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Post-2015 sustainable development goals: UN negotiations begin

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Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals

UN Negotiations Begin

Marianne Beisheim

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) are due to be met by 2015. Some targets have already been achieved, but most will not be met on time. Now the UN is considering the post-2015 development agenda. The high-level panel appointed by the UN Secretary-General to advise on the future of the MDGs began its work in late September. The UN General Assembly is also in the process of establishing an intergovernmental open working group tasked with developing a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). Since the concept of sustainable development means reconciling conflicts between environmental and developmental objectives, both processes should become one in the mid-term. This would allow UN member states to negotiate a *single* set of goals for sustainable development with global reach. So, what are the decisive factors for this process and what institutional support will it require?

In 1992, the international community committed to the principle of sustainable development. Twenty years on, the world is still struggling to put it into practice. A set of concrete goals would help drive the process forward. At the moment, however, ideas about the form and content of the goals are rather vague. There is consensus that carefully selected goals should take account of the economic, social, and environmental dimensions of sustainability and the interrelations between them. The goals should also be measurable, verifiable and time-bound. At the UN, various efforts to develop such goals are currently in process – to be effective, the UN should strive to bring them together.

The post-2015 agenda: new development goals ...?

After the UN adopted the Millennium Declaration in 2000, some of the aims it contained were built into the eight MDGs. The goals define – mostly by indicators, base year and target year – what progress the international community wants to achieve by 2015. The MDGs are a success to the extent that they became a multilateral point of reference: annual evaluations show what has been achieved and where efforts need to be stepped up.

However, there is also much criticism. A general complaint is that the MDGs do not cover the full content of the Millennium Declaration. Critics also feel that the goals reflect an over-simplified understand-

ing of poverty, and that they fail to account for qualitative elements, for the interrelationships involved, and for matters of justice, equity, and sustainability.

The report entitled *Realizing the Future We Want for All*, which the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda published in June, addresses this criticism and develops a broader basis for the future development agenda. Based on three fundamental principles (human rights, equality, and sustainability), the report says that the goals should cover four core dimensions (inclusive social development, environmental sustainability, inclusive economic development, and peace and security). While some experts advise formulating goals solely on outcomes (i.e. on ends not means), the report includes a discussion on measures (“enablers”). These would need to be adapted to suit different local contexts. The report, does not, however, formulate a set of goals because the authors do not want to prescribe the inter-governmental negotiations.

The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (HLP), which the UN Secretary-General recently appointed, has been tasked with producing a proposal for the agenda during the first half of 2013. Ban Ki-moon called on the panel members – who include Germany’s former President Horst Köhler – to be bold yet practical in their thinking. It remains to be seen whether the panel will not only set out broad parameters but also suggest specific goals. Homi Kharas (Brookings Institution) has been named executive secretary and lead author of the panel. The HLP’s proposals will inform the Secretary-General’s report, which Ban Ki-moon will present to the General Assembly’s high-level meeting on the MDGs, scheduled for September 2013. After that, it will be up to the member states to negotiate the post-2015 agenda and decide on a set of goals, targets and indicators.

... or is it better to go straight for sustainable development goals ...?

The MDGs have drawn criticism for the large “ecological footprint” left by the development successes achieved to date, particularly in China. Sustainability does not feature as a cross-cutting dimension that is integral to all the MDGs. Instead, only one of the eight goals aims to ensure environmental sustainability (MDG 7) and its requirements are rather vague.

The outcome document of the Rio+20 Summit, which was adopted in June 2012, proposes developing a set of universally applicable SDGs. Colombia and Guatemala put this item on the agenda in the run-up to the summit. However, nothing has been decided as to the actual content of the goals. The Rio+20 Outcome Document merely names 26 possible priority areas for which the international community could develop goals and indicators. It is also unclear whether the SDGs will exist in addition to the MDGs, or if both will be incorporated into a single set of goals – so far the latter is the ambition expressed by the UN.

Some G77 countries stressed that they would not accept another UN- or expert-led process of the kind that established the MDGs. Instead, they pushed for a member state-driven process to agree a set of global SDGs. An open working group (OWG) is therefore being set up that will comprise 30 members representing the UN’s regional groups. The OWG’s task will be to present a proposal for a concrete set of goals to the 68th session of the UN General Assembly, ideally in September 2013. Even though such an intergovernmental process may be better suited to negotiating a solution that is acceptable to all member states – although presumably one that will only be based on a minimum consensus – there is still no guarantee that the General Assembly will agree to the proposal.

... including goals for peace and statebuilding?

Right at the beginning, the Millennium Declaration addresses the relevance of peace, security and disarmament. Yet the MDGs do not pick up on these issues. However, fragile states and a lack of security (due to violent conflicts, or repressive measures imposed by governmental or private security forces) are two of the main obstacles on the road to achieving the MDGs. The abovementioned report by the UN Task Team also emphasizes that peace and security are core dimensions of sustainable development. Freedom from violence could be one of the new goals, measured with indicators like figures on battle-related deaths or targeted killings.

The fourth High Level Forum on Aid Effectiveness, held in Busan (South Korea) in December 2011, presented five Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs): legitimate politics, security, justice, economic foundations, and well-managed revenues and services. Representatives of fragile states within the g7+ group drew up the goals in collaboration with international partners. Germany supports the initiative and recently presented its own guidelines for working with fragile states. Ellen Johnson Sirleaf, President of Liberia and Co-Chair of the HLP, and Emilia Pires, Minister of Planning and Finance in Timor-Leste, chair of the g7+ and member of the HLP will most likely try to put the PSGs on the post-2015 agenda. At the moment, however, these goals are rather vague. Indicators should have been presented in September 2012, but they are not yet on the table.

Governance goals such as aiming to reduce corruption, strengthening civil society, and reinforcing the states' capacity to collect taxes while boosting transparency in how they use the money – are certainly most desirable. However, as countries attach great importance to their sovereignty in these matters, it is unlikely that ambitious governance goals will become a reality.

An integrated set of goals

So what might a *single* limited set of global sustainable development goals look like? A set of goals that is more comprehensive and systematic than the eight MDGs, that incorporates sustainability, equity, and governance, but avoids overloading and stands a good chance of gaining broad support?

The Millennium Declaration and the UN documents on sustainable development that have been adopted by consensus should continue to serve as the main points of reference. Poverty eradication and the unfulfilled poverty-related MDGs must remain the basis for the new goals, not least to reassure developing countries that their legitimate development interests are taken seriously. The first goal could be to eradicate extreme poverty by 2030. Other goals should be directed towards attaining a minimum standard of living. The Multi-dimensional Poverty Index developed by the United Nations Development Programme complements income-based measurements by using ten indicators for health, education and living standards. The International Labour Organization recently passed a recommendation on a “social protection floor”. It includes access to essential healthcare, and basic income security, especially for the elderly and unemployed. These concepts could inspire the debate on future goals and indicators. Furthermore, fighting poverty should feature as a cross-cutting issue in all other goals – for instance, by placing particular emphasis on development in the poorest quintile of the population and by introducing indicators to monitor this.

While that would secure the socio-economic foundations, the “planetary boundaries” should form the environmental ceiling. Analyses show that eradicating extreme poverty would not necessarily put environmental boundaries under stress. This is an important point, given the reservations that developing and newly industrialised countries have about any limitations on their scope for development and growth. In fact, it is patterns of behaviour

associated with excessive resource consumption among the wealthy that make sufficiency goals necessary – but this will be politically explosive. The rising demands of the growing upper and middle classes in newly industrialised countries will exacerbate the problem. When setting goals, priority should therefore be given to boosting resource efficiency, developing an integrated ecosystem management, and strengthening sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

It remains to be seen whether PSG-style governance goals will gain consensus. Freedom from violence has perhaps the best chance of winning sufficient support – and is an essential basis for development.

Those involved in defining the goals should consider three criteria. Firstly, the content of the goals should be ambitious, going beyond what seems feasible today but addressing what is necessary for a transformation towards sustainability. At the same time, the defined objectives should be impact goals (ends) and should not provoke ideological conflicts over implementation policies (means) that would risk destroying the whole process.

Secondly, the process should avoid duplicating existing negotiations on relevant issues like climate change or biodiversity. Rather, the goals should incorporate these as cross-cutting issues and should otherwise focus on areas that have so far been neglected (energy, oceans, forests, employment, food security, soils, resource efficiency) and tackle new challenges (consumption, cities, waste management, resilience). To limit the number of goals and make them coherent and concise, they could be clustered (e.g. green jobs, sustainable cities). Germany could leverage the outcomes of the Nexus Conference (Bonn 2011) to help formulate a combined goal on water, energy and food security.

Thirdly, participants should choose goals that are measurable (via existing indicators and data) or that can be made measurable in the medium term. They should also pay attention to distributive justice.

Institutional support

One issue that has received little attention to date is how to support the implementation process at the institutional level. In Rio, governments agreed to establish a high level political forum for sustainable development (HLPF) by autumn 2013. If this forum should indeed be operational in time, it could coordinate the ongoing monitoring and evaluation of progress towards the goals, and regularly update the General Assembly on its findings. For this, however, the HLPF would need to rank high within the UN system and be given a powerful mandate. This mandate is to be negotiated under the General Assembly by autumn 2013 – an ambitious plan by any measure.

With regard to the goals, the HLPF's mandate could lay down two core tasks in terms of providing support and demanding commitment. First, the HLPF should coordinate a system of tailored support and, second, it should organise a review process.

Since it is likely that many of the goals will have to remain voluntary, countries should be called on to commit to a “pledge and review” process. This would require them to stipulate, in line with their needs and capacities, which goals they plan to achieve nationally and when. The industrialised countries need to realise that they, too, must set themselves ambitious goals. To incentivise and support countries in making the transformation towards sustainability, the HLPF should facilitate their access to financial aid, capacity-building measures (e.g. for setting up tax and social systems, and crisis prevention) or technological innovations.

In return, the countries would have to agree to a periodic peer review at the UN level. This review should be based on a previous process of national accountability with full participation of civil society, the major groups and other relevant stakeholders. These institutionalised follow-up processes could help build the political will to comply with the agreed goals for sustainable development.

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