

Concretizing vagueness: new momentum for development through sustainable development goals?

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The year 2012 once again offers the opportunity to shape global development policy-making. 20 years after the initiation of the Rio Process, the United Nations (UN) return to Rio to assess and renew their commitment to sustainable development. But how can new momentum for development be achieved? One possible new impetus for development is the idea of so-called Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which has emerged in the run-up to the Rio+20 Summit. It is still unclear if these goals will find sufficient backing, what they would include and when they would be implemented. Yet, some important aspects have to be considered in order to avoid mentioned past shortcomings of both UN processes. A balance and interconnectedness of issues is essential both to emphasize the interlinkages and to address the criticism of an environmental bias in the Rio Process. Importantly, central issues like poverty eradication must not be neglected. Additionally, measuring success is of importance. Here, measuring techniques as well as the quality of data collection have to be taken seriously. Institutional backing is equally important. This is relevant for the structures of international governance of development which have to be embedded in competent institutions and for implementation on national and local level where often-praised “ownership” has to be realized.

1. FROM MDGS TO SDGS?

The current rapprochement of sustainable development and development targets as reflected by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) is represented by the emerging debate on MDGs and so-called SDGs. While the idea of SDGs surfaced in 2011 during various preparatory meetings for the 2012 summit on initiative by the governments of Colombia, Guatemala and Peru, it was officially introduced in the first draft of the Rio Outcome Documents, launched in January 2012.

In this document SDGs are mentioned in paragraphs 105 to 110, which call for the establishment of SDGs by 2012 in order to “reflect an integrated and balanced treatment of the three dimensions of sustainable development”. It is not clear however at this point, how the SDGs relate effectively to the MDGs. Further paragraphs only provide for limited clarification on this. Paragraph 107 details the potential issues to be reflected by the SDGs, including sustainable consumption and production patterns, food security and sustainable agriculture, sustainable energy for all, water access and efficiency, sustainable cities, green jobs and others.

Paragraph 108 calls for an integrated approach. The explicit linkage of the two sets of indicators is however not evident from the current language in the draft outcome document. For this reason several official as well as unofficial processes are currently underway with the goal of shaping the overall strategy in designing these indicator sets, identifying the key issues and mapping out potential alternatives.

However these indicators will develop over the years to come, the following aspects appear relevant for consideration in designing one set or several sets, which will serve the purpose and expectations raised by the various constituents. If designed carefully, SDGs could create a more appropriate fundament for development success.

2. BALANCING ISSUES

Due to the stronger presence of ecological challenges compared to 1992, the existent economic and social injustices, the experience of economic instability and the perceived linkages between different global challenges today, awareness of the need for sustainable development might be raised more easily than ever before.

Still, the perceived or actual “environmental bias” is a problematic element of the current sustainable development discourse. This bias allegedly stems from the environmental agendas that the governments of the Global North pursue. Some observers speak of an “environmental bias that has hijacked” the movement of sustainable development and criticize the neglect of attention to the importance of economic development (Victor 2006). It is a fact that environmentalists were strongly involved in the design of sustainable development concepts, as they were in the Brundtland Commission and the following events (Warburton 1998). However, even apart from any assumed political agenda, “sustainability” is often associated with ecological concerns.

A related major concern regarding the transition from or the combination of MDGs and SDGs relates to the general development character of the MDGs. With the SDGs seen as inherently more environment-focused by some stakeholders, this might lead to shortcomings on the part of some of the MDGs, where this linkage cannot easily be established. A prominent example might be the sanitation target, which is explicitly development-linked, but has no obvious immediate implications for the green economy. Yet even if linkages are more evident, it is important that poverty alleviation must not fall behind when designing SDGs. It has to be emphasized that one purpose of a green economy is to contribute to today’s and future economic and social development within countries as well as globally. Importantly, the general warning that economic development should not harm the environment and that environmental initiatives should not have negative effects on the economic growth is not enough if the holistic understanding of sustainable development is taken seriously. This is especially important considering the risk that green economy models, based on the existing market logic, unfold the same perpetuation of inequalities. Thus, policies should not only avoid harming the respective parallel development pillar but should rather aim at improving all three different factors in a truly balanced way. It does not fulfil sustainable development criteria if only the avoidance of a slow-down of needed growth is included in environmental policy-making. Rather, existing negative effects of the present economic model have to be acknowledged as well.

In this line, caution has to be exercised concerning new possible conditionalities in economic cooperation that could stem from such a green economy model and impede changes in poorer regions. These and protectionist effects resulting from green economic parameters would harm developing countries instead of utilizing the new economy model to foster equitable economic and social development.

3. INTERCONNECTING ISSUES

One of the key criticisms of the MDGs is that the goals do not reflect that issues addressed by individual targets are interconnected. Reaching each and every individual goal is often highly contingent on sufficient performance in one or more of the other categories. For example health-related goals either directly or indirectly depend on poverty alleviation as well as a clean environment. At the same time, one could argue that health is an important precondition for the education-related

goals. Although it is quite clear that separate and clearly defined goals are necessary in order to focus attention on the attainment of certain issues, it is often argued that paying more attention to the interconnected nature of most of the goals will actually help to avoid duplication of efforts, to better target assistance and to identify the most effective levers in reaching the overall aim of the entire set of goals.

It is the interconnectedness issue, where the compatibility of different developmental goals is most relevant. On the one hand, in many instances those issues currently subsumed under the potential SDGs represent those aspects in natural resources management that provide for the necessary environmental safety and security in order to assure the more development oriented MDGs. On the other hand, taking a closer look at some of the SDGs suggested, highlights the need for also carefully considering interrelationships between them. This observation is for example epitomized by the water-, food- and energy security nexus, which highlights the interconnectedness of these three resources and their relevance for development (Hoff 2011).

4. MEASURING SUCCESS

Measuring progress and success in attaining any development-related goals is a main concern. Measurability is of importance in targeting assistance, monitoring those arrangements that work and identifying those that do not lead to positive results. Measurability has definitely been referred to as one of the merits of the MDGs and much work has gone into developing more or less elaborate monitoring and measuring systems or refining those that already existed. An example is the Joint Monitoring Programme (JMP) on access to water supply and sanitation, as stipulated by MDG 7. The JMP effort is administered by UNICEF and WHO (UNICEF/WHO 2010) and seeks to gather current data on access to water-related services across the world. While the JMP is highly regarded for its statistical rigor, it also demonstrates the intricacies in monitoring complex service delivery. While the JMP already differentiates between different types and qualities of access it does not take into consideration the quality of the service delivered, such as the quality of the water delivered or the further processing of waste water. This example demonstrates that monitoring, while so decisive for the goals' success, is probably also one of the greatest drawbacks. For some of the proposed SDGs it will be extremely difficult to measure complex natural or social processes and dynamics. One of the

main challenges in the negotiations to come will be managing the thin line between accuracy and complexity, between precision and measurability. In addition, while measuring results might prove to be difficult enough, it is crucial not only to measure if progress in the respective targets is achieved but also how this progress is achieved. Sustainable development is only possible if it is known which actions lead to the intended outcome. Evaluations and rigid testing are therefore needed. If these are not conducted progress cannot be attributed to any measures taken.

5. INSTITUTIONAL BACKING

The institutional issues that are to be discussed at the Rio+20 Summit might compensate for their omission at the MDG Review. Questions of governance have always been more articulated in the Rio Process and new institutional arrangements could have positive consequences for sustainable development governance. The draft of the Rio outcome document lays out plans for a completely new framework for sustainable development, anchored in the current structure of ECOSOC, the CSD and other specialized UN agencies, which are to be revitalized, transformed or complemented. Here, it is important to acknowledge that the positioning of institutions for sustainable development can have an effect on their functions. The debate on reorganizing International Environmental Governance in connection with the Rio Process has to be evaluated more carefully if concerns that environmental aspects prevail over the other pillars are taken seriously.

The question that actually emerges in this context and needs to be considered in Rio with view to the SDG/MDG reform relates to the ownership of these goals at the international level. One option would be administering the goals and their monitoring process through one global entity that keeps track of progress on all goals, thus also ensuring their coherence and keeping track of their interconnectedness. The other option would be leaving individual goals in the responsibility of individual expert UN agencies, such as UNICEF and WHO in the case of health-related goals.

While both solutions for the international level have their merits and drawbacks, what matters most in the institutional set-up for the goals are national structures and institutions. These are at the heart of the implementation process. Here it is often better known, how much has been reached and where future efforts need to be directed. In effect, what is needed is thus a closer correlation and collaboration of global as well as national

institutions. The purpose should be to facilitate action and strengthen accountability. This need had been articulated in the MDG Review already and should be taken up by the SDGs or any other related process accordingly.

6. STRONG SIGNAL FOR POST 2015

It is uncertain how the negotiations about MDGs and SDGs might turn out over the coming months and whether there will be a decision about new goals in Rio or not. Yet, the current debate is useful in several ways. First, SDGs can help to finally concretize the idea of sustainable development after 20 years of vagueness. Second, the debate about the MDGs is opened. They certainly have left some issues uncovered; some even argue that their original intention 'has been denied' (Vandemoortele 2011). If well-directed the SDGs could help place the development debate and the MDGs in the right context, by highlighting the interconnectedness of the goals with other economic, social and environmental factors, thus highlighting their multiple dimensions and aspects. Third, the timing of the SDG debate is helpful in carrying over the MDGs to and beyond the 2015 time horizon. It is very unlikely that the SDGs enter into force and full implementation phase after the 2012 summit. It is pretty clear however is that they will guide the debate for the years until 2015 and beyond.

Trying to answer the question, how new momentum for development can be created in the context of Rio+20, the general challenge remains: problems are complex but action must be specific. Neither too much reduction nor too extensive concepts are feasible. A campaign, like the Millennium Campaign, has proven to be able to galvanize actors while sustainable development seems to leave room for too many interpretations without uniting actors on a common goal. If sustainable

development is seen as a fundament underpinning specific policy tasks that can both be represented through a global campaign as well as satisfy the holistic understanding of development, the Rio Process can gain new impetus. Here, the acknowledgment that this understanding is the only way for a real move forward would have to be the starting point.

The current debate on SDGs could be a fruitful way to reach a more promising concept for sustainable development action. The first looming obstacle, however, is finding an international agreement on SDGs. Taking into account the original understanding of sustainable development SDGs would have to be universal. Up to now, support for the idea of SDGs is uncertain. It can be assumed that support by the Global North as well as of some emerging countries is less likely if SDGs encompassed more than the usual pledge to increase ODA. If domestic policy changes are connected to such a commitment some governments might be reluctant to agree on sufficiently ambitious goals and targets. ■

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