The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition

https://www.e-ir.info/2016/01/18/the-sustainable-development-goals-an-assessment-of-ambition/

MITU SENGUPTA, JAN 18 2016

In an international system where states jealously guard their sovereignty and policy autonomy, is it possible for world leaders to agree upon common objectives and plans for action, especially when it comes to contested issues such as that of "global development"?

United Nations Resolution A/RES/70/1 of 25 September 2015 – also known as "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development" (hereon: Agenda 2030) – will lead you to believe that this remarkable feat is indeed possible. "Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda," the resolution states, with certainty.

Agenda 2030 is an intergovernmental agreement that is designed to guide global development efforts over the next fifteen years, between 2015 and 2030. Its centerpiece, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), replaces the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which held sway between 2000 and 2015. The new goals are designed to build on the MDGs and "complete what they did not achieve."

But while there were only eight MDGs, the SDGs are 17 in number, with 169 associated targets, and 304 proposed indicators. This dramatic jump in goals and targets from the MDGs to SDGs has provoked criticism, even ridicule. "Play sports! Be in harmony with nature! End all preventable deaths! Only the UN could have come up with a document so useless," said William Easterly, a leading authority on development aid.

The governments that have signed on, however, are clearly pleased with themselves. "On behalf of the peoples we serve, we have adopted a historic decision on a comprehensive, far-reaching and people-centered set of universal and transformative goals and targets," their resolution states. Is the UN's confidence in the merits of its new agenda defensible? Do the SDGs indeed represent a "supremely ambitious and transformational vision"?

In this essay, I provide an assessment of the SDGs by posing and answering five questions relating to their scope, depth, and ambition. I start, however, with a brief note on the process through which the SDGs were created and the conceptual shift, from 'human development' to 'sustainable development,' that they represent.

The Journey to Agenda 2030 – From 'human development' to 'sustainable development'

The origins of the MDGs lie in a series of UN summits and conferences held during the 1990s, on topics such as nutrition, gender quality, and childhood health. Drawing on targets set at these conferences, the Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) articulated a set of 'international development goals' in 1996, which, in turn, formed the basis of the MDGs. The MDGs were never openly debated. Following the adoption of the UN Millennium Declaration, a group of high level experts was convened to formulate the MDGs, and the goals were presented as an annex to a report from the Secretary General to the UN General Assembly (UNGA). With the acceptance of this report, it was argued that the UNGA had assented to the MDGs (see, in this connection, Wisor 2012; Hulme and Scott 2010).

The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition

Written by Mitu Sengupta

This was an unconventional beginning. The new agenda was challenged almost immediately by international NGOs, with the complaint that the MDGs had been devised in a top-down manner by international civil servants based in New York rather than through a democratic process of consultation with civil society. While this was a reasonable grievance, the narrow process adopted by the authors of the MDGs was quite sage given the political climate of the time. In the 1990s, as Fukuda-Parr and Hulme point out, international development specialists were bitterly divided over the merits of structural adjustment and the Washington Consensus, with the World Bank and IMF pitted against NGOs, "with the UN caught in the middle" (2011: 24). A less stealthy approach might have led to stiff, even debilitating resistance from the international financial institutions and powerful developed country governments. Even so, the MDGs' undemocratic beginnings were always a target of criticism, and when it came to replacing the goals, the UN was careful to adopt a more open and inclusive process.

A vast amount of time and effort have gone into the creation of Agenda 2030.

In July 2012, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed a 27-member high-level panel, co-chaired by British Prime Minister David Cameron, to advise on the global development framework beyond 2015. The high-level panel released its final report in May 2013, with the claim that it had consulted a massive swathe of people, including "over 5000 civil society organizations to global alliances – working in about 120 countries across every major region of the world." The results of an extensive online global survey (My World 2015) were also fed into the deliberations of the high-level panel.

The high-level panel suggested twelve "illustrative goals and targets" as possible replacements for the MDGs, and recommended putting "sustainable development at the core" of the post-2015 agenda. This signalled a decisive shift in the official discourse on the MDG-replacements from the idea of 'human development,' which had inspired the MDGs, to that of 'sustainable development' (the most influential conceptualization of which is articulated in the Brundtland Commission's Report of 1987 as: "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs").

The distinction between the two concepts is noteworthy. While poverty-reduction is central to both human development and sustainable development, and while both view economic growth as a means rather than an end of development – thereby providing an alternative to mainstream, economistic perspectives that tend to treat economic growth synonymously with development – sustainable development places emphasis on meeting the needs of future generations by preserving the earth's natural systems. More generally, it calls into question the anthropocentric bias of all development paradigms, including that of human development.

Following the June 2012 summit of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) – popularly known as Rio+20 – the MDG-replacement process was conclusively merged with the UN's sustainable development agenda. The key outcome of Rio+20 was an agreement by member states to develop a set of aspirational sustainable development goals similar to the MDGs, and in January 2013, a 30-member Open Working Group (OWG) of the UNGA was tasked with preparing the requisite proposal. Rio+20 did not spell out the sustainable development goals, and nor, at the time of the event, were they being viewed as MDG successors. At the end of 2013, however, the UN announced that the SDGs, under preparation by the OWG, would be used to replace the MDGs. There would be only one set of goals, and the post-2015 agenda would be a sustainable development agenda.

The OWG completed its mandate in July 2014, after thirteen rounds of thematic consultations with national governments, civil society, and the private sector, by publishing a draft text with 17 goals and 169 targets, which was to serve as the basis for intergovernmental negotiations leading up to the 2015 summit of the UNGA. It was expected that some of the goals or targets proposed by the OWG would be dropped or dramatically modified during intergovernmental negotiations, such as the controversial inequality reduction goal (on which more below). Remarkably, all goals and targets survived the process, and were adopted as part of the Agenda 2030 in September 2015.

Let us turn now to the five questions through which I provide an assessment of the SDGs.

The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition

Written by Mitu Sengupta

1. Do the SDGs capture the complexity of sustainable development?

Seventeen goals are difficult to remember and mobilize around, much less fit onto the surface of a promotional mug or T-shirt. Being fewer in number was a distinct advantage of the eight MDGs and one of the reasons they were a "communications success."

It is the longer list, however, that better represents the complexity of sustainable global development. For example, the SDGs go beyond targeting poverty and symptoms of poverty, which was the focus of the MDGs, to governance concerns that were overlooked by the MDGs, such as improving access to justice, reducing corruption and bribery, increasing participatory and representative decision-making, and strengthening the participation of developing countries in the institutions of global governance. The inclusion of a dedicated goal on urban sustainability (SDG-11) is also laudable, given the considerable impact of the development of cities on poverty reduction and climate change, and the significant contribution that urban governments are likely to make in achieving the SDGs.

Another step forward is that the SDGs address key challenges, such as combatting climate change and achieving gender equality, not only through standalone goals, but in a crosscutting manner through the framework, thereby capturing the interconnectedness of sustainable development concerns. For example, in addition to SDG-8, "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" – which is already much more powerful than the parallel MDG-3 – gender equality targets are woven into other goals, such as SDG-4.8, which seeks to eliminate gender disparities in education (for a good review of the limitations of the MDGs, see Fehling, Nelson, and Venkatapuram 2013).

Yet in spite of these clear advances, there is cause for concern.

For example, while there is a welcome shift in the proposed agenda's flagship poverty goal from the language of reduction to that of eradication, and from the focus on poverty and hunger to that of "poverty in all its forms," no measure of poverty, other than the money-metric one of $1.25 per day (2005 purchasing power) is mentioned (on this, see Pogge and Sengupta 2015). This income-based measure fails to capture many of the hardships that constitute poverty in the real world, such as child labor, chronic undernourishment, illiteracy, exposure to violence, and lack of access to safe drinking water, shelter, sanitation, and essential medicines. This contradicts the language of ending poverty "in all its forms everywhere" in SDG-1's title. These ambitious words are also undermined by the means of implementation (MOIs) associated with this goal because they make no reference to structural reforms that would contribute to tackling the root causes of poverty, such as cancelling the external debt of Heavily Indebted Poor Countries.

Another area of concern is the tension between SDG-8, "promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth," and SDG-13, on taking "urgent action" to combat climate change. How are we to achieve sustained and inclusive economic growth while keeping in mind planetary boundaries? Agenda 2030 does not answer this crucial question, although, to be fair, the question, in itself, reflects the difficulty of trying to integrate the two frameworks of human development and sustainable development. Amartya Sen, whose capability approach provides philosophical justification for the human development model, wrote a paper with Sudhir Anand in 1994 that took on the task of combining the two concepts. The authors argued for the integration of human development with "the safeguarding of their fruits for the future," but also stressed that "this safeguarding of future prospects has to be done without giving up the efforts towards rapid human development and the speedy elimination of widespread deprivation of basic human capabilities which characterize the unequal and unjust world in which we live." Therein lies the challenge, if not contradiction, that is mirrored in the new goals. It leaves one wondering whether the idea of 'sustainable development' can really be clearly operationalized, and if it was a good idea to base the world's new development paradigm on such an indistinct concept.

2. Do the SDGs keep to the promise of being guided by human rights?

Agenda 2030's commitment to human rights is affirmed in its preamble and reinforced by several proclamations that the SDGs are "grounded in" the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, international human rights treaties, and "other instruments such as the Declaration on the Right to Development."

The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition

Written by Mitu Sengupta

At first glance, this appears to be true. The MDGs intersected with only a limited section of the international human rights agenda. While they coincided with various provisions of the International Covenant on Economic, Social, and Cultural Rights (ICESCR) – such as the indicators on access to clean water and primary education completion rates – they contained no references to civil and political rights, other than the indicator on the proportion of seats held by women in national parliaments. In contrast, the 17 goals and 169 targets of the SDGs overlap with a much wider range of economic, social, and cultural rights, covering the ICESCR's content not only in the areas of hunger, education, and access to clean water (like the MDGs), but also in relation to decent work, social protection, mental health, and much more. The SDGs also coincide with some provisions of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights (ICCPR), such as equal access to justice for all, the provision of legal identity for all, and public access to information.

Nonetheless, there are some glaring omissions.

Essential resources, such as food and water, are not characterized as human rights. Moreover, despite being much stronger than the MDG on gender equality, SDG-5 ("achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls") does not overtly recognize the human rights of women and girls. Yet another oversight is that, while children are identified as a vulnerable group to whom we owe special responsibilities, there is no reference to children's rights. Recognizing the human rights of children would have brought the new agenda into alignment with the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and entitled children to protection from a host of violations, such as being tried and punished as adults in courts of law. Also in this vein is the failure (in SDG-1.4, for instance) to recognize community land rights, including the rights of indigenous peoples to land, even though a large amount of land in developing countries is held by communities based on a shared culture or heritage rather than by individuals.

Perhaps the most striking omission, however, is the absence of references to some of the most important provisions of the ICCPR, such as the freedoms of thought, expression, and association. Not only is fulfilling these fundamental civil and political rights a moral imperative, their achievement enables the realization of a host of other rights. Upholding these rights is also essential to effective monitoring and accountability. Explicit reference to these rights in the new agenda should have been non-negotiable.

3. **Do the SDGs make a strong enough commitment to equality and non-discrimination?**

It is a clear positive that the principles of equality and non-discrimination receive explicit recognition in the SDGs. The stand-alone goal to reduce inequality, SDG-10, is an important addition to the post-2015 agenda and vital to its success. It is reassuring that it was not cut from the framework's final draft, nor submerged under some other goal. Furthermore, in keeping with the principle of "leave no one behind," which was widely endorsed in global consultations on the post-2015 agenda, the SDGs contain a commitment to considering targets achieved only if they are met for all segments of a population, especially those who are subject to discrimination on the grounds prohibited in international human rights law. This is articulated in SDG-17.8's pledge to disaggregate relevant data "by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national context."

Nonetheless, there are reasons to be skeptical of the new agenda's stated commitment to reducing inequality and ending discrimination.

First, the concern to avoid inequality is not integrated into other goals in a cross-cutting manner as it is done for the objectives of combating climate change and achieving gender equality. There is no explicit reference to inequality within and among countries outside of SDG-10.

Second, SDG-10 does not sufficiently recognize the need to design economic rules— either national or global— that would keep inequality in check. For example, there is no reference in the MOI for this goal to inheritance and progressive income taxes.

Finally, the list of grounds for potential discrimination recognised by the SDGs is not complete. Given the otherwise

The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition
Written by Mitu Sengupta

progressive tenor of SDG-5 and its associated targets – and the attempt to recognize gender equality as a multidimensional concept – it is a glaring omission that there is no language whatsoever on ending discrimination, violence, and denials of sexual and reproductive rights on the basis of a person's sexual orientation, gender identity, or gender expression.

Ending such gender-based discrimination should be recognized as a core human rights goal that is crucial to achieving sustainable development. Because of their real or perceived sexual orientation, gender identity or gender expression, many people are not only bullied, raped, and murdered, they are marginalized and denied access to education, employment, healthcare, housing, social assistance, and community resources. Sadly, ending discrimination on the basis of sexual orientation and gender identity remains a politically sensitive issue even today. If we are serious about attaining sustainable development for all human beings and leaving no-one behind, it is one on which we must not compromise.

4. Do the SDGs uphold the principle of universality?

The demand for universally applicable goals was a consistent feature of the MDG-replacement debates. None of the MDGs, with the exception of MDG-8, were of sure relevance to developed countries, especially when viewed at their target and indicator levels. Despite their emphasis on 'developing a global partnership for development,' furthermore, the MDGs did not set out any clear responsibilities for the world's wealthier states. This imparted the impression that the MDGs were a slate of instructions for developing countries alone.

In contrast, many, if not most, SDGs are worded to be applicable to all countries, rich and poor alike. Some goals, such as SDG-3.4, which seeks to reduce mortality from non-communicable diseases and promote mental health, are of ringing relevance to developed countries. Moreover, unlike the MDGs, which embraced proportional goals to 'halve' the proportion of people living on less than $1.25 a day or "halve" the proportion of people who suffer from hunger, the SDGs are designed to reach a statistical "zero" on poverty, hunger, preventable child deaths, abuse of children, and several other goals.

The shift in language from "reducing" to "eradicating" and "ending all forms everywhere" is a move forward not only because it signals global recognition that poverty, hunger, torture, discrimination, and other violations are morally unacceptable, but because getting to zero requires an honest focus on empowering the poorest and hardest to reach, even in the most affluent countries of the world. While goals such as "end poverty in all its forms everywhere (SDG 1)," "end all forms of discrimination against all women (SDG 5.1)," and "reduce all forms of violence and related deaths everywhere (SDG 16.1)" are meaningful to the poorest countries on the planet, they are also relevant to its wealthiest states. So are the goals and targets committed to attaining universal provision or access in areas such as healthcare, education, and financial services.

To this extent, the SDGs are in keeping with Agenda 2030's promise to be "universal" and take an important step towards enhancing global ownership of the new agenda.

This clear positive is undermined, however, by important goals that are not framed in universal terms, but in terms of what is "nationally appropriate." For example, rather than demand *universal* social protection floors for SDG-1, to "End poverty in all its forms everywhere," proposed target 1.3 calls for "nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors."

It is perhaps understandable that a universal or zero target approach for all minimum core economic and social rights obligations has been carefully avoided in the formulation of the new goals. During the OWG's intergovernmental consultation sessions, developing countries, led by the Group of 77 (G77) and China, referenced the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities and argued that while the SDGs should be made relevant to all countries, the roles and responsibilities in the implementation of the goals should be differentiated in relation to the different national realities, capacities, and levels of development of developing countries and also to national policies and priorities (on this, see Muchhala 2015).

The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition
Written by Mitu Sengupta

This demand, which led to the inclusion of nationally determinable targets and language on respecting national policy space (such as in SDG-17.15), reflects a legitimate concern that bold, zero goals will be used to shame and blame developing countries that simply lack the capacity to achieve them. The solution, however, was not to dilute the SDGs by aiming for whatever is feasible with national resources. Instead, the SDGs should have specified the responsibilities of wealthy countries and enterprises in relation to these goals, identifying what they must do to reduce impediments, and to increase assistance, so that ambitious targets could be met even in the poorest countries. Doing so, in fact, would have been in line with Agenda 2030's stated commitment to realizing the Right to Development and the internationalization of responsibility that this entails.

This brings me to a more general analysis of the new global partnership goal, SDG-17, which was intended to be a more robust version of the paltry MDG-8, but ended up suffering from its key defect. The world's most powerful agents – affluent states, international organizations, multinational enterprises – are once again shielded from any concrete responsibilities for achieving the SDGs. Given their wealth and influence, they ought to be taking the lead in providing the needed resources – for example, for meeting the enormous challenge of improving the data collection capacities of developing countries – and in implementing systemic institutional reforms that will address the root causes of poverty. These needed reforms include changing the rules that encourage illicit financial outflows from developing countries or force the poorest countries to pay interest on debts accumulated by previous unaccountable leaders (for more on this argument, see Pogge and Sengupta 2015: 585-586).

If the world's most influential agents had been held sufficiently accountable for what they owe towards making sustainable development work, the concepts of partnership and universalism would have been a lot more meaningful.

5. Are the SDGs sufficiently ambitious and transformative?

In order to answer this question, we might begin by taking a closer look at SDG-13, on taking urgent action to combat climate change. Since the term 'sustainable' is given a headlining role in the new agenda, this is one of the top goals.

Unfortunately, the targets for SDG-13 are noticeably weak. An important target on investing in low-carbon solutions, which had appeared in early OWG drafts, was dropped, and there is now no concrete commitment to mitigate climate change itself. Furthermore, not even one target is devoted to discouraging or ending the ecologically most damaging modes of production and consumption, such as coal-fired power plants without carbon sequestration, fracking, and beef consumption. The adaptation targets included under SDG-13 also betray a technocratic approach to climate change, with only slight token efforts to connect this goal to other SDG objectives. Neither contradictions (with goals such as industrialization and economic growth) nor complementarities (with goals such as poverty eradication and inequality reduction) are sufficiently recognized. Identifying the dissonance and harmony of SDG-13 with other goals and their targets is essential to undertaking an honest attempt at mitigating climate change and its impacts.

The SDGs also miss a crucial opportunity to effectively question and reform unjust global institutional arrangements. While official and non-governmental development assistance substantially improves the evolution of global poverty and income inequality, it can only very partially mitigate the centrifugal tendencies produced by the ordinary operation of the world economy as presently structured. The SDGs contain only a few passing references to institutional reforms that could diminish the headwinds blowing against the poor, although such reforms are crucial for the achievement of every goal (see Pogge and Sengupta 2015). For example, SDG-17, on strengthening domestic resource mobilization, makes no mention of the structural barriers to domestic resource mobilization in developing countries, such as that of chronic tax evasion and avoidance, which is facilitated by rules that allow multinational corporations operating in developing countries to engage in abusive transfer pricing.

The weaknesses of goal 13, when taken alongside the other gaps and limitations identified in this essay, make it difficult to accept the claim that the SDGs present a "supremely ambitious and transformational vision," even though they are, undoubtedly, an improvement upon the MDGs.

The main strength of the SDGs is that they provide official, global recognition to a broad spectrum of achievements,

The Sustainable Development Goals: An Assessment of Ambition

Written by Mitu Sengupta

besides economic growth, that have come to be associated with the term 'development,' such as sustainability, gender equality, poverty eradication, and participatory decision-making. Remarkably, the goals also incorporate *some* preferences of virtually every major 'stakeholder' in development, be this the conservationist or the pro-growth neoclassical economist. In this sense, what is being seen as a weakness of the framework, i.e. the large number of goals and targets, is actually a strength. A shorter slate of goals would have been more convenient for public relations purposes, but it might have meant excluding more asks, or endorsing only a limited conceptualization of 'development.'

The clear advances in recognition and representation brought to life by the new agenda should indeed be celebrated. What is lost in the fray, however, is any real determination to tackle the root causes of poverty and unequal relations of power, either nationally or globally.

Given that Agenda 2030 has been forged in an international system where states jealously guard their sovereignty and policy autonomy, it is perhaps extraordinary that we have arrived at any common denominator at all. Even so, the SDGs disappoint as much as they impress.

References

Fehling, M., Nelson, Brett D., Venkatapuram, S. (2013) "Limitations of the Millennium Development Goals: A Literature Review," *Global Public Health*, 8 (10): 1109-1122.

Fukuda-Parr, S., Hulme, D. (2011) "International Norm Dynamics and the 'End of Poverty': Understanding the Millennium Development Goals," *Global Governance*, 17: 17-36.

Hulme, D., Scott, J. (2010) "The Political Economy of the MDGs: Retrospect and Prospect for the World's Biggest Promise," *New Political Economy*, 15(2): 293-306.

Pogge, T., Sengupta, M. (2015) "The Sustainable Development Goals: Nice Idea, Poor Execution," Washington International Law Journal, 24(3): 571-587.

Sen, A., Anand, S. (1994) "Sustainable Human Development: Concepts and Priorities,"*UNDP Human Development Report Office Occasional Papers*, September 1,http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2294664, accessed Jan. 13 2016.

Wisor, S. (2012) "After the MDGs: Citizen Deliberation and the Post-2015 Development Framework,"*Ethics and International Affairs*, 26 (1): 113-133.

About the author:

Dr. Mitu Sengupta is an Associate Professor in the Department of Politics and Public Administration, at Ryerson University, Toronto, Canada. Her research focuses on global political economy, international development theory and ethics, and the politics and political economy of South Asia. Mitu also serves as Global Coordinator for the Centre for Development and Human Rights (CDHR), a non-governmental organization based in New Delhi, India, and is a director of Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP), an international network, founded at Yale University, that aims to leverage the resources of academia towards the end of eradicating global poverty.