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At the Rio+20 closing ceremony in June 2012 (f.l.t.r.): Nassir Abdulaziz Al-Nasser, the then President of the UN General Assembly; Ban Ki-moon; UN Secretary-General; Dilma Rousseff, President of Brazil; and Muhammad Shaaban, UN Under-Secretary-General for General Assembly Affairs and Conference Management. This conference saw the official launching of the SDGs.

The Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals: a historic opportunity

In September 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are to be adopted in the context of the Post-2015 Agenda. In what way do the SDGs differ from the Millennium Development Goals? What does the community of states expect from their introduction? Our authors describe the background of the process and the latest developments in the debate.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were a game-changer because they channelled aid and de-

veloping countries' revenues into a discrete package of priorities for eradicating extreme poverty. Undeniably, significant progress was made across peaceful developing countries against the eight MDGs (see box). According to the World Bank, absolute poverty has been halved (although not evenly in each country and region). In 1990, 43.1 per cent of the population in developing countries lived on less than 1.25 US dollars (USD) a day; by 2010, this rate dropped to 20.6 per cent. The world is close to attaining uni-

versal primary education too – 90 per cent of children in developing countries are completing primary education (although sub-Saharan Africa is behind at 70 %) (World Bank, 2014).

The MDGs, however, are tainted by serious criticisms. They neglected to tackle conflict and to build national institutions, which contributed to the world leaving behind 1.4 billion people in the fight against poverty. That is 20 per cent of the world's population who now live in conflict-affected

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countries that have weaker institutions and lower access to rural populations (OECD, 2015). The MDGs have also been criticised for being too narrowly focused on health and education, for addressing the symptoms rather than the causes of poverty (therefore not sufficiently empowering people), and for not advancing environmental sustainability.

Finally, the MDGs have been criticised for perpetuating traditional paternalist aid relations between countries of the “north” and “south”. The world has changed significantly since the MDGs were agreed. The richest countries experienced deep financial crisis from 2008, while the investments of some of the BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China and South Africa) and other rising powers in developing countries have grown exponentially. Many developing countries are more confident than ever about pursuing their own development paths, if they can harness the benefits of globalisation (such as trade, foreign direct investment and technology), and if they can generate employment for growing workforces.

At the UN Conference on Sustainable Development hosted by Brazil in June 2012 – also known as Rio+20 – countries agreed to replace the MDGs with a new, universal set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDGs are intended to reflect these global shifts and to address the common critiques of the MDGs. As a result, the vision for the SDGs is more ambitious than ever. Although voluntary, the SDGs are expected to influence the domestic policies of all governments up to 2030 – in high, middle and low-income countries alike. They are to be based on the three pillars of sustainable social, economic and environmental development; and they are intended to achieve more inclusive and sustainable globalisation for all.

In September 2015, world leaders will convene at a UN Summit in New York, USA, to endorse the new global development framework. The rest of this short article reviews the stakeholders, the substance, and the

process towards agreeing on a new global development deal.

■ Stakeholders: inclusive negotiations so far

The post-2015 negotiation process created opportunities for a wide range of actors to participate in the formulation of the proposed SDGs. Unlike the MDGs, which were drafted in a small group before the Millennium Summit in 2000, Rio+20 tasked the UN General Assembly to establish an inter-governmental Open Working Group (OWG), comprised of 70 countries that would share 30 seats at the negotiating table, to develop a draft set of goals. This level of developing country inclusion in shaping an international development framework is (disturbingly) unprecedented.

In July 2014, after nearly a year and a half of negotiations and consultations, the OWG – co-chaired by Hungary and Kenya – proposed a draft framework for 17 SDGs and 169 targets. To develop the framework, the OWG drew on:

- the Rio+20 outcome document;
- countries’, regional organisations’ and blocs’ negotiation priorities, which were considered during thematic discussions and drafting sessions of the OWG;
- technical advice from the United Nations;
- written contributions and advocacy by civil society organisations. One foundation concluded that contributions from civil society proved

influential in securing more politically contentious goals such as promoting peaceful societies, reducing inequality within and between countries, tackling climate change, and promoting sustainable consumption and production (Adams, B. and Tobin, K., 2014);

- the report of the High-Level Panel on the Sustainable Development Goals. The High-Level Panel was a 27-member group of eminent persons, including representatives of governments, academia, the private sector, and civil society;
- the results of the UN-led MY World online survey. The survey solicited the input of over seven million people to date, and captured data on citizens’ top 6 preferences from 16 available global priorities.

■ The draft SDGs: universal and ambitious

The OWG’s 17 draft SDGs are listed in the box on page 8, covering the three pillars of sustainable economic, social, and environmental development agreed in Rio. In addition to their universality, some key differences from the MDGs are that the SDGs build upon existing international commitments to health and education by committing to improving the quality, not only quantity, of services. In addition, they encompass previously neglected areas, including to promote peaceful societies; to reduce inequality within and across societies; to promote sustainable consumption and production; to tackle climate change; to preserve ecosystems and natural resources; and to build safe human settlements and improve food security.

■ The substance of the SDGs

Form – The OWG’s proposal for the SDGs is a political compromise. A number of countries have noted that there are major technical problems with the targets – some are “outcomes” while others are “indicators”. Other (mainly “northern”) countries have argued that having 17 goals and

The Millennium Development Goals

- 1) Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
- 2) Achieve universal primary education
- 3) Promote gender equality and empower women
- 4) Reduce child mortality
- 5) Improve maternal health
- 6) Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
- 7) Ensure environmental sustainability
- 8) Global partnership for development

17 Proposed Sustainable Development Goals

- 1) End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- 2) End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
- 3) Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- 4) Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
- 5) Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- 6) Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- 7) Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
- 8) Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- 9) Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation
- 10) Reduce inequality within and among countries
- 11) Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- 12) Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- 13) Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts (acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change [UNFCCC] is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change)
- 14) Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- 15) Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- 16) Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- 17) Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

The full OWG proposal for the SDG framework is available at:

► <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>

169 targets is too ambitious a proposition to effectively implement in all countries. The Group of 77 countries of the “south” (G77) contended that the proposal of the OWG should be preserved as it is because the process for getting there was open and transparent. At the time of writing, it appeared unlikely that the goals would be changed, although there may be scope to improve the technical quality of some of the targets. At the end of 2014, the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, produced a Synthesis Report in which he proposed six “essential elements” of the universal SDGs – dignity, people, prosperity, planet, justice, and partnership (UN, 2014). These elements are intended to help organise and communicate the ambition of the agenda to all people (17 goals are

hardly memorable). The OWG’s proposal, along with international commitments to implementation and to monitoring, are likely to form the main elements of a new Declaration in 2015.

Ambition – The framework contains many ambitious “zero-based” goals and targets, such as eliminating poverty, ending violence against women and children, and ending all forms of discrimination, as well as ambitions to improve the quality and universal access to a wider range of public services. Achieving heady universal ambitions over the next 15 years will need to target aid where it is needed most, will need more loans for middle income countries, a growth in domestic resources, greater private sector investment, technology transfers, re-

mittances from migration, trade and climate finance, among other areas. Multiple new global partnerships will be needed for many countries to come close to achieving the goals by 2030.

Function – The 17 goals are intended to guide all countries’ domestic development priorities, to shape the elements of new global partnerships around aid, trade, climate finance and private financial flows, and to shape monitoring of progress in development up to 2030. Some countries have pointed out major challenges to monitoring and implementation of the framework. Even minimum levels of data collection for 169 targets could be financially prohibitive, especially for a large number of countries who may lack the resources to effectively implement and monitor the agenda. Furthermore, universal implementation could be undermined by selectivity in national implementation, while there are many goals and targets that the world has yet to learn how to implement. Agreeing the new framework is the start, and not the finish, of framing a new global development agenda.

Measurability – It is likely that the UN will need to play a key role in monitoring the global framework. Creating a data revolution must be at the heart of implementing the agenda, even MDG data remains partial for some countries, especially in rural areas. In order to establish a baseline of data for measuring progress towards achieving the SDGs, data collection needs to be more transparent and systematic and it needs to start now. The UN Statistical Commission will oversee the development of an indicators framework for the post-2015 development agenda, and agree measures to implement a monitoring system.

■ Next steps in the negotiations: Four multilateral processes

In September 2014, the UN General Assembly adopted by consensus a resolution deciding that the OWG’s proposals shall be the main basis for integrating the SDGs into a broader post-2015 development framework.

This marked a big leap forward in framing the post-2015 development agenda. International attention in 2015 must turn to how to implement the SDGs.

Securing a deal will require continued inclusion of low-, middle- and high-income countries in order to ensure enough wins for enough constituencies. But realising universal ambitions will also require engaging an even wider range of stakeholders in the debate outside New York in order to close the gap between grand ambitions and resources. Foreign ministries will need to engage with domestic ministries on how to implement a universal framework. Political leaders must communicate with their own citizens about the draft framework. Growth and job creation will revolve around the actions of the private sector. Their inclusion in the debate must be ramped up, and civil society, governments and the private sector must coalesce around new global partnerships to achieve the SDGs. And of course finances must be found to implement the agenda.

The political pressure is on. Not only is 2015 the year for deciding a successor framework to the MDGs, it is also the year of UN Climate Change talks, Financing for Development and WTO negotiations. These processes are all pivotal for securing new global partnerships and finance, and failure on one track risks souring the other three, or leaving large holes in imple-

mentation. Governments and other stakeholders have some of the following opportunities:

The post-2015 development framework negotiation track. In January 2015, UN member states recommenced formal negotiations on the SDGs, their “means of implementation” and the Universal Declaration to be adopted at the Summit in September 2015. They will be expected to meet for multi-day negotiating and drafting sessions each month until the UN Summit in September. Partners around the world can start now to form ideas and actions for new global partnerships to implement the SDGs.

The financing for development negotiation track. International Financing for Development negotiations are proceeding through three drafting sessions in January, April and June 2015. The negotiations will culminate at the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia, in July 2015. It will convene high-level political representatives as well as relevant institutional stakeholders, non-governmental organisations and business sector entities. The conference aims to answer major questions around how to finance the SDGs. A convincing deal at the UN Summit on the SDGs in New York in September will rely heavily on outcomes in Addis. So far, countries have not clarified the tasks and offers that they are willing to put on the table around key areas such as aid,

non-concessional finance, trade, private sector funding, intellectual property and technology or migration.

The climate negotiation track. Climate negotiations will culminate at the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change COP 21 Summit, to be held in Paris, France, in December 2015. The summit will convene member states to agree on the next chapter of global efforts to limit greenhouse gas emissions from 2020 onwards. Political progress towards Paris may positively or negatively affect the political atmospherics around the UN development summit in New York in September.

The WTO negotiation track. Negotiations on trade will culminate at the 10th WTO Ministerial Conference, to be held in Nairobi, Kenya, in December 2015. As the Ministerial Conference is the foremost decision-making body of the organisation, the WTO will convene all members to potentially agree on a trade package that could benefit least developed countries.

By the end of 2015, governments will have been able to capitalise upon a historic opportunity to address the world’s most pressing development problems for all countries and all people. Yet, to seize this opportunity, they must now build a collective and coherent vision for making good on paper commitments to the SDGs.

For references, see: www.rural21.com

The ‘Back to Learning’ campaign was launched in Juba, South Sudan, by UNICEF and South Sudan President Salva Kiir in February 2015. The campaign aims to bring education opportunities to 400,000 children whose schooling has been interrupted by the conflict in the country. In contrast to the MDGs, topics addressed by the SDGs will include conflicts and the development of peaceful societies.



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