy, housing, transport, air quality)
- Improved resource productivity in cities and urban systems
- Improved integrated planning for cities

MDG Linkage: By 2020, achieve a significant improvement in the lives of at least 100 million slum-dwellers

What can we learn from the MDGs?

The temptation to adopt the MDG approach to the challenge of sustainable development is easy to appreciate. MDGs have proven useful in sparking public awareness on poverty and other key development concerns, and generating consensus around the goal of addressing them. Against the plethora of social, economic and environmental problems confronting the world's peoples, it is but

rational to identify priorities and focus efforts accordingly.

But even before rushing into a process of adopting new SDGs, the question governments and the UN should first answer is why, despite the popular awareness, high-level commitment, and celebrity enthusiasm generated around the MDGs, the world is still far behind in achieving them?

Box 1. (continued)

- **Healthy and productive oceans**

Potential issue areas:

- Global fish stocks sustainably and effectively managed
- Reductions in marine pollution from land based sources
- Marine and coastal ecosystems sustainably managed and protected

- **Enhanced capacity of natural systems to support human welfare**

Potential issue areas:

- Reduced rate of destruction of critical and provisioning ecosystems
- Reduced rate of species/ genus loss (note links to food security)
- Local sustainable livelihoods supported

- **Improved efficiency and sustainability in resource use (Sustainable consumption and production patterns)**

Potential issue areas:

- Sustainable public procurement
- Promotion of life cycle approaches (including sound chemical management)
- Promotion of cleaner production approaches

- **Enhanced Employment and Livelihood Security**

Potential issue areas:

- Social protection floors tailored to national needs and capacities promoted
- Supportive economic, social and environmental policies for employment generation
- Promotion of entrepreneurship and sustainable enterprise development
- Enabling environment for full participation of women and youth in labor markets

MDG Linkage: Halve the proportion of people living on less than \$1 a day

MDG Linkage: Achieve decent employment for women, men, and young people

The reason of course is that the MDGs are embedded within the broader context of the neoliberal restructuring of the global economy (trade and investment liberalization, privatization, deregulation), which has actually worsened many human development indicators in most regions. Unbridled market liberalization has weakened many governments' capacity to ensure the progressive realization of human rights, and has undermined even the most modest development goals that are the MDGs.

As Charles Gore, former LDC specialist at the UN Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) acknowledged: "The MDGs have...been embedded within a particular approach to national policy which assumes that global integration, through the Washington Consensus policy package, together with good governance and more social spending, will lead to substantial poverty reduction and improved human development. But these policies have not been able to generate sufficient productive employment opportunities and livelihoods in poor countries, and they have been unable to build up those countries' productive base and thus allow them to become less dependent on aid."¹

Indeed the strength of the MDG approach—their simplicity and broad appeal—also makes for their main weakness as they obfuscate the hard structural and dialectical processes at the core of poverty and underdevelopment. As Charles Gore puts it, the ascendancy of the MDG approach as the lynchpin of the current international development consensus involves the ditching of the notion of development as a comprehensive process that entails

evolution and structural transformation, in favor of development conceived as a collection of quantifiable performance standards.

In other words, the MDG approach reduces the process of development to meeting specific, absolute, and measurable aspects of poverty or underdevelopment—such as hunger, or infant mortality—without tackling the roots of poverty and underdevelopment that give rise to hunger and preventable deaths.

For instance, conditional cash transfers in some Latin American countries are hailed for helping reduce rates of inequality and improving enrolment rates among children, even without redistributive reforms. The distribution of mosquito bed nets has made some improvements in reducing child mortality in Africa, even as real improvements in the delivery of health services wait in the backburner.

These achievements are certainly noteworthy. But short of structural transformation and departing from conservative macroeconomic policy frameworks, it is hard to think how these quick wins might be sustained over the long term.

Indeed, the eruption of economic, climate, and food crises in recent years suggests that without comprehensively addressing the power imbalances and wrongheaded policy choices at the root of poverty and underdevelopment, quick successes with meeting particular MDGs or SDGs are bound to be eroded no sooner than they are won.

1. Charles Gore. 2009. "The Global Development Cycle, MDGs and the Future of Poverty Reduction." Background paper for the High Level Policy Forum - After 2015: Promoting Pro-poor Policy after the MDGs, 23 June, Brussels. European Association of Development Research and Training Institutes.

Box 2. A sample set of SDGs

(taken from a panel presentation on SDGs by Antonio Tujan Jr, IBON International Director, at the High Level Symposium of the Development Cooperation Forum on 14-15 May 2012, Brisbane, Australia)

The SDGs fulfill various key purposes – such as being beacons or signals for our aspirations and goals, and as indicators to measure our achievement. This will not be easy since SDGs to be effective must not simply be framework setting and aspirational, but in fact be transformational. Importantly it must also be operationable and monitorable. It will be a challenge to find indicators that are few but significant, that would not be short term but catch attention. Examples could be:

1. poverty reduction (MDGs continuation)
2. women participation (indicator for women's rights and empowerment)
3. equality (building on Gini coefficient)
4. decent work (jobs and livelihood for all)
5. social protection especially for youth and children
6. self-reliant economic development
7. per capita greenhouse gas emissions and/or per capita energy consumption
8. biodiversity protection
9. indicator for coherence for sustainable development partnerships
10. targets for development cooperation and climate financing both linked to GDP above a per-capita threshold

By linking #7 to a per capita target, differentiated responsibility is realized through a universal target since high emission countries would need to bring their emissions down to a target whereas developing countries have a leeway in increasing emissions as they seek to achieve climate-friendly sustainable technologies that would still increase emissions. The same argument would apply if a per capita energy use is applied.

Goal #6 addresses the issue of system change in a manner that would reduce it to a set of indicators for self-reliant economic development along the parameters of sustainability in all respects. Goal #9 builds on effective development cooperation along the lines of sustainable development while Goal #8 is also important if we recognize the responsibility for conservation of nature for future generations.

These targets, though they are rough estimations for purposes of illustration, would show that SDGs can be universal or common for all and yet fulfill the principle of CBDR. Goal #10 for example would still be valid for a developing country to contribute to South-South cooperation except for LDCs and fragile states that fall under a certain threshold.

Can SDGs serve as tools for sustainable development?

SDGs can only contribute to sustainable development if they address the structural causes of poverty and unsustainable development. This means calling for the end to the current unsustainable neoliberal model of production and consumption that allows unbridled environmental destruction and violation of human rights for the accumulation of the benefits of economic development in the hands of a few while the environmental and social costs are borne by the larger part of the population whose needs, even the most basic ones, are not met.

SDGs must therefore address the three pillars of sustainable development and not merely represent the marriage between poverty reduction and environmental concerns. Rather, SDGs must bring the MDGs to a higher level, a holistic approach to development that should rightfully address the people's right to development, to address the structural causes of poverty, economic backwardness and environmental degradation. The SDGs then become a beacon for policy coherence for sustainable development beyond 2015 as countries address poverty reduction, economic development and growth and sustainable development as one.

In this sense, the SDGs that respond to the whole range of system change and sustainable development will fulfill both the purpose of calling attention and ensuring focus but at the same time ensure a holistic approach to the systemic and structural problems of

underdevelopment and poverty as well as environmental degradation.

Developing a post-2015 framework and a set of SDGs must be guided by a **rights-based agenda**, the **principle of universality, equity and common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR)** and respective capacity, and **democratic ownership**.

The overarching objectives of SDGs must be on **poverty eradication** as well as shifting to **sustainable and equitable production and consumption**. These two objectives must be considered as integral and mutually reinforcing. SDGs need to be comprehensive enough to cover the three dimensions of sustainable development—environmental, social, and economic—to be effective.

A **rights-based agenda** would ensure that the political, social, and economic rights of people, including the right to food and proper nutrition, clean and safe drinking water, healthy environment, the rights of indigenous peoples, labor rights, the right to information, right to participation, right to self-determination, right to development, and other rights are integrated in the formulation of the SDGs.

The principle of **universality** means that SDGs should be applicable to all countries, not just developing countries as did the MDGs. However, the principle of universality must be coupled with the principles of equity and common but differentiated responsibility and respective capacity.

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This means that while overarching goals and objectives may be universal, the targets and indicators will differ between developed and developing countries, according to national priorities and in line with the principle of CBDR.

The large portion of populations living in abject poverty in the South makes poverty eradication the primary goal of sustainable development in such nations. Likewise, recognizing that raising the standard of living of their populations can have negative environmental consequences, developing countries must also consider ecological limits. Developed nations on the other hand have the responsibility of addressing poverty and unsustainable consumption and production not only inside their borders but also in other countries.

Developed countries must also assist developing countries in shifting to sustainable paths of development through appropriate and adequate financial and technology transfers and capacity building.

The principle of **democratic ownership** is also important in framing the SDGs. These principles require participation not only from national and subnational governments but also from civil society, especially those from marginalized groups, in all stages: from the identification of priority areas, to defining the set of goals, as well as in the implementation and evaluation of the goals. Countries especially developing countries must be able to achieve SDGs tailored to their specific circumstances and their defined priorities.

SDGs should have a **clear plan of implementation**, with a clear set of commitments, timelines and indicators for progress. SDGs should be measurable and time-bound not only for management purposes but also for transparency and accountability. However, a comprehensive and integrated set of SDGs calls for the formulation of a set of indicators that go beyond the measurement of GDP to encompass the well-being of people and the environment.

Finally, the SDGs should be **integrated into the post-2015 development framework** and elaborated through a **nationally-driven process** characterized by **democratic participation and transparency**. The exclusive process of the identification of the MDGs which limited the decision-making to government bodies with advice from experts should not be repeated. Instead, a multi-stakeholder process should be adopted. The participation of civil society, especially grassroots and the most marginalized sectors, should be present in all phases of decision-making; from the identification of priority areas, to identifying the set of goals and indicators, as well as in the implementation and evaluation of the SDGs.

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IBON International

is a division of IBON Foundation. It engages in capacity development for human rights and democracy around the world.

3/F IBON Center, 114
Timog Avenue, Quezon
City, Philippines

Tel +632 9277060 to 62

Fax +632 9276981

Email

international@ibon.org

Web

Endnotes

