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Post 2015: how to reconcile the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

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Briefing Paper 18/2012

Post 2015: How to Reconcile the *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)* and the *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*?

Summary

For the last 20 years, the international development debate has been dominated by two trends that seem at first to be heading in a similar direction. However, under closer scrutiny they differ with respect to their focus and underlying philosophies. These are on the one hand the agenda of reducing poverty in developing countries in its various dimensions (lack of income, education, water, political participation etc.) that found their expression in the *Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)*. On the other hand, there is the idea of sustainability that became popular at the Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and that at the Rio+20 summit in 2012 generated a parallel concept to the MDGs: the so called *Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)*.

Two independent UN working groups will soon be created: One to discuss whether there should be a new global development agenda after the term of the MDGs ends in 2015, and what such an agenda should entail; the other is to compile a list of possible SDGs. This raises the question what happens if these separate processes actually result in two differing sets of goals, and if it might still be possible to merge the poverty and sustainability agendas.

Both agendas have a lot in common, but in contrast to the MDGs, the proponents of SDGs see poverty as merely one of a number of global issues to be addressed, which again makes those in favour of the MDGs afraid that poverty reduction will become secondary in an SDG

agenda as just one item among many others. On the other hand, the pro-SDG side criticises the MDGs for having a too narrow concept of development and giving immediate results preference over socially, economically and ecologically sustainable ones.

Both are valid concerns, and thus it is important to find a solution that takes them both into account, while still satisfying the interests of countries around the world.

In this case it is helpful to highlight a rather technical aspect: The majority of the MDGs refer to improvements in the wellbeing of individuals, they are thus final goals of human development (education, health, access to water) to be measured at the micro-level. The SDG agenda also involves such goals (clean air, biodiversity), but also ones that refer to the preservation or establishment of global public goods (limiting climate change, financial stability) that can thus only be measured through macro-indicators. The latter are not objectives, but preconditions for sustainable development that for reasons of consistency should not enter into one agenda with final goals. Some of these are already addressed by MDG 8 (among them a fair financial and world trade system).

If one were to create two separate but mutually referring agendas for the future beyond 2015 – one concentrating on human development, the other on global public goods – it might be possible to address the most serious concerns of the proponents of either pure MDGs or pure SDGs.

Strengths of the MDGs

The MDGs are the result of a process that started in 1990. It aims at making aid more effective and focusing it more on poverty reduction. In addition, it started taking poverty as a multi-dimensional phenomenon rather than simply a lack of income. In a number of world conferences long lists of goals in the areas of education, food, child development and more were adopted. The most important of these goals were consolidated in the UN's Millennium Declaration. The time had come, eleven years after the end of the cold war and before the emergence of possible new international conflicts, and so it was possible to define clear value targets and a target year to a number of the goals in the Millennium Declaration and present them to the UN General Assembly as the MDGs in 2001.

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

Proponents of the MDGs argue that, to be as successful, a new international agenda beyond 2015 should also be straightforward and realistic. They accuse those who try to push goals from other policy areas onto the agenda of using the MDGs to their own ends, and profiteering from their success and popularity. This would cause the original MDGs to be sidelined and their essence watered down.

Weaknesses of the MDGs

Meanwhile, the critics of the MDGs point out that they also have a number of weaknesses:

First, they constitute an incomplete agenda. They originated in the Millennium Declaration, but only cover the chapters 'Development and poverty eradication' as well as parts of 'Protecting our common environment', completely leaving out 'Peace, security and disarmament' as well as 'Human rights, democracy and good governance'.

Equally, they cover only some dimensions of multi-dimensional poverty. With reference to the work of Amartya Sen, the international aid debate defines poverty as multiple deprivation of basic capabilities: economic, human, socio-cultural, political and protective. The MDGs

Box 1: The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)
1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieve universal primary education
3. Promote gender equality and empower women
4. Reduce child mortality
5. Improve maternal health
6. Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensure environmental sustainability
8. Develop a global partnership for development

measure economic capabilities (in MDG 1) and human capabilities (in MDGs 2–7), but neither socio-cultural nor political capabilities, and protective capabilities only in a rudimentary fashion (i.e. social security as an aspect of decent work for all).

Second, the MDGs neglect distributive issues. For instance, when a particular country lowers its child mortality rate, then MDG 4 does not capture whether this is due to improvements in the health of the most disadvantaged, i.e. with the highest probability of their children dying before age 5 or others that are better off in terms of child survival. For policy makers it may be cheaper and hence more attractive to invest in the health of the latter rather than those at the bottom of the pyramid.

Third, some MDGs measure *outputs* or *inputs* rather than *outcomes* or *impacts* of development. MDG2, for example measures only the intake of education, regardless of its quality or relevance for economic, social and political life.

Fourth, some MDGs cannot even be measured – either because no indicators or targets were set, or because for certain indicators no data is available.

Fifth, the MDGs cannot easily be transformed into national objectives. They were originally formulated as global goals, but, without modification they were increasingly seen as national objectives in order to create national accountability.

This interpretation constitutes a particular challenge to the least developed countries, which tend to have started out in the baseline year 1990 with much poorer performance than other countries with regards to most MDG indicators. There-

Box 2: Issues that the Rio+20 declaration has suggested to be addressed by Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)
Poverty reduction
Food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture
Water and sanitation
Energy
Sustainable tourism
Sustainable transport
Sustainable cities and human settlements
Health and population
Promoting full and productive employment, decent work for all and social protection
Oceans and seas
Small island developing countries
Least developed countries
Landlocked developing countries
Africa
Regional efforts
Disaster risk reduction
Climate change
Forests
Biodiversity
Desertification, land degradation and drought
Mountains
Chemicals and waste
Sustainable consumption and production
Mining
Education
Gender equality and the empowerment of women

fore, it has been especially hard for them, for instance, to achieve MDG1c, which calls for a reduction in the share of malnourished people by half between 1990 and 2015. Countries that start from a higher share of people with malnutrition have more difficulties in achieving the goal than other countries, because the goal implies a much greater reduction for them in the absolute number of people with hunger. It would therefore be good to create a fairer formula for allocating the responsibilities or contributions to implementing the common global goals to each country.

Sixth, some goals at the global level were unrealistic right from the start (e.g. MDG 2, which demands total enrolment in primary education worldwide), while others demonstrate low ambitions, at least at the global level (e.g. MDG1, which asks for halving the share of people that suffer from income poverty and which according to the World Bank has already been achieved – see, however, *Briefing Paper 3/2012* on this issue, as well).

Furthermore, many criticise the MDGs as well for being too focused on the social sectors and neglecting the production sectors and economic development. This judgement, however, is unfair for two reasons: First, the MDGs do not focus on particular sectors, but on goals of human development. Achieving the health goals (MDGs 4–6) may well require investments in healthcare, but it 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 to be preconditions for long-term poverty reduction and for the achievement of the MDGs. But they are no ends in themselves and should therefore not have a place in an MDG agenda.

The SDGs

Proponents of an SDG agenda further criticise three other aspects of the MDGs: (i) they are not global goals and ultimately put obligations on the developing countries; (ii) they are generally short to medium term and thus run counter to policies that are oriented towards sustainability, which necessarily have to be inherently longer-term; (iii) central areas of sustainable policies – chiefly environmental objectives – are not reflected sufficiently.

These points of criticism are justified. The first one can be addressed by formulating goals in a way that takes the stages of development of individual countries into account.

The other two question the MDGs more generally. However, current proposals for a future SDG agenda so far have not created an alternative to the second criticism. It too envisions a rather short-term horizon and the indicators suggested so far do not include aspects of sustainability as well. The proposed agenda differs from the MDGs mostly in that there is a wider range of goals that matter from a sustainability perspective. Since each of the proposals for a possible future SDG agenda are still at the suggestion stage and sometimes vary widely, Box 2 lists the issues suggested by the Rio+20 summit's final report for a future SDG agenda.

Of course, the MDGs are not a purely socio-political agenda and neither would potential SDGs be just environmental. Both approaches involve similar ideas. They differ mostly with respect to their underlying thinking: While the MDGs are mostly inspired by improving the living conditions of the poorest people, the SDGs main concern is shaping development sustainably.

Consequences for a new international agenda

A new post-2015 international development agenda should focus on the MDGs' strengths, while avoiding their weaknesses. It should still consist of a number of manageable goals that are easy to understand, measurable and with a deadline. On the other hand they should be (i) more comprehensive than the MDGs have been, (ii) correlation sensitive, (iii) *outcome-oriented*, (iv) specified by indicators, (v) country specific and (vi) realistic while still ambitious.

What needs to be avoided is that MDGs and SDGs are created without being coordinated. Indeed, it is necessary to design an integrated agenda that takes the poverty as well as sustainability debates into account.

Possible additional goals

In the current debate on such an agenda, determining the areas it should cover will be crucial. It is almost beyond dispute that *reducing income poverty, food security, education, health, family planning and gender equality* will be involved – one way or the other.

It is a good idea, and has the agreement of all countries, to include a goal *infrastructure*, which will encompass the already included sub-goals water and sanitation, as well as adequate housing and energy supply.

Box 3: Possible structure of a post-2015 international agenda in two parts

Agenda 1: Human development objectives (final goals)	Agenda 2: Provision of global public goods (instrumental goals / enablers)
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Reduction of income poverty 2. Food security 3. Education 4. Health and family planning 5. Infrastructure (energy, housing, water and sanitation) 6. Environment (clean air and water, protection of resources) 7. Resilience (human and social security) 8. Good governance (transparency, efficiency, political participation, human and civil rights) <p>(Monitoring differentiated by gender, income and location)</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Limiting climate change 2. Joint global management of oceans, the atmosphere, space, the polar regions, fresh water resources 3. Containing infectious diseases 4. Improving the stability of financial markets 5. Creating an open, rules-based and fair system of world trade 6. Curbing international terrorism 7. Disarmament of anti-personnel mines and weapons of mass destruction

Further, there will possibly be agreement on a goal *resilience* that will refer to human and social security – i.e. protective opportunities.

In spite of possible opposition from certain countries, it would also be desirable to introduce a framework for political and sociocultural capabilities (human rights, good governance, peace, security, civil rights, social inclusion etc.).

It would further be desirable to take distributive issues into consideration. This does not mean introducing an additional goal *distribution* but rather measuring achievements towards each goal separately for different population groups or even better giving results different weight according to the segment of the population (rich and poor, women and men, urban and rural, disadvantaged and privileged etc.), to avoid general advances in a country for a given indicator either hiding strong internal differentiation, or in extremis overall improvements solely being the result of progress among those already privileged.

Most controversial is what can be done to improve the status of *environmental* goals. 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), but their commitment and status could be strengthened. Other goals suggested by the Rio+20 agenda also involve *outcomes* and thus could easily be included in a new list of MDGs (i.e. protection from desertification, soil degradation or over-exploitation of fresh water resources), whereas that could be more difficult for goals that cannot be measured according to indicators at the micro-level and which strictly speaking are not actually final goals, but instruments, i.e. ‘enablers’ of development such as climate stability or the protection of seas and oceans. Without them, many objectives cannot be achieved – nor can many MDGs. But because of this instrumental relationship it makes sense to differentiate between them and final goals of human development (see Box 3).

A two part agenda

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 (preconditions) of human development. The latter would build on MDG 8 and also contain all those goals that the world community can only solve by working together. And the former would include MDGs 1-7 and some sustainability goals now missing in the MDG agenda. Such a division makes sense, because (i) the goals on either side of the agenda are conceptually different; (ii) improvements for the former can be measured at the national and sub-national level as well as globally, whereas for the latter in general only globally; (iii) the goals of both parts are instrumentally linked.

Moreover, this would also take into account the concerns of proponents of either a new MDG agenda and those in favour of SDGs: Such a division into two parts would limit the marginalisation of goals for poverty reduction on the one hand, while the second part would ensure that the most important criteria of sustainable development would at least be taken into account. MDGs and SDGs would be combined to form a unified agenda, living up to the expectations of the paradigms of both poverty and sustainability.

The objectives of this agenda should be global in every sense of the word: The goals of the second part are 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.

Whether such an agenda will come together, has to be seen. After all, more important than its actual manifestations is that it needs to be accepted by all governments and societies. In contrast to the inception of the MDGs in 2001, the developing countries really need to be fully integrated into the elaboration of the new agenda right from the beginning, and the concerns of governments and NGOs both in the North and the South need to be considered in equal measure.



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