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Three commitments governments should take on to make Sustainable Development Goals the drivers of a major transformation

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On the basis of the outcome document of the Rio+20 conference, the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) mandated an Open Working Group (OWG) 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. "The transformation potential of the SDG package is so great that many of the countries involved in the negotiations may not even fully comprehend the possible magnitude, which may be similar to that of the industrial or digital revolutions," the OWG vice chair reckons. This brief explores tangible options for propelling this transformation.

KEY POINTS

- Countries must prepare to set up a dashboard of SDGs distinguishing between ends and means and narrowing down the number of targets and associated indicators.
- Countries should engage into national strategic planning and designing what would be equivalent to Intended Nationally Determined Contributions (INDCs) applied to a dashboard of country-relevant SDGs (INDCs-eq).
- Within these INDCs-eq, national investment plans should be consolidated, development finance be climate-proofed and scaled up at the same time.

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1. INTRODUCTION

It took more than forty years after the Stockholm Conference on the Human Environment to consider a possible global greenhouse gas emissions reduction agreement, which is at the agenda of the 2015 COP21 in Paris, for a potential application in 2020. The sober arithmetic of time reminds us that sustainable development governance has not yet produced the transformations and accomplishments called for during the Stockholm (1972) and Rio (1992) summits despite the tremendous proliferation of institutions and initiatives.

Global Reports issued before the Rio+20 Conference emphasised what the then Danish Minister of Foreign Affairs Carsten Staur coined as the paradox of "institutional success and environmental degradation".[1] The Future We Want—the outcome document of Rio+20—acknowledges that the system of global sustainable development governance has grown in size and scope but has not been entirely effective in achieving its larger goals of actually improving the global environment, of achieving sustainable development or even of reversing the major trends of degradation.

To what extent are the sustainable development goals (SDGs) likely to overcome the "sustainable development paradox" is the question addressed in this brief.

2. HOW AND WHY DID SDGS EMERGE IN THE GLOBAL AGENDA?

The SDGs[2] 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.

The rationale of SDGs can be traced back to three streams along which they currently expand:

Stream 1: Finish the MDG job

The Millenium Development Goals (SDGs) contributed to the emergence of the concept of SDGs through a kind of analogy. The MDGs have helped to organise the academic "development" community, to stimulate its experimentation processes and research on measurement, to increase knowledge on the impact of the different development projects—and thus on the relevance of each one—, to channel public and private funding and to prioritise public policies, thereby modifying the policy preferences of recipient countries. By raising awareness, MDGs have also affected individual preferences, as shown by the support for the Make Poverty History campaigns and the evolution of different opinion polls on the relevance of official development assistance (ODA).

The realization of MDGs is a mixed success. Several MDG targets have been met: the world has reduced extreme poverty by half, efforts in the fight against malaria and tuberculosis have shown positive results, access to drinking water sources has improved, and disparities in primary school enrollment between boys and girls are being eliminated in all developing regions. In the same time, major trends that threaten environmental sustainability continue, and progress in combating hunger, child and maternal mortality is insufficient and uneven across countries, with Sub-Saharan countries lagging behind. Strikingly enough, success in halving poverty has much less to do with foreign development assistance than with GDP growth in emerging countries such as China.

Stream 2: Bolster the catching-up process and cope with its side effects

SDGs have emerged at the initiative of two developing countries—Colombia and Guatemala—which are neither least developed nor emerging countries. These countries call for a new agenda geared toward bolstering the catching-up process while enabling them to cope with all its environmental and social negative side-effects. Some of the non-LDC countries are indeed beset with rich and poor countries' problems alike, without benefiting neither from the facilities granted to the LDCs and LICs (ODA grants and concessional loans) nor from the institutional capacities of OECD countries. This is spectacular in the health sector, where in addition to supplying and sustaining primary health services for the most in need, they have to cope with non-communicable diseases such as diabetes, cancers or heart diseases and to meet emerging middle-class demand for universal health coverage. It is also commonplace in the energy sector where the transition towards a low-carbon economy has to come about in a context of growing energy demand and social pressure for universal access to modern energy. The sustainable development paradox and the challenge of making economic, social and environmental pillars hold together is particularly salient in the low-and-middle income country group.

1. Outcome document – Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/owg.html.
2. In this brief, "SDGs" refers to the list of SDGs produced by the Open Working Group (see note 1).

Stream 3: Bring back the environment in the development agenda

The environmental question holds the "challenger position" on the international scene against more conventional diplomatic issues, such as security, economy or development. In 2000, a shift took place in the balance between environmental and developmental issues, along with the agenda established by the Millennium Summit of the United Nations in New York, and the MDGs for poverty reduction, which marginalized environmental protection and sustainable development. This shift endorsed the establishment of environmental protection as a secondary objective or "dominated issue" of the international community's agenda[3]—partly because of the difficulty to hasten convergence across governments (and across ministries within countries) on solutions to environmental problems and/or because these problems rank at the bottom of the hierarchy of the perceived challenges faced by a given country. Attempts to bring back environment on the top of the development agenda can be illustrated by the green growth/green economy concepts put forward, with some dissensus, at the Rio+20 conference (2012).

3. COMMITMENTS FOR TURNING GOALS INTO MEANS FOR A MAJOR TRANSFORMATION

The word "transformation" abounds in the synthesis report of the Secretary-General. "The year 2015 offers a unique opportunity for global leaders and people to end poverty, transform the world to better meet human needs and the necessities of economic transformation (…)" the first paragraph states. "Transformation is our watchword," the Secretary General states a few paragraphs further below. "A truly transformative agenda" is called for a couple of pages after… Similar emphasis is placed on "transformation" by the vice-chair of the Open Working Group, Csaba Kőrösi: "The most important aspect of the SDGs is that they contain the key components of a major transformation. If anything close to these goals can be implemented by 2030, then nothing short of a huge reorganisation will have taken place. The transformation potential of the SDG package is so great that many of the countries involved in the negotiations may not even fully comprehend the possible magnitude, which may be similar to that of the industrial or digital revolutions."[4]

SDGs are indeed a list of goals anyone could hardly disagree with. "The package that we've reached is far from complete and far from perfect" Kőrösi acknowledges. "For instance, it is not yet suitable for public communication. We wanted every component of the package to meet the 'M&M' criterion, by this we mean to be understood by ministers and mothers, and the 'mothers' part of this objective has not been achieved. However, this is the package that we were able to obtain at a given point of time, at a certain point of the process—and we were able to agree on 169 targets" (Kőrösi, 2015).

Commitment 1: set up a dashboard of SDGs at country level

What would make the transformation that SDGs are supposed to trigger ever happen? End results goals are not transformative *in essence*—they simply inform us on whether or not the transformation *has happened*. In his reading of the OWG report, Michael Jacobs quite rightly pinpoints a mix of ends and means in the list of SDGs.[5] Following his account, there are 12 end-state goals defining a good society (including a sustainable environment) and 5 means or strategies to achieve them. In the same vein, the 169 targets can be split between core targets (i.e. eradicate extreme poverty) and more loose policy objectives (i.e. implement nationally appropriate social protection systems). Michael Jacobs' proposition is to prioritize end goals to means, and core targets to policy objectives, so as to pass the coherence test and implicitly meet the 'M&M' criterion which is deemed a guarantee for success. Michael Jacobs' comment is pretty much in line with the essence of MDGs—a list of end results to achieve.

One could argue however that the goals should focus on means instead of ends, and/or that targets should focus on policy objectives, to make sure that SDGs are transformative in essence. This involves in turn agreeing on the drivers of transformation, and on a policy agenda that countries would all commit to implement to make the transformation happen.

The "means" versus "ends" actually points to two different conceptions of SDGs. The first is normative on means and provides a list of problems to solve. The second is aspirational on ends and prejudges that naming ends will propel action. Whatever our judgement on the conception we deem the more appropriate, we can agree with Michael Jacobs that SDGs do not choose between means

3. The term was coined by Laurence Tubiana (forthcoming).
4. Kőrösi Csaba (2015). "Negotiating a common future: What we have learnt from the SDGs" in Pachauri, Paugam, Ribera, Tubiana (eds) *Building the Future we Want* A Planet for Life Series, TERI Press, New Delhi : 74-82.
5. Jacobs M. (2014). "The sustainable development goals and climate change: some thoughts on rationalization" New Climate Economy mimeo.

and ends at both goals and targets level—and that further distinction would help. Countries should urgently set up a dashboard of SDGs distinguishing between ends and means and narrowing down the number of targets and associated indicators.

Commitment 2: prepare Intended Nationally Determined Contributions applied to a dashboard of country-relevant SDGs (INDCs-eq)

Sceptics will point out that the UN files are bursting with texts, treaties and conventions which, if taken as a whole, cover the three dimensions of sustainable development. What the SDGs can add to this maze of texts is a legitimate question.

Whatever their nature and number, they should deliver practical results in the three dimensions of sustainable development. "SDGs would focus the broad debate at a practical level, and (…) productively address key issues for which measurable progress would be welcome", the governments of Guatemala and Colombia argued in their proposal for creating SDGs in early 2012.[6] Practicality implies measurement, data collection, verification, and access, but also knowledge on causation mechanisms underpinning failures and successes, ve.g. more than information on what goal and target have been ultimately achieved.

"If we are serious about implementation, then the bulk of the work will have to be done back at home" Kőrösi recalls. He further adds: "Even though the General Assembly has adopted the OWG's report with its goals and targets, ensuring that it will become a vital part of future negotiations, this in itself will not generate a movement of capital and knowledge. Only national and local plans and projects can achieve this redirection of funds. Banks and institutions will not finance the SDGs; finances and other implementation means will be targeted at actual, tangible projects. On this aspect, there is still much work to be done. SDGs are in place, but most countries do not have national plans and there is certainly a lack of projects".[7] In between global talks at UN headquarters and direct consultations of world citizens through Internet with initiatives such as MyWorld, there is a missing middle, which is the country level.

One way to foster national appropriation, thereby bridging the sustainable development implementation gap, would be to develop forward-looking views of different potential development paths for 2030 at national and regional levels. These forward-looking exercises are ongoing in some countries for climate change and energy and agriculture.[8] They could be generalized to other SDGs[9] and lead to the formalization of what would be equivalent to Intended Nationally Determined Contributions applied to a dashboard of country-relevant SDGs (INDCs-eq.).

Commitment 3: Consolidate national investment plan within INDCs-eq.

What will make (sustainable) development finance transformative? Financing for development (FfD) and climate financing talks place great emphasize on the mobilization of new/additional resources to bridge the gaps with the trillion-dollar estimated needs to achieve the SDGs—assuming implicitly that the transformation will stem from "more" money to start with. In addition to scaling up private finance, some of the emerging common issues in the finance discussions in the COP and FfD include domestic resource mobilization, effective modalities of channeling finance, allocation to LDCs, and MRV.

There seems to be a consensus among practitioners that simultaneously managing co-benefits and trade-offs between climate and development priorities would increase the effectiveness of both climate and development finance and make these consistent with the transformative ambition of SDGs. A storyline could be that development finance should be climate-proofed and scaled up at the same time. The definition of national investment plans within INDCs-eq. would be a critical step forward.

Last, it is very likely that SDGs and countries will not receive equal shares from the available capital available worldwide. Hence the need to place greater emphasis on the access to and dynamics of financing, and in particular on who ultimately pays: the taxpayer or the consumer? The taxpayer from the North or the South? Is it the rich consumer or the poor consumer? SDGs funding in the long term is comparable to the issuance of a debt for which the underwriters and the schedule must be specified from the outset—otherwise the financing will not be *sustainable*, in both the environmental and financial meanings of the word.

6. RIO + 20: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) *A Proposal from the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala*, mimeo, 2012.
7. See footnote 6.
8. See the Deep Decarbonization Pathways Project http://unsdsn.org/what-we-do/deep-decarbonization-pathways/
9. See http://unsdsn.org/news/2015/03/13/the-world-in-2050-pathways-towards-a-sustainable-future/