

World Development Agenda After 2015: Merging Human With Sustainable Development

PERSPECTIVE

In a number of world conferences in the past, long lists of goals in areas of education, food, child development, and more were adopted. The most important of these goals were consolidated in the UN's Millennium Declaration, from which the Millennium Development Goals were taken in 2001. In September 2013, the UN supported the creation of only one post-2015 list of goals that encompassed both Sustainable Development Goals and a post-MDG agenda. So in 2015, the United Nations wants to establish a new global agenda that takes poverty as well as sustainability debates into account and would thereby, at the same time, be a successor for the MDGs and a framework for more sustainable international development. Dr Markus Loewe highlights the challenge of designing such an agenda and suggests that the post-2015 agenda should consist of two separate but mutually referring sets of goals – one concentrating on human development, the other on global public goods.

For the last 20 years, the international development debate has been dominated by two trends. On the one hand, there is the agenda of reducing poverty in developing countries in its various dimensions, which found its expression in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). On the other hand, there is the idea of sustainability, which encompasses three dimensions – economic development, social justice and protection of the environment. It was adopted by the world community at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and generated a parallel concept to the MDGs at the Rio+20 Summit in 2012: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Fortunately, the UN took a decision in September 2013 that there should be only one post-2015 list of goals that has both an SDG and post-MDG agenda.

The challenge is, however, to design such an agenda that fulfils the aspirations of the proponents of both the MDG and the

SDG concepts. This article suggests that the post-2015 agenda should consist of two separate but mutually referring sets of goals – one concentrating on human development, the other on global public goods.

Considerable Strengths of MDGs

The MDGs are the result of a process that began in the 1980s. It aimed at making aid more effective and focussing it more on poverty reduction. In addition, it started to look at poverty as a multi-faceted phenomenon rather than just a lack of income. In a number of world conferences, long lists of goals in areas of education, food, child development, and more were adopted. The most important of these goals were consolidated in the UN's Millennium Declaration, from which the MDGs were taken in 2001.

The strength of the MDGs is that they constitute a manageable number of straightforward goals that are easy to understand and measure, and offer a clear deadline. This made it possible to rekindle the interest in development issues in countries of the North, and strengthen the willingness to put more resources into aid. Further, the MDGs have increased the accountability of all relevant actors of international development, which has contributed to greater result-orientation and effectiveness of development policy.

Critical Weaknesses

There are many weaknesses to the MDG concept as well. In particular, the MDGs are an incomplete agenda. They originated in the Millennium Declaration, but cover only two of its chapters (on development and environment), completely leaving out the chapters on disarmament and good governance.

Moreover, the MDGs neglect distributive issues. Inequality is a severe obstacle to many aspects of development. Nevertheless, the MDG agenda contains only one indicator (under the heading of MDG 1) capturing one aspect of distribution: the share of the poorest quintile in consumption.

Further, some MDGs measure outputs or inputs rather than outcomes or impacts of development. MDG 2, for example, measures only the intake of education, regardless of its quality or relevance for economic, social, and political life. Its existence has led to a significant acceleration in the rise of school enrolment rates. But in many countries, this has been at the expense of the quality of education. More children went to school, but the number of teachers and the space in school buildings did not increase correspondingly.

In addition, the MDGs cannot easily be transformed into national objectives. They were originally formulated as global goals, but they were, without modification, increasingly seen as national objectives in order to create national accountability. This interpretation constitutes a particular challenge to the least-developed countries.

And finally, most MDGs are short-to medium-term, which runs counter to policies that are oriented toward sustainability; inherently, these have to be long-term. Therefore, the idea came up that the next international development agenda should not only look at short-term achievements in terms of human development, but also at shaping global development more sustainably – particularly with regards to the protection of the environment.

Many people also criticise the MDGs for being too focussed on social sectors and neglecting production sectors and economic development. This judgment, however, is unfair for two reasons: First, the MDGs do not focus on particular sectors, but on goals of human development. Achieving health goals (MDGs 4-6) may well require investments in healthcare, but may also (and often even more) call for investments in the education or water sector. Second, economic growth, transport infrastructure, and a functioning private sector tend to be essential preconditions for long-term poverty reduction and the achievement of MDGs. But they are not ends in themselves and should not, therefore, have a place in an MDG agenda.

Expectations from the Next Global Development Agenda

In 2015, the UN wants to establish a new global agenda that takes poverty as well as sustainability debates into account and

would thereby, at the same time, be a successor for the MDGs and a framework for more sustainable international development.

Such an agenda should have the strengths of the MDGs while avoiding their weaknesses, and must have the following goals:

- Be relevant in both objective and subjective terms like the MDGs;
- Contain only a limited number of easy-to-understand goals;
- Be goals for people, that is final end-goals of development rather than instruments; and
- Be SMART (specific, measurable, agreed, realistic, time-limited).

At the same time, the new agenda should:

- Be more comprehensive than the MDGs (i.e. include additional dimensions of development/well-being such as, political, socio-cultural, and protective capabilities);
- Consider distributional issues;
- Avoid inconsistencies (all targets should focus on outcomes rather than inputs or outputs);
- Be truly universal, that is, defined on the global level, but relevant and applicable nationally for all countries;
- Be binding for all countries, though; and
- Ensure the sustainability of development.

Establishment in Two Parts

However, the controversy on ways to improve the status of environmental goals remains. The Rio+20 Declaration suggests a number of objectives for a prospective SDG agenda. Many are already included in the MDG agenda as sub-goals or indicators (i.e., biodiversity, protection of forests, reducing carbon emissions etc), but their status and commitments made to them could be strengthened. Others are outcomes of development, and thus could easily be included in a new agenda (such as protection against desertification or soil degradation). But the same is much more difficult to accomplish for goals that cannot be measured according to indicators at the micro-level and that, strictly speaking, are not actually final goals, but rather instruments, that are, 'enablers' of development, for example climate stability.

Because of this instrumental relationship, it makes sense to differentiate between them and final goals of human development. It would be conceivable to establish an international development agenda in two parts: one of which would concern itself with final goals of human development, and the other with the creation/protection of global public goods that are key enablers of human development (see Figure 1). The latter would build on current MDG 8 and also contain all those goals that the world community can only achieve by working together, while the former would include MDGs 1–7 and some sustainability goals that are now missing in the MDG agenda. Such a division makes sense for three reasons:

- The goals on either side of the agenda are conceptually different;
- Improvements for the former can be measured at the national and sub-national levels as well as globally, whereas for the latter in general they can only be measured globally;
- The goals of both parts are instrumentally linked.

Moreover, this would also take into account the concerns of the proponents of a new MDG agenda as well as those in favour of SDGs. Such a division into two parts would limit the marginalisation of goals for poverty reduction, while the second part would ensure that the most important criteria of sustainable development would at least be taken into account.

The objectives of this agenda

should be global in every sense of the word. The goals of the second part are global by definition, as they refer to global public goods and can thus only be measured globally. But those of the first part should also apply to all nations rather than just the developing countries, as is the case with the current MDGs. This will require differentiation to transform the global goals into national objectives, making them both achievable but also ambitious, according to each country's capacities. This will encourage the reduction of poverty, mortality, and school dropout rates in the rich countries as well.

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