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The United Nations' new post-2015 agenda – global transformation or development of the South?

By Imme Scholz,
*German Development Institute /
Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)*

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The United Nations' new post-2015 agenda – global transformation or development of the South?

Bonn, 3 June 2013. On 31 May representatives of a panel consisting of high-ranking politicians and academics from all over the world handed the Secretary-General of the United Nations (UN) a proposal for a new global development agenda. Ban Ki-moon himself had called on the panel to reflect on an agenda to succeed the Millennium Development Goals, which are to be achieved by 2015. Germany was represented by former President Horst Köhler, the co-chairs being British Prime Minister David Cameron, Indonesia's President Susilo Yudhoyono and Liberia's President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf.

In recent months the contents and objectives of this follow-up agenda had been the subject of a worldwide consultation process that essentially centred on three questions: first, should the agenda remain focused on the poor countries, or should it set universal goals for all countries and so give a fresh boost to global cooperation aimed at achieving general welfare? Second, should the principal aim be to improve the living conditions of poor children, women and men, or should this aim be combined with others – the rule of law and freedom from violence, climate and environmental protection, world trade policy? And third, should the agenda refer to quantified goals, and how might this be linked to countries' widely differing resources and responsibilities?

In Germany this debate has been largely confined to developmental and environmental circles, although the questions it raises are far more of a challenge to other areas of policy and other actors. The High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda has found answers to these three questions – it is worth reading the report, which, though quite short at 45 pages, is highly detailed. Perhaps the most important statement it has to make is, first, that the common goals should be universal: the follow-up agenda is not an agenda for the poor countries in which the rich countries are able to play only a limited part through their development policies. The goals are to act as a guide for the domestic and foreign policies of all countries, including the rich. If combating extreme poverty was the sole objective, that would not be necessary – but the agenda is to be far more com-

prehensive in content than its predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals.

Second, the goals are to be integrated: extreme poverty is to be eradicated by 2030, and this issue is linked to aspects of sustainable development – in other words, climate and environment policy, energy and water policy and natural resource management. In the Panel's view, these aspects should be the focus of a global development effort if social and economic improvements are not to endanger future prosperity. Nor does the Panel beat about the bush when it comes to governance, saying that good governance and effective institutions are vital for human and sustainable development.

Third, the aims are specific: 12 goals are backed by a total of 54 specified and almost always quantified targets, which are to be reached by 2030.

However, the Panel uses the aims simply to illustrate the priorities and measures with which the "big transformative shift" that is the precondition for sustained global prosperity can be achieved. This shift should be driven by five decisions of principle: (i) no one is to be excluded from prosperity, and goals are to be deemed as achieved only when it is proved to be true of even the lowest income groups; (ii) sustainable development will be at the core of the agenda, and consumption and production patterns will be so altered that they can be made universal; (iii) the structures and growth of the economy will be geared to employment on the basis of sustainable innovation strategies; (iv) peace and good governance will be secured; and (v) a new global partnership will be formed to implement the agenda, with every conceivable organisation and person actively involved, from governments through civil society organisations and the private sector to the research community and private foundations.

This makes it clear that the new global development agenda is not something that can be entrusted only to development and international environment policies. If Germany intends to play an active part in shaping the global debate that will now follow, fresh thought must be given not only to improving the blending of inward- and

outward-oriented policies and involving international cooperation, but also to the overriding objectives to which competing policies (such as climate and energy) must be subordinated.

Are the report and the proposed list of objectives generally convincing? At least they form a good point of departure for the necessary debate on the importance that the UN member states attach to combating poverty, protecting Earth's ecosystems and natural resources and ensuring that human rights are respected. If this can be turned into a debate that has substance, it may be possible to overcome the shortcomings of the proposal: first, an agenda geared to sustainability and the blending of global and national policies will require far more investment in global cooperation than we have seen in recent years, despite or because of the financial crisis. Agreeing on joint target corridors and then hoping for ambitious national policies will not be enough. For there to be effective cooperation with other actors in society, a clear, long-term legal and economic course must be charted. But the report remains vague, rather than appealing for greater courage to take visionary, resolute public action.

Second, the large, dynamic emerging economies must take responsibility for the sustainable transformation of economic structures today, not wait for the industrialised countries to show them the way. Otherwise, they run the risk of getting locked into energy- and emission-intensive infrastructure. The report is inconsistent on this aspect: in

the analysis it refers to this challenge, in the political recommendations for the national targets that individual groups of countries should set themselves it omits this of all subjects.

Third, inherent in voluntary national goals is the risk of free-riding: everyone hopes that someone else will take the lead. On the other hand, it will not be possible to negotiate formulae for burden-sharing in all 12 areas of activity. This is, however, important at least with regard to those threats to the Earth system which will require rapid and purposeful action by the major polluters if such irreversible damage as climate change and ocean acidification is to be avoided. There is an urgent need for a more precise definition of the cases in which this is necessary and of how the burdens are to be shared, as with the targets set by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) for greenhouse gas emissions (see the Action Agenda for Sustainable Development of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network – SDSN).

Both nationally and internationally, Germany can make a very important contribution to this post-2015 global development agenda: with its *Energiewende*, its transition towards renewable energy technologies and decarbonisation. But it is important for the *Energiewende* also to be seen as an innovative policy capable of sending out a strong call for global economic structural change and global cooperation, rather than a disadvantage in an economic contest in which the participants are striving to achieve yesterday's goals.



Dr. Imme Scholz

Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE)