



Sustainable Development Goals: A Better Pact is Possible!

August 10, 2014 (Thomas Pogge, New Haven | Mitu Sengupta, New Delhi) Despite some clear positives, the draft text of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) does not fulfill its self-proclaimed purpose of inspiring and guiding a concerted international effort to eradicate severe poverty everywhere in all its forms. We offer some critical comments on the proposed agreement and suggest eight ways to embolden the goals and amplify their appeal and moral power.

To be adopted in 2015 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA), the SDGs are meant to guide global development efforts over the subsequent 15 years. They replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which hold sway in the 2000-2015 period. In order to forge a widely acceptable formulation of the SDGs, the UNGA had instituted an Open Working Group (OWG). This group has recently completed its mandate by publishing a draft text with 17 goals and 169 targets, which will be placed before the UNGA in September 2014 and will then serve as the basis for intergovernmental negotiations in the 12 months thereafter.¹

Like the MDGs, the SDGs will be a statement of aspirations, a voluntary agreement rather than a binding treaty. This is a drawback insofar as states may feel more tempted to skimp on their commitments. But it is also an opportunity — missed by the OWG draft — insofar as states may be willing to adopt an agenda that is more ambitious in scope and vision when this agenda imposes on them no legally binding obligations. Drafting a common vision for 2030 can raise the gaze of politicians and officials beyond their usual preoccupations with short-term political advantage or narrowly defined national interest, can lead them to think imaginatively about that cosmopolis of the future whose foundations are now being shaped in this early stage of globalization.

- 1. To strengthen accountability in the post-2015 agenda, the new development goals should contain specific references to whose goals they are supposed to be, clearly stipulating the responsibilities of competent agents.***

¹ See <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html>.

Accountability is the key to effective development goals. While the SDGs are commendable for their inclusion of goal-specific means of implementation (MOI), they fail to specify, for each proposed goal, whose goal it is supposed to be: who is supposed to do what to get it accomplished. Failing that, the proposed SDGs are, once again, a wish list only, with very little moral force. Take, for instance, the proposed target 5.1: “End all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere.” At whom is this instruction directed? What efforts does it require from states acting domestically, from states acting beyond their own borders, from multinational enterprises? Without any hint of an answer to these questions, the most influential agents, who are generally best placed to advance the objective, will also be best able to divert attention away from their own responsibilities. One of the poorest countries might be blamed for failing to get its hunger rate down from 60 to 30 percent, while an upper-middle-income country might rest easy with the much less demanding task of reducing its hunger rate from 2 to 1 percent. This is precisely what happened with the MDGs, where the poorest countries got the blame for not reducing their huge deprivation rates fast enough. If repeated, this deficiency stands to undermine the moral authority and success of the new agenda.

- 2. To achieve sustainable development, the SDGs should not merely appeal for greater efforts by governments and other powerful agents but should also call for structural reforms of the global institutional order that conditions the options and incentives of these and other agents.***

While official and non-governmental development assistance certainly affects the evolution of global poverty and income inequality, it is not nearly enough to balance the centrifugal tendencies produced by the ordinary operation of the world economy as presently structured. The OWG draft misses a crucial opportunity to question and reform such unjust arrangements. There are only a few passing references to institutional reforms that could diminish the headwinds blowing against the poor, although such reforms are crucial for the achievement of every goal on the agenda. For example, the draft says precious little about illicit financial flows, which are known to [aggravate oppression and poverty worldwide](#) and dwarf the flow of international development assistance. The initial version of the OWG draft included a stand-alone target for global cooperation to reduce international tax dodging; but this target was drastically cut back in the final revision of the draft, which piously calls (on whom?) for reducing “illicit financial and arms flows” (target 16.4) and asks for cooperation toward improving poor countries’ capacity for tax and revenue collection (target 17.1). If we are serious about tackling the scourge of illicit financial flows, we should insist on stand-alone targets that name responsible agents and specify their tasks. In particular, we should call on governments to mandate (i) disclosure of the ultimate

beneficial owners of companies and of the controlling parties of trusts and foundations (1), (ii) public country-by-country reporting of profits and other tax-relevant information by multinational enterprises (6), (iii) automatic exchange of tax-relevant financial information by national tax authorities worldwide (5), (iv) public reporting on funds paid to governments for the extraction of natural resources and on the use of those funds (3) and (v) tough sanctions, including jail time, for professionals who facilitate illicit financial flows, for instance senior officers from global banks, accounting firms, law firms, insurance companies and hedge funds. In addition, we should call on governments to commit to (vi) harmonizing anti-money laundering regulations internationally (9) and (vii) carrying out clear, reliable, frequent and timely public fiscal reporting as well as opening up their fiscal policy-making process to public participation (7).²

3. *To enlarge its ambition and impact, the new agenda should include strong human rights language.*

The new agenda does not aim high enough in recognizing, protecting, and fulfilling human rights, taking into consideration their universality, indivisibility, and interdependence. For example, going against the aspirations of women's groups worldwide, the gender equality goal does not recognize the human rights of women and girls. Food, water, and sanitation are also not framed as human rights. Furthermore, rather than demand *universal* social protection floors, proposed target 1.3 calls for "*nationally appropriate* social protection systems and measures for all, including floors." It is perhaps understandable that strong human rights language and a universal or zero target approach for all minimum core economic and social rights obligations have been carefully avoided in the formulation of the new goals. Developing countries have fought hard for the inclusion of nationally determinable targets and language on respecting national policy space (target 17.15), fearing that they will not be able to meet the burden of 'zero goals,' which may then be used to name, shame and blame them. While this is a legitimate concern, the solution is not to dilute the SDGs by aiming for whatever is feasible with national resources, but to specify what wealthy countries and enterprises must do to reduce impediments and to increase assistance so that ambitious targets can be met even in the poorest countries.

4. *To ensure that progress toward the goals is honestly measured, (a) definitions and measurement methods must be locked in for the 15-year period rather than allowed to be revised with hindsight and (b) the tracking of progress must be entrusted to an*

² These were among the leading demands that emerged from a crowd-funded [Delphi study](#) that ASAP completed with a panel of 29 leading experts.

independent, international group of high-level academic experts rather than to politically exposed agencies such as the World Bank and the UN Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO).

The new agenda will be worth very little without reliable measures of progress toward the agreed objectives. While poverty may indeed have declined in the last 25 years, the trend depends heavily on the definitions and measurement methods used. For example, the World Bank has defined poverty ever more narrowly by replacing the original purchasing power parity threshold of \$1.00 per person per day in 1985 US-dollars (as referenced in the UN Millennium Declaration and in MDG-1) with a lower \$1.08 per person per day in 1993 US-dollars and then with an even lower \$1.25 person per day in 2005 US-dollars. This has led to a much prettier poverty trend and to massive undercounting of those who cannot meet their basic needs.³ Likewise, the FAO has recently transformed a steadily rising under-nourishment trend into a steadily falling one by introducing an “improved methodology” that counts as undernourished only those whose caloric intake is “inadequate to cover even minimum needs for a sedentary lifestyle” for “over a year.”⁴ This definition excludes those who suffer other nutritional deficits (protein, vitamins, minerals and other micronutrients) or are not adequately nourished by the sedentary diet because they must do serious physical work in their home or for a living. Midway methodological revisions divert efforts to merely cosmetic progress and undermine the credibility and moral authority of the SDGs.

Recommendations for improving specific goals

- 5. To realize the full potential of SDG-1, “End poverty in all its forms everywhere,” the goal must (a) include measures of poverty other than the income-based measure of \$1.25 per day and (b) specify systemic global reforms that would reliably end poverty.***

There is a welcome shift in the proposed agenda’s flagship poverty goal from the language of reduction to that of eradication. However, no measure of poverty, other than the money-metric one of \$1.25 per day (2005 purchasing power), is mentioned, even though this income-based measure fails to capture many of the hardships that constitute poverty in the real world, such as child labor, chronic undernourishment, illiteracy, exposure to violence and lack of access to safe drinking water, shelter, sanitation, electricity and essential medicines. This contradicts the language of ending poverty “in all its forms

³ See Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies behind the Pro-Poor Rhetoric* (Cambridge, Polity Press 2010), pp. 63-68, and “Poverty, Hunger and Cosmetic Progress,” in Malcolm Langford, Andy Sumner and Alicia Ely Yamin, eds., *The Millennium Development Goals and Human Rights: Past, Present and Future* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press 2013), pp. 209–231.

⁴ FAO, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2012* (Rome, FAO 2012), p. 50.

everywhere” in the goal’s title. Such ambitious language is also undermined by the MOIs associated with this goal, which make no reference to the structural reforms required to tackle the root causes of poverty. Cancelling the external debt of Highly Indebted Poor Countries and closing down opportunities for tax dodging are examples of structural reforms that could be framed as MOIs for this goal.

6. ***To increase the impact of the proposed SDG-10, “Reduce inequality within and among countries,” the first target, 10.1, should specify by how much the growth of the bottom 40% should exceed the national average. Here a suitable target would be to halve, by 2030, each country’s logarithmic distance from a Palma ratio of 1.⁵ In addition, there should be references to inequality reduction in the targets of other goals. Indicators used to monitor targets should be disaggregated by relevant categories such as gender, race, ethnicity, religion and geographical area. In keeping with the principle of “leave no one behind,” which was widely endorsed in global consultations on the post-2015 agenda, no target should be considered achieved until it has been met for all relevant segments of a population.***

We welcome the inclusion of a stand-alone goal on inequality reduction, [which civil society and developing countries have fought long and hard for](#). Proposed SDG-10 is vital to the success of the post-2015 agenda, and it must not be cut from the framework’s final draft, nor be submerged under some other goal, such as poverty eradication or economic growth. While the conventional prescription against poverty is economic growth, overcoming existing deprivations through global growth (leaving inequalities as they are or even allowing them to worsen, as they did in the period since the end of the Cold War) would take far too long — at 2% real growth, the poorer half would take 35 years to double its real income — and would also impose unsustainable environmental burdens as the richer half would then also double its 30-times-larger income and consumption during the same period. Furthermore, so long as the poorer half of humanity have only 3.3% of global income and an even smaller share of global wealth, as well as greatly inferior education, health care and civil rights protection, it is very difficult for them to become full agents in their own emancipation. They will be sustainably liberated from deprivation only if they can fully participate in this liberation and defend it in the political realm. In this way, the achievement of all development goals depends on an empowerment of the poor by

⁵ The Palma ratio is the income share of the richest 10% divided by that of the poorest 40%. Thomas Pogge has proposed that each country should aim, by 2030, to reduce income inequality to the square root of its present Palma ratio. Thus, countries with current Palma ratios of 4, 2.25 and 1.69 would commit to reaching, by 2030, Palma ratios of 2, 1.5 and 1.3, respectively. Romania, the only country with a current Palma ratio of 1 or below, would merely need to remain within this range. See www.cgdev.org/sites/default/files/it-all-about-tails-palma-measure-income-inequality.pdf.

reducing excessive social, economic and civil rights inequalities. An explicit commitment to eradicating inequality among nations, moreover, will ensure that the post-2015 agenda is genuinely universal. In its absence, the language of universalism will be treated cynically, as a mask for real inequalities, thus undermining the moral authority of the new goals.

7. To strengthen proposed SDG-13, “Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts,” there should be one or more targets that discourage and aim to discontinue the ecologically most damaging modes of production and consumption.

The starring role given to the word “sustainable” gives the challenge of climate change a much-deserved central place, which is also confirmed by it getting a stand-alone goal. Once again, however, the moral power of this goal will depend on the strength of its targets and the effectiveness of its MOIs. The targets for SDG-13 are conspicuously weak. For one thing, they include no concrete commitment to combat climate change itself (mitigation) after an important target on investing in low-carbon solutions, which had appeared in earlier OWG drafts, was dropped from the final version. Not even one target is devoted to discouraging or ending the ecologically most damaging modes of production and consumption, such as coal-fired power plants without carbon sequestration, fracking, beef consumption and the tax-exemption of frequent flyer miles. It is fine, of course, to reiterate the UNFCCC commitment to “mobilizing jointly USD100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to address the needs of developing countries in the context of meaningful mitigation actions.” But why not add here that these funds should be raised in a way that discourages the burning of fossil fuels, for example through a global fee on excessive greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions? Each country would have to pay a fee (starting at \$2 per ton in 2016 and then rising by \$2 annually) for each ton of CO₂ equivalent above a certain threshold (4 tons per capita in 2016 and gradually declining thereafter). This fee would comfortably raise the promised \$100 billion by 2020 and it would also increase the price of fossil-fuel based consumption, thereby encouraging both conservation and the development of cleaner energy alternatives (wind, solar, nuclear, etc.). The adaptation targets included under SDG-13 betray a technocratic approach to climate change, with only slightest token efforts to connect this goal to other SDG objectives. Neither contradictions (with goals such as industrialization and economic growth) nor complementarities (with goals such as poverty eradication and inequality reduction) are sufficiently recognized.

8. To give meaning to SDG-17, “Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development,” concrete responsibilities must be specified for the affluent countries and international agencies.

The new global partnership goal proposed by the OWG, SDG-17, is intended to be a more robust version of the paltry MDG-8, the only goal among the MDGs that deals directly with the responsibilities of affluent states and international agencies. The absence of measurable targets, indicators, and achieve-by dates for MDG-8 indicates that the MDGs were not founded on a 'global partnership' at all, but were essentially a slate of instructions for the developing countries alone. SDG-17 is certainly more comprehensive than MDG-8, containing 19 targets on issues such as finance, technology, trade, data monitoring and accountability. Nonetheless, the key defect of MDG-8 also mars SDG-17. It seems that, once again, the world's most powerful agents — affluent states, international organizations, multinational enterprises — will be shielded from any concrete responsibilities for achieving the SDG agenda when, given their wealth and influence, they ought to be taking the lead in providing the resources needed to achieve the SDGs and in implementing systemic reforms of global institutions that will address the root causes of poverty. These needed reforms include changing the rules that encourage illicit financial outflows from developing countries or force the poorest countries to pay interest on debts accumulated by previous generations of corrupt and often unelected leaders. Instead, we are treated to rather banal language on the need for "multi-stakeholder partnerships" with private actors and civil society. If SDG-17 fails to hold the world's most influential agents sufficiently accountable for what they owe to making sustainable development work, the concepts of partnership and universalism will remain a smokescreen for extreme global inequalities, thus weakening confidence in the goals.

A strong global partnership goal is essential for maintaining the moral authority of the post-2015 agenda as a whole. The targets for SDG-17 should be re-written to specify the concrete responsibilities of the affluent states in regard to implementing needed global institutional reforms and financing sustainable development. Responsibilities of these two kinds can often be discharged through a single institutional mechanism. For example, to deter and offset the effects of protectionist barriers, which distort trade and diminish trading opportunities for poor populations, rich countries providing subsidies or export credits might commit to paying a share of the value of such subventions into a Human Development Fund.⁶

⁶ This share might be 2 percent in 2016 and then increase by another 2 percent each year, reaching 30 percent in 2030. At today's level of subsidies and export credits, this mechanism would raise between \$6 billion (2016) and \$90 billion (2030) a year over the SDG period. For comparison, current official development assistance stands at ca. \$130 billion from all countries.