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Post 2015: How to Design Goals for (Inter)National Action?

Summary

United Nations (UN) Member States agreed to start negotiations towards a universal sustainable development agenda. A major challenge is to design goals that guide future action at the national and international levels. These "Goals" usually refer to global development priorities at the highest aggregated level. "Targets" are subcomponents of goals that are needed to achieve the overarching goal. "Indicators" help to monitor progress towards the targets.

At the national level, countries prefer to set their own targets and indicators based on their own circumstances and needs. At the international level, setting global minimum standards for all citizens, or agreeing on global environmental ceilings, can ensure better development outcomes for all countries. International development goals can foster coherence in aggregating national actions in addressing global challenges. They can create accountability across countries and ensure comparability on development progress.

Combining national development targets and international development goals within one unified agenda, however, is challenging in at least two ways. First, a balance has to be found between flexibility at the local level and a strong basis for accountability at the global level. National level target-setting takes account of local development conditions and allows room for flexibility in addressing complex development challenges. Goal-setting at the global level will, however, prescribe goals to be met by all countries, which may be more or less consistent with the targets set at the national level.

Second, it is difficult to define ambitious goals that are meaningful in a heterogeneous world. Countries differ regarding income, poverty, equality and geography, for instance. Global standards and rules need to be ambitious, yet they have to be fair towards all countries.

Designing a universal development agenda has to address the differentiation of countries and integrate national- and international-level development goals within one agenda. This paper examines three approaches for designing the post-2015 agenda: **1) the Millennium Development Goals approach** (top-down negotiation), **2) the inductive approach** (bottom-up) and **3) the two-tier-list approach** (a hybrid of the two).

Each approach is characterised by different advantages and disadvantages that decision-makers negotiating the post-2015 agenda need to consider carefully. This paper proposes five key questions for judging the merits of each approach: How are global and national development goals linked? How does the approach influence negotiations? Are sector-specific and cross-cutting goals included? How does the approach foster accountability? How communicable will the future agenda be?

In light of these considerations, the two-tier-list approach would allow for combining a list of global goals to foster global collective action with nationally set targets and indicators. The two-tier-list approach offers the greatest potential for designing an ambitious, communicable, accountable and relevant future development agenda.

Introduction: linking the local and the global

The post-2015 debate is moving on from theoretical discussions of global development goals to real-life intergovernmental negotiations. At a Special Event on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in September 2013, UN Member States called for a *"single framework and set of goals – universal in nature and applicable to all countries"* that combines poverty eradication and sustainable development (see also Briefing Paper 19/2013). This decision concretised the course laid out at the Rio+20 summit in 2012. Here, UN Member States agreed to formulate sustainable development goals (SDGs) that *"incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages."*

At the 2013 Special Event, Member States also announced that intergovernmental negotiations on a post-2015 agenda would start in September 2014. Governments then want to adopt the new agenda at a summit in September 2015. Therefore, the timeline for the post-2015 process and its overall objective – a universal development agenda – are now clear. The effort being made towards establishing a single framework that is universal and applicable to all countries is a powerful sign of a changed global context. Countries are seeking to move away from the binary distinction between one group of countries that is considered "developed" and another group that is not. Although lacking empirical validity, this binary distinction made past negotiations relatively straightforward. For instance, financing achievement of the MDGs in developing countries was strongly linked to official development assistance provided by richer countries.

Going forward, however, there is little clarity on how to design global development goals, and on how global goals can be transposed into concrete priorities and actions of individual governments. Given the large variety of country groups (rich/poor/emerging; resource-rich or poor; fragile; environmentally vulnerable, etc.) setting goals that are relevant for all countries will be difficult. Also, conflicting interests between national policy-making and international rules and regulations will complicate negotiations. For instance, global minimum standards for climate change might clash with national priorities regarding energy-intensive industries.

Apart from country-related considerations, other factors will complicate the formulation of a universal agenda that includes global and national development goals. The challenges include ensuring (sub-) national-regional-global interlinkages and avoiding reductionist sectoral approaches that go against the central idea of sustainable development. Also, the challenge of constructing a coherent and strong global narrative – and, linked to that, the possibility for this narrative to promote accountability relations – will be important. These factors can be used to judge the merits of different approaches for designing and negotiating a post-2015 framework.

This paper compares three such approaches: (1) the MDG approach, (2) the inductive approach and (3) the two-tier-list approach. Whereas the MDG approach for designing development goals has been analysed in past studies, the latter two approaches are the authors' own ideas. These relate to emerging negotiation proposals that are still works in progress and have to be further operationalised and tested. Table 1 provides an overview of the three approaches and suggests five potential criteria for analysis.

1. The Millennium Development Goals approach

The MDGs were, in essence, a compilation of the results of several global conferences. Since the late 1990s, a number of meetings have prepared the grounds for an international agreement on a list of global development goals linked to the 2000 UN Millennium Declaration. This process was roughly three times as long as the period now available for post-2015 negotiations. The MDGs were developed in a relatively top-down fashion by experts from the UN and other international organisations.

The MDGs were designed as global goals, negotiated in a predominantly top-down and expert-led way, and did not differentiate between individual countries. For example, MDG-1 includes the target of halving global poverty levels by 2015. In practice this meant that each country was assessed against the same poverty target, although the target was formulated for the global level. Thus, commentators criticised that the MDGs were misunderstood, since they were never intended to apply to individual countries. This distortion led to specific goals being considered non-ambitious by some countries while being almost unattainable for others. It also led to misinterpretations such as "Africa is behind on achieving the MDGs."

The seven MDGs were accompanied by a separate and complementary goal 8, which targeted the international community as a whole. Although this goal was innovative, in that it involved differentiated reporting for developing-country groupings, those indicators that could not be "projectised" and did not involve a transfer of resources soon lagged behind. In terms of sectoral focus, the MDGs were most relevant for socials sectors such as health and education. Each MDG goal addressed a specific sector and there was little explicit attention given to cross-cutting areas. Links between individual sectors had to be created after the goals had been developed already.

"Soft" accountability for achieving the MDGs is mostly created through public attention, as MDG monitoring is relatively straight-forward. Yet, there is no "hard" accountability mechanism built into the MDGs, since limited commitment to – or progress on – the MDGs has no direct consequences. The communication side of the MDGs, however, is often portrayed as a major success story for international development cooperation. The MDGs galvanised international support for development, and channelled attention towards the issues addressed by the MDGs.

2. The inductive approach

In recognition of the shortcomings of the MDGs, discussions on how to formulate the Sustainable Development Goals that were committed to during the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro have looked into possibilities for a more inductive approach to formulating these goals. One of these possibilities would allow countries to choose their own targets and indicators, and to adapt these as per their own baselines and possibilities for change. This idea emphasises country-level differentiation in negotiating development goals. This would provide for an inductive and decentralised process to guide the design of the overall goals. The main guiding principle would be that each country is responsible for determining development targets according to its own priorities, and that an inclusive and multi-stakeholder dialogue process on these priorities then creates a "bottom-up" base to formulate global goals. The inductive and differentiated nature is mainly found in that this process allows for targets to be associated with different goals, as opposed to being placed in sectoral confinements.

The overall idea here reflects an interpretation of the Rio+20 Outcome Document that the SDGs are not an end in themselves, but a means to refocus policy and action on the interlinkages between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. It is argued that this approach helps to avoid an overly reductionist and sectoral approach in the negotiations, which, in previous months, have been driven by influential lobbies calling for the inclusion of particular individual goals. These ideas represent an evolution of the 2011 initial proposal for formulating that was similar to the way the MDGs were designed.

A key feature of the inductive approach is that national-level goals can be very specific in targeting cross-cutting development priorities that address all dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental. For example, a country could set a target for water efficiency in agriculture as a first step. As a second step, all specific cross-cutting targets can be grouped into different global goals consisting of many individual modules (i.e. targets from the national level). A national target for water efficiency in agriculture can then be grouped under different international sectoral goals, such as "water" or "agriculture".

This approach for formulating national targets and global goals can be characterised as bottom-up and highly differentiated. The main challenge is to keep the overview and to avoid having countries adopt targets that are non-ambitious or lopsided in terms of prioritising certain dimensions of sustainable development. Another challenge will be to what extent countries could be compared across the targets. The question then remains whether the sum of these targets will be more than the individual nation-state parts, and whether the SDGs will thus guide this transformation. Finally, the communications side of the inductive approach should not be neglected. It will be difficult to construct a coherent global narrative on development for goals that are highly differentiated across specific issues and countries.

3. The two-tier-list approach

As a third option, one can envisage a hybrid approach that adopts beneficial components of both the MDG and inductive negotiation approaches (see also Briefing Paper 18/2012). Such a hybrid approach could have advantages in terms of covering both global and national dimensions adequately. Here, however, the choice for pursuing a top-down or bottom-up formulation approach would be based on what is most effective for the issue at hand. The idea of making this assessment on a case-by-case basis is similar to the idea of determining whether goals are targeted at the national, regional and/or international levels, as in the original SDG proposal. Action to address "common" challenges, such as ensuring decent employment, could be

Table 1: The three design options compared			
	MDG Approach	**Inductive Approach**	**Two-tier-list Approach**
Global-national Linkages	Global-level focus; no differentiation; top-down	National-level focus; strong customisation; bottom-up	Global-national focus; differentiation plus global challenges
Negotiations	Negotiations on ambitious global-level goals are challenging	Negotiations focus on the choice of specific targets; indicators are determined by individual governments	Negotiations on ambitious global- and national-level goals are challenging
Sectoral Focus	One goal per sector; little attention for cross-cutting issues	Multi-sectoral goals; strong focus on cross-cutting issues	Sectoral goals and multi-sectoral goals
Accountability	Implicit accountability through public attention; relatively easy to monitor	National accountability mechanisms; complicated to aggregate actions and progress	National and global accountability mechanisms; need for monitoring task division and accountability
Communication	Easily communicable	Challenge to construct national and global narrative	National and global development narrative possible
Source: Own representation			

dealt with through a bottom-up process, whereas truly "global" challenges, such as climate action, would benefit from a top-down process.

For a first list of development goals, countries could be encouraged to adapt goals to their individual national contexts through an inclusive consultation process that involves all key actors in helping to set the benchmarks. For a second list of goals, countries should report their contributions to the provision of global public goods, thereby ensuring that global challenges for sustainable development can be addressed adequately. These global-level goals could be set through intergovernmental negotiations that also define a burden-sharing formula for individual countries or country groups. Therefore, the approach to differentiation would be top-down when an international division of contributions is needed, and be more bottom-up when local adaptation is required. This approach could result in two lists of "common but differentiated" development priorities that reinforce one another.

4. The way forward?

The next phase of post-2015 negotiations will be crucial to determine whether the outcome will result in innovation or end in deadlock. Recent experiences in sustainable development and climate change negotiations show that the "business as usual" approach to negotiating international frameworks is no longer adequate. The current negotiations would therefore not be likely to produce meaningful results if they were to follow the expert-led and relatively top-down MDG approach.

Advances in technology and infrastructure investments make it possible in most countries to more easily engage different parts of society. Moving towards a more bottom-up approach

to negotiations is becoming more realistic every day. As emphasised in the recent report of the Oxford Martin Commission for Future Generations, there is a need for an "*updated set of shared global values around which a unified and enduring pathway for society can be built.*" This will not necessarily be achieved by 2015, but the chance of a lifetime will be missed if deadline-fixation prevails.

Countries may thus opt for an inductive approach or may explore a two-tier-list approach, as presented here. Although an inductive approach seems to be the most feasible in political terms, it is likely to fail in terms of substance, as countries may not be responsible enough to commit to a sufficiently high level of ambition on their own. While helping to avoid reductionist approaches, the full differentiation it allows for would complicate the formulation of a strong overall narrative. This would hamper the possibility of a post-2015 agenda promoting strong accountability relations for all actors who sign up to it. Yet, the inductive approach is an attractive idea for breaking away from reductionist thinking and fostering cross-cutting policies for sustainable development.

The two-tier list, on the other hand, may be technically the most feasible, yet it may cripple negotiations as per countries' inability to find consensus on whether to engage in global discussions or "decentralise" them to the national level. But a two-tier-list approach is better suited to the creation of a global development narrative than is the inductive approach. This will also be critical in generating the necessary public support for a universal development agenda. Overall, the two-tier list seems to be the most feasible approach, as it reflects what is needed to adopt an ambitious post-2015 framework: combining the art of the possible with a leap of faith.

Literature

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