

Five questions and answers on the sustainable development goals

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On the basis of the outcome document of the Rio+20 conference, *The Future We Want*, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) mandated an Open Working Group (OWG) involving 70 representative countries and observers (multi-stakeholders) to propose a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs), for final adoption at the end of the 68th Session of the UN General Assembly in September 2015. In 2014, the United Nations decided to align this process with the post-2015 development agenda in order to move towards a set of goals that integrates economic, social, societal and environmental dimensions to provide the basis for the post-2015 United Nations agenda. After 16 months of work, the Open Working Group published its proposals on Saturday, July 19, 2014.¹

1. Outcome document – Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/owg.html>

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KEY MESSAGES

- The sustainable development goals (SDGs) are an unprecedented attempt to integrate the many dimensions of sustainable development into a single framework of objectives. To the credit of the vice-chairs of the Open Working Group, the drafting of the SDGs was preceded by a number of consultations on the state of problems of unsustainable development and solutions to these problems; they were thus drafted with a view to effectiveness, in other words as goals that can and ought to be achieved, rather than as an asymptote towards which efforts should be directed.
- Taken as a whole, the SDGs proposed by the OWG are above all enhanced and extended Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with the implications that they primarily concern the developing countries and that they do not integrate development and environment issues to any significant degree.
- Criticisms and doubts can be expressed regarding certain goals or targets taken in isolation from one another, for which few means of action are available: guaranteeing full employment, or high growth in the least developed countries (LDCs), for example. However, the real question is elsewhere and lies in the true capacity for change that the SDGs offer to economic, political and civil society stakeholders in the different countries.
- As they stand, far from associating the SDGs with sustainability challenges that, by their very nature, call for the exploration of new development paths, the sectoral goals and targets—and especially industrialisation—are largely based on the reproduction of past trajectories, whose limitations are well known.

WHAT DO THE SDGs ENTAIL?

The SDGs² set out a series of 17 overall goals accompanied by 169 targets with different time horizons until 2030, each of which describes the basic components of a more sustainable form of development. If they are achieved, the SDGs will have contributed to creating a world without extreme poverty (target 1.1), without hunger or malnutrition (2.1), without preventable deaths of newborns and under-five children (3.2), without epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, and neglected tropical diseases (3.3), and without gender discrimination (5.1). Access to drinking water will be universal (6.1), sanitation will be improved (target 6.2), and access to sexual and reproductive health (5.6), to health coverage (3.8), to modern energy (7.1), to transport (11.2) and to housing (11.1) will also be universal. Child labour and forced labour will be eradicated (8.7), economies will have full employment (8.5), and the LDCs will have GDP growth of at least 7% per year (8.1) and will be twice as industrialised as today (9.2). In all countries, the income of the bottom 40% of the population will grow at a rate higher than the national average (10.1).

Ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns is referred to the implementation of the 10-Year Framework on this subject³ (12), and combating climate change to the work of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) (13). The oceans and marine resources will be protected and used sustainably (14), but the protection of the high seas is not mentioned. Biodiversity loss will be halted, and terrestrial ecosystems protected (15). There will be fewer forms of violence in the world (16.1) and less corruption (16.5).

To meet these goals and targets, the means of implementation (finance, technology, trade) will be “strengthened”, and the global partnership for sustainable development will be “revitalised” (17).

HOW DO THE SDGs DIFFER FROM THE MDGs?

The SDGs are an unprecedented attempt to integrate the many dimensions of sustainable development into a single framework of objectives. However, taken as a whole, the SDGs are above all enhanced and extended MDGs, with the implication that they primarily concern the developing countries (goals 1 to 9 in particular). They address

certain gaps in the MDGs (the quality of education and not just access to education, nutritional aspects of food security and not just combating hunger, and neglected and non-communicable diseases, in particular), and therefore represent progress. They are the result of lessons learned from the MDGs.

The SDGs differ from the MDGs in at least five ways:

- They include sectoral or even macroeconomic goals: developing infrastructure, and increasing productivity and industrial value added, in particular. Once again, we see here the effect of lessons learned. The vast majority of people who have moved out of extreme poverty in the last 15 years have been able to do so because of high growth in heavily populated countries, which have become middle-income countries. Invoking productivity, industrialisation and growth to reduce persistent poverty is not therefore inappropriate, although it does raise questions as to our capacity to produce sustained and sustainable GDP growth, especially if this growth must be decoupled from the consumption of natural resources, as recommended by certain complementary targets. Indeed, a major reduction in extreme poverty without an increase in pollution has never been observed; likewise, in the last 30 years, industrialisation has not been accompanied by a reduction in inequalities—yet these are both separate targets or goals in the current SDGs. Far from associating the SDGs with sustainability challenges that, by their very nature, call for the exploration of totally new development paths, in other words an incentive for radical innovation, sectoral targets such as industrialisation are largely based on the reproduction of past trajectories, whose limitations are well known.
- They give more importance to social or societal goals—if need be, simply by recalling certain terms of commitments already made within the framework of treaties or conventions.
- They include peace and security goals. Once again, rather than being excessively ambitious, these should be seen as consistent with the goals of ending poverty, malnutrition and hunger, which, as we know, are concomitant with armed conflict.
- They substantially develop the environmental MDG (MDG 7) according to the terms and objectives of the three Rio conventions (1992: climate, biodiversity, desertification), to which are added marine, life-cycle and waste issues.
- Under each goal, they include at least one target of interest to a country irrespective of its income level, thereby satisfying the principle of universality required by the terms of *The Future We Want*, with the reservation that universal targets are not

2. In this brief, “SDGs” refers to the list of SDGs produced by the Open Working Group (see note 1).

3. At Rio+20, the Heads of State confirmed their commitment to speeding up the shift towards sustainable patterns of consumption and production (SCP), through the adoption of the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on Sustainable Consumption and Production (10YFP), for which the secretariat is hosted by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP).

always quantifiable and quantified. One example of this is halving the number of people in relative poverty (i.e. according to national definitions rather than to the threshold of US\$ 1.25 per day) (quantified target 1.2), or the implementation of sustainable production systems (non-quantified target 2.4).

Finally, it should be pointed out, in procedural rather than substantive terms, that contrary to the MDGs, the SDGs were drafted and negotiated by government representatives.

WHAT LEVEL OF AMBITION?

For the moment, the level of ambition is unquestionably high. The word “end” occurs far more often (10 times) than in the MDGs (once). The range of fields covered, as already mentioned, is also far broader. If it were given a direction, this ambition would move towards a strengthening of the MDGs. It should be stressed that at present, the direction taken is not that of the integration or articulation of development and environmental issues.

ARE THE SDGs REALISTIC?

To the credit of the vice-chairs of the Open Working Group, the drafting of the SDGs was preceded by a number of consultations on the state of problems of unsustainable development and solutions to these problems; they were thus drafted with a view to effectiveness, in other words as goals that can and ought to be achieved, rather than as an asymptote towards which efforts should be directed.

However, criticisms and doubts can be expressed regarding certain goals or targets for which few means of action are available: guaranteeing full employment, or high growth in the least developed countries (LDCs), for example, appear to be unattainable based on the performances of the different policies implemented to date. But full employment and economic catch-up nevertheless feature in most of the macroeconomic models used in universities and trade negotiations. We can therefore once again turn the criticism around for the sake of consistency and, as a last resort, recall Nelson Mandela, who said, “It always seems impossible until it is done”.

To these criticisms are added those of economists who stress the cost of certain goals, in particular those aimed at “ending” a problem⁴—when reducing its incidence (without eradicating it) would have been more efficient. In short, pulling the final

person out of poverty is costly. The same applies to malnutrition. Put that way, this criticism goes against moral standards: if we know how to solve the problem of poverty and malnutrition in its entirety, which principle of justice permits us to avoid doing so? The interesting part of the criticism is elsewhere: it underlines a difficulty that is inseparable from the level of ambition of the SDGs: by producing a comprehensive framework for sustainability, the SDGs blur any priorities. We will return to this in the next section.

We also note the criticisms of development and environmental NGOs regarding the role given to growth and especially to trade liberalisation in the attainment of goals, whereas development and the effective application of international environmental law are not mentioned.

Moreover, it should not be forgotten that the SDGs are also criticised for being nothing more than a new form of self-justification for the aid sector, a criticism already levelled at the MDGs.

All of these criticisms are serious. However, we believe that the real questions lie elsewhere—not in which goals will be met, and with how many decimals, but in the true capacity for change the SDGs offer to economic, political and civil society stakeholders in the different countries.

WHAT CAPACITY FOR CHANGING DEVELOPMENT PATHS AND MODELS?

The SDGs are both a reminder of commitments already made—this is the case for the symbolic goal of combating climate change or protecting biodiversity—and the expression of an ambition and a propeller towards greater achievements; ending extreme poverty and malnutrition are just two examples of this. Whether reminders or propellers, what exactly will they change from January 1, 2016?

At the very least, they will produce *information*: the hundreds of indicators associated with the targets, despite being undoubtedly difficult to read, will provide a more precise, coherent and comprehensive picture than the one currently given by the sporadic UN reports on the quality of development in the different economies and regions of the world. The SDGs will be first and foremost statistics to inform the indicators, both for the “North” and for the “South”.

They can reasonably be expected to produce *knowledge*: provided that monitoring and evaluation mechanisms stimulate experimentation and learning within and between countries, the SDGs can be seen as laboratories for policies in the broad sense, whose effects can be compared over time—with the aim of better understanding what works or does not work, and under which conditions.

4. Bjorn Lomborg “Setting the Right Global Goals” Project Syndicate <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/bj-rn-lomborg-identifies-the-areas-in-which-increased-development-spending-can-do-the-most-good>

The SDGs will also be policies and practices, which is something the MDGs have struggled to achieve beyond the narrow context of development experts.

Today, we have some information concerning the measurement, evaluation and monitoring mechanisms, which are essential to the experimentation and learning processes we have just mentioned. Meeting under the auspices of ECOSOC, in June 2014 a High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) published the prototype of what should become the *Global Sustainable Development Report*—an evaluation report of progress made on the SDGs. Several options are being investigated and discussed concerning its format and frequency: a traditional report drafted under the responsibility of the Secretary-General of the United Nations; a report based on national contributions and stakeholders; or the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) model, in other words a report drafted by an intergovernmental panel on sustainable development. Whatever the option chosen, it is understood that national reports will have to be drafted as well as reports by specialised agencies. The question remains as to how the national reports will be reviewed, including the possibility of peer reviews.

More speculatively, the SDGs can produce a *change* in development path and models: this seems to be essential to ensure all goals are achieved simultaneously, so much so that it could be seen as the indirect objective of all the SDGs. Raising the question of changing models therefore amounts to asking whether or not all the SDGs will be achieved simultaneously—and we stress the word “simultaneously”. It is not just a matter of increasing productivity, but of increasing productivity and changing production models in order to make these less natural resource-intensive, to give just one example. The main uncertainty here concerns the capacity of the SDGs and of the associated monitoring mechanisms to bring about these changes in development paths and models pursuant to the requirements of sustainability. They run the risk of reproducing the same specialisation as the MDGs, making each issue a specific silo: they are every bit as specialised. The tension between development and environment is heightened by the presence of an industrialisation goal on the one hand, and environmental goals on the other. However, the process launched by the HLPF could also succeed where the MDGs have failed, by comparing between countries the systemic functioning of the *simultaneous* achievement of the different goals, especially if the national reports produced contain an explicit forward-looking anticipation of development model changes between 2015 and 2030, rather than a simple juxtaposition of sectoral reports.

Why is there such uncertainty surrounding the capacity for change provided by the SDGs?

First, because they are not self-enforcing. They are not accompanied by penalties and are therefore, in legal terms, devoid of force. Next, since they translate the current imbalance between preferences for the environment and (traditional) preferences for industrialisation and development, they are MDGs+, in other words MDGs combined with environmental concerns, rather than goals that each integrate the many dimensions of sustainable development. In 1992, the collective or consensual priority was for environmental protection; today, it is instead for economic-catch up and a general increase in well-being (measured by growth). This imbalance between preferences is more likely to lead to a harmonisation than to a transformation of development models.

Third, the SDG means of implementation set out in goal 17 seem to fall short of the ambitions of the SDGs as a whole, which we consider to be high. Is it only possible to put an end to a series of 10 scourges or disasters, to protect biodiversity and natural resources, and to dramatically reduce the production of waste through the “strengthening” of existing means of implementation and a “revitalisation” of the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development? This is questionable. The Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing, which will shortly publish its final report,⁵ will perhaps shed further light on this question, as will the Third International Conference on Financing for Development, to be held in Addis Ababa in July 2015. But this partnership, already present as MDG 8, was also broadly criticised for failing to tackle issues of international competition, which were addressed elsewhere (in bilateral trade agreements, for example).

Finally, the SDGs will only be translated into action and truly implemented if they are appropriated by the countries concerned—in literal terms, all countries, because they are universal. The state of discussions to date suggests that they will be more rapidly adopted by the developing countries, and in particular by the low- or middle-income countries, than by the OECD countries, except for the obligation these countries set themselves to honour certain payments. We had thought that sustainable development was an idea belonging to the rich countries. Their silence about what they expect from the SDGs for themselves suggests we were wrong. Sustainable development seems to be first and foremost for the poor. But rich or poor, the countries have exactly one year left to finalise the SDGs. ■

5. The version available when this brief was written was the “Advance unedited version of the report of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing” dated August 8, 2014.