

Are the SDGs (Sustainable Development Goals) fit for purpose?

by

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SUMMARY. — Of all the competing goals world leaders could have agreed on for the year 2030, reducing inequality and addressing sustainability should have come first. They make all other goals so much harder to achieve, if not impossible. However, the SDGs dodge the twin challenge of our time. As with the MDGs (Millennium Development Goals), they represent a global deal rather than a universal agenda. Moreover, most verifiable SDG-targets are not dissimilar from the MDGs, *e.g.* poverty, hunger and child mortality. A distinct aspect is that their level of ambition is inversely related to the level of specificity: the goals are bold but their scope is greatly diminished by the fuzziness of the targets and the poor choice of indicators. In short, the SDGs are not fit for purpose. Sustainable development remains, in the realm of current multilateralism, an idea whose time has not yet come.

SAMENVATTING. — *Zijn de SDG's (Sustainable Development Goals) geschikt voor hun doel?* — SDG's zijn doelstellingen van wereldleiders voor 2030. Bij het vaststellen ervan hadden de aanpak van ongelijkheid en het streven naar duurzaamheid prioritair moeten zijn. Zonder die prioriteiten zijn alle andere objectieven moeilijk, zometen onmogelijk, te realiseren. De SDG's ontwijken echter de ware uitdagingen van onze tijd. Zoals de MDG's (*Millennium Development Goals*), zijn ze een wereldwijde deal i.p.v. een universele agenda. Bovendien zijn de meetbare doelstellingen van de SDG's gelijkaardig aan die van de MDG's, zoals armoede, honger en kindersterfte. De ambities van de SDG's zijn echter omgekeerd evenredig aan de duidelijkheid ervan. De doelstellingen zijn stoutmoedig maar hun reikwijdte en ambitie worden beknot door wollige streefcijfers en gebrekkige indicatoren. Kortom, de SDG's zijn niet geschikt voor het doel waarvoor ze werden ontworpen. Op multilateraal vlak blijft duurzame ontwikkeling een idee is wiens tijd nog niet is aangebroken.

RESUME. — *Les ODD (Objectifs de Développement durable) sont-ils adaptés au défi de notre temps?* — Parmi les objectifs auxquels les dirigeants mondiaux pourraient s'entendre pour l'an 2030, la réduction des inégalités et le développement durable devraient être prioritaires, car ils rendent tous les autres objectifs beaucoup plus difficiles à atteindre, sinon impossibles. Cependant, les ODD esquivent le double défi de notre temps. Comme pour les OMD (Objectifs du Millénaire pour le Développement), ils représentent un accord global plutôt qu'un agenda universel. De plus, la plupart des objectifs mesurables des ODD ne sont pas différents des OMD, c.-à-d. la pauvreté, la faim et la mortalité infantile. Un aspect distinct des ODD est que les objectifs sont audacieux, mais leur portée et leur ambition diminuent considérablement par le flou des cibles et le choix des indicateurs. Bref, les ODD ne sont pas adaptés pour atteindre leurs objectifs. Dans le domaine multilatéral, le développement durable est une idée dont le temps n'est pas encore venu.

Keywords: development, sustainability, inequality, universality, MDGs

The question is not whether the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) represent a better framework than their predecessor—the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)—but whether they are good enough to meet the two-fold challenge of our time: sustainability and inequality. As these defining challenges are global in scope, the SDGs must be truly universal in scope, by embodying a ‘one-world’ agenda. This article examines whether the SDGs address sustainability, inequality and universality in a manner that is fit for purpose. In order to establish the defining challenges of our time, we first need to review the results of the MDGs.

MDGs’ outcome

In the field of human development, the world has made respectable progress over the past 25 years (United Nations 2015). One of the most striking statistics is that there were some 18,000 fewer cases of child mortality per day in 2015 than in 1990; notwithstanding the significant rise in the world population over that period. About three quarters of all births are now attended by skilled health personnel, leading to a substantial reduction in maternal mortality. Nearly as many girls as boys are enrolled in primary school. Malnutrition (underweight) has decreased from one-in-four children to one-in-seven. The incidence of diseases such as measles, malaria and polio has fallen drastically. Worldwide, the year 2015 saw fewer than 100 cases of polio, down from over 300,000 in 1990. New HIV infections have declined sharply and an estimated 14 million people living with AIDS now receive antiretroviral therapy. All pertinent chemicals have been phased out to close the ozone hole in the atmosphere.

We hasten to add that no firm conclusions can be drawn about the role played by the MDGs in these stories of success. For that, we need the counterfactual scenario, as well as a clear attribution of the progress to the MDGs. Both are missing. To state, for example, that “The MDGs helped to lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty” (United Nations 2015, p. 3) is improper because it cannot be substantiated or tested by scientific analysis. This is not to say that the MDGs did not make a difference. Valid arguments have been, and can be, made in their favour. It simply means that their contribution cannot be quantified in a precise and scientific manner.

Regretfully, several areas have witnessed little or no progress, especially with regards to the environment. Deforestation remains excessively high. Although decelerating, it makes the world annually lose an area of forest that is roughly equivalent to twice the surface of Belgium. Overfishing continues unabated. Eco-systems and oceans are under severe stress. Several species among amphibians, corals, mammals and birds are at risk of extinction; jeopardising the planet’s biodiversity. Greenhouse gas emissions have soured by an estimated 50 per cent between 1990 and 2015 (United Nations 2015).

Whilst the world has made significant progress during the MDG-era, none of the numerical targets were met globally. Using traffic-light colours, green can be assigned to the MDGs related to poverty, hunger, child mortality, maternal health, drinking water, HIV/Aids, malaria and TB. This assessment is based on the view that target setting is not only about achieving but also about striving. Global progress in these domains has been more than respectable, even though the numerical targets were not met or data to support that claim are not available or sufficiently solid.

The colour orange can be applied to the goals about basic education and gender equality, where progress could—and should—have been much faster. One in ten children still lacks access to primary school and the quality of education often remains sub-standard. Gender biases remain embedded in virtually all societies and shape people’s perceptions and aspirations from an early age (Bian, Leslie & Cimpian 2017).

The colour red must be given to the goal on global partnership for development—a goal mostly directed at high-income countries. Foreign aid has stagnated at around 0.3 per cent of their combined national income, considerably below the agreed target of 0.7 per cent. Also, the global trading system remains biased in favour of developed countries—mainly through international trade agreements that are laden with provisions that have nothing to do with trade but extend into other policy areas, especially patent law and investor protection. Last, but not least, red applies to the goal regarding the environment, where the world has moved in the opposite direction than what was intended—e.g. overexploitation of marine fish stocks, loss of biodiversity, rising emissions of carbon dioxide.

In sum, the outcome with the MDGs shows considerable progress in terms of human development but grave threats for the environment. The overall picture can be summarised by the one-liner ‘Progress for people, regress for the planet’. Hence, the ‘S’ in the acronym SDGs is fully justified.

Sustainability

However, the successor to the MDGs fails to address sustainability in earnest. It is remarkable that goal 13—‘Take urgent action to combat climate change’—ranks only in thirteenth position. Ranking does matter because it gauges the relative importance of the objective. Given that climate change is not among the top three priorities—which are occupied by the MDG-like issues of poverty, hunger and child mortality—raises the question whether world leaders really have the courage to address it as a top priority. More important than ranking is that the content of the goal 13 is weak and disappointing. It lacks specifics and clarity, as well as a sense of urgency. The first three targets read as follows: ‘13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards’, ‘13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national planning’; and ‘13.3 Improve education on climate change mitigation’. Apart from the fact that none of these targets is verifiable, it is a moot question whether resilience, planning and education can be considered as ‘urgent action’.

It may seem surprising but the SDGs do not set any verifiable target regarding climate change. The only numerical target in this domain refers to climate finance, not to climate change. Target 13.a indicates that ‘Developed-country parties are to mobilize jointly \$100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to mitigate climate change in development countries’. Its interpretation is now a bone of contention between developed and developing countries. Among the 169 SDG-targets, only two somewhat relate to environmental sustainability in a verifiable manner. They include target 12.3: ‘By 2030, halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer levels’ and target 14.5: ‘By 2020, conserve at least 10 per cent of coastal and marine areas’. The others use fuzzy language and omit the three essential components of a verifiable target, namely conceptual clarity, a numerical outcome and a specific deadline.

Inequality

Besides being unsustainable, progress made across the world has not been equitable either. Due to phenomenal economic growth in emerging economies, between-country inequality has probably decreased in recent years, although this is hard to measure with any degree of accuracy. However, it is within-country inequality that really matters for people, and that is where most countries have witnessed an increase over the past decades. Invariably, people perceive inequality in terms of disparities within society, not between societies. Surveys show that people relate inequality vis-à-vis individuals within their society and community, not in comparison with the average standard of living in faraway countries. Also, within-country inequality is most relevant for domestic policymaking, rather than between-country inequality.

A growing body of evidence indicates that income disparities within countries are widening. No matter how it is measured, it is no longer possible to dispute the evidence that inequalities are on the rise in most countries. Palma (2011) finds that about 80 per cent of the world population lives in regions where the median country has a Gini coefficient of close to 0.40, which indicates high inequality. China is one of the front runners in terms of rising inequality. Liu (2011) documents that China's Gini coefficient soared from the moderate level of about 0.30 in the early 1980s to the high level of about 0.50 in 2010. Seldom has a country witnessed such a steep rise in inequality over such a short period of time. Inequality has risen in other countries too. Over the past 30 years, it has increased in 17 out of 22 OECD member states (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2011). The gulf between the rich and the rest has widened further since the onset of the financial crisis. The OECD states, "Inequality has increased by more over the past three years to the end of 2010 than in the previous twelve" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2013 p. 1). In its latest update, the OECD writes, "the average Gini coefficient of disposable income reached 0.318 in 2013/14, only marginally higher than in 2007, but the highest level on record since the mid-1980s" (Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development 2016, p. 1).

Evidence regarding non-money-metric aspects of development, such as education, health and nutrition, also shows that there has been a systemic bias against the least well-off people (Minujin & Delamonica 2003, Moser et al. 2005, Reidpath et al. 2009, Wilkinson & Pickett 2010). Thus, to be more accurate, the one-liner mentioned earlier to summarise the MDGs' outcome needs the insertion of the adjective 'better-off': 'Progress for better-off people, regress for the planet'. Indeed, data show that, in most countries, progress has bypassed the people at the bottom of the social ladder.

Extreme inequality is harmful in many ways, not merely economically but also politically and psycho-socially. Stiglitz observes, "economic inequality inevitably leads to political inequality" (2015, p. 9). Many a democracy is showing signs of a hollowing out, with low membership of political parties, low voter turnout, and high electoral volatility. Unexpected wins become more frequent, especially for anti-democratic candidates who delegitimise opponents, attack civil liberties, and disregard checks and balances. High inequality also compromises the principle of equal access to essential public goods such as education, health, public transport, and an independent judicial system. This leads to more economic, social and racial stratification and deepens existing divisions within society. The issue is not that some individuals earn more or have more than others, it is that high inequality jeopardises the democratic tenet that 'all people are created equal'. Indeed, extreme inequality is at odds with the principle of equal treatment of citizens (Swift 2001). Countless citizens across the world perceive a "government of the 1 percent, by the 1 per cent, and for the 1 percent", as Stiglitz puts it (2012, p. 99). Extreme inequality also corrodes societal values of empathy and tolerance.

Inequality is frequently seen as an ideological matter, whereas poverty and growth are considered as technical issues. This, of course, is incorrect; they all have technical and political implications. Those on the right on the political spectrum usually dismiss concerns about inequality as ‘politics of envy’, believing that those who are less well-off are simply envious of their wealth and resentful of their success in life. For those on the left on the political scale, high inequality stems from excessive greed. Both views are over-simplistic. Sandel expresses a more nuanced view: “If the only advantage of affluence were the ability to buy yachts, sports cars, and fancy vacations, inequalities of income and wealth would not matter very much. But as money comes to buy more and more—political influence, good medical care, a home in a safe neighborhood rather than in a crime-ridden one, access to elite schools rather than failing ones—the distribution of income and wealth looms larger and larger” (2013, p. 8). In other words, high inequality undermines the fundamental tenets of democracy and meritocracy.

Despite the evidence that inequality is rising, and that it is harmful for the economy and that it undermines the democratic system, the SDGs pay only superfluous attention to it. As with climate change, the goal about inequality does not rank among the top priorities. One finds it in tenth position, which suggests that it is, at best, of second-tier importance. In addition, it does not quite address inequality. Target 10.1 aims to ‘progressively achieve and sustain, by 2030, income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average’. At first glance, it seems to contain the three elements of a verifiable target: conceptually clear, numerical, and specific deadline. However, it does not address inequality. It cannot be addressed by focusing on one segment of the population. To truly address inequality, one must encompass the entire income spectrum, not just the poorest segment. As Atkinson argues, “we need to consider the distribution as a whole” (2015, p. 183).

Meeting target 10.1 does not necessarily imply a decrease in inequality. The bottom 40 per cent may see faster income growth but if caused by transfers from the next 50 per cent, while leaving the top 10 per cent unaffected, then the country will see an increase in inequality. The paradox will be that inequality will increase despite meeting target 10.1. This apparent contradiction stems from the fact that the target confuses inequality with poverty. Already, some countries are observing a hollowing out of the middle class (Temin 2017) and a virtual secession of the extremely wealthy from society. This remains unaddressed by the SDGs. In other words, target 10.1 has little or no relevance for reducing extreme inequality.

The SDGs’ failure to adequately address inequality is not due to a technical mistake. It is driven by a political narrative that dodges or even contests that extreme inequality is the prime challenge of our time. Political correctness demanded that the SDGs focus on extreme poverty rather than on extreme inequality. In its stead, the slogan ‘Leave No One Behind’ was launched to mask the world leaders’ inability to accept that inequality is one of the most pressing challenges the world faces. Shiller, Nobel laureate, puts it quite strongly, “The most important problem we are facing now today, I think, is rising inequality” (quoted by Dorling 2014, p. 1). The World Economic Forum rates “rising income and wealth disparity as the most important trend in determining global developments over the next 10 years” (2017, p. 6).

Some are making a big deal of the reported decline in inequality in a few Latin American countries (Lopez-Calva & Lustig 2010). However, it must be kept in mind that these countries remain highly unequal. It would be mistaken to interpret a decline in their Gini coefficient by a few percentage points as a sign that they have turned into equitable societies. Their Gini coefficient is still stratospherically high, often exceeding the level of 0.50. The reality is that

most Latin American countries remain extremely unequal, perhaps just a touch less so. Addressing extreme inequality remains a prime challenge for them too.

Universality

Apart from failing to cover the twin challenge of sustainability and inequality, the SDGs also fall short of embodying a truly universal agenda. Just like the MDGs, they exemplify a global deal between the North and the South, with a series of verifiable performance targets for developing countries and a few vaguely-formulated delivery targets for developed nations. True universality would mean that the agenda transcends the artificial North-South divide and comprises performance targets for all countries, not just for developing countries. However, the SDGs still embody the old donor-centric view that development is something that essentially happens in the South.

Obviously, not all domains of a global agenda can be universal in scope. Different aspects will apply differently to different categories of countries. Universality, however, requires that, on balance, the SDGs would apply to all countries in a similar manner. Yet they fail to achieve balance. Most verifiable targets relate to developing countries. The SDGs comprise very few performance targets for rich countries that are verifiable. Most are formulated in a vague and fuzzy way so that they remain unverifiable. The SDGs cannot be considered as representing a universal agenda that applies to all categories of countries in a similar way.

This point is best illustrated by goals 1 and 2. It is obvious that eradicating extreme poverty and ending hunger will not be as challenging for high- and most middle-income countries as for the least developed nations. Yet, these goals could have been formulated differently to embody universality. For instance, had a numerical target been included for overweight and obesity, goal 2 would have been universal in scope because they represent growing public health concerns in virtually all countries—both rich and poor. If trends continue, almost half of the world's population will be overweight or obese by 2030, imposing enormous costs on people, societies and economies (James & McPherson 2017). The World Health Organization reports that the global prevalence of diabetes has nearly doubled since 1980, a trend largely driven by the unrelenting rise in overweight and obesity (World Health Organization 2016). Nonetheless, overweight and obesity are not mentioned by the SDGs, which is almost beyond belief.

Breastfeeding is another area omitted by the SDGs, although it contributes significantly to goals related to education, health and nutrition, including overweight and diabetes. Noteworthy is that a global target for breastfeeding already existed when the SDGs were formulated. It aims to 'increase the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months up to at least 50% by 2025' (World Health Organization 2012, p. 60). It is not entirely clear why it was not included among the SDGs, but it is probably no coincidence that breastfeeding is an area where high-income countries tend to lag poorer ones (Victoria et al. 2016).

These omissions are not a simple oversight but stem from the fact that developed nations are not quite ready to commit themselves to specific, numerical and time-bound targets. Therefore, it was politically more convenient to focus the SDGs on ending hunger than to set verifiable targets for overweight or breastfeeding.

Not fit for purpose

In conclusion, the claim that the SDGs represent a universal agenda that covers inequality and addresses sustainability is untenable. Yet, it is frequently reiterated. The 35-pages document that spells out the 2030 Agenda claims not less than nine times that the SDGs are universal (United Nations 2015). Kahneman explains how easy it is for reality to get misinterpreted and misconstrued. He writes, “A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth” (2011, p. 62). The widespread claim that the SDGs adequately address sustainability, inequality and universality stems more from repetition than from their content.

A distinct aspect of the SDGs is the inverse relationship between specificity and ambition. The goals sound bold but most targets are fuzzy and many indicators are inapt. Such fuzziness and inaptness diminish the level of ambition of the SDGs, as they inhibit objective measurability. The few verifiable targets contained in the SDGs are not dissimilar from the MDGs. In short, if the MDGs were simple-minded, then the SDGs are definitely muddle-headed. The sad but inevitable conclusion is that, in the realm of multilateral affairs, sustainable development remains an idea whose time has not yet come.

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