

Development is thinking ahead

A world on its way to Sustainable Development Goals

Paul Engel and Anna Knoll¹

Key messages

Unlike the formulation and agreement of the MDGs, the post-2015 discussions has so far been characterised by an inclusive process allowing the voices of different stakeholders to be heard. The possibility for the public to follow the negotiations closely has contributed to accountability. This inclusiveness will need to continue to find ways to translate global goals into specific national policy objectives.

The implications of universal goals will vary considerably from country to country and countries themselves will have to take responsibility for the development of tailored solutions. Resources for implementation will come from country budgets themselves, international investments and private financial flows and less and less from development aid. Public-private partnerships are one of the most rapidly growing components of international cooperation. Yet, more developed countries will continue to have global responsibilities to assist weaker countries.

Countries will distinguish themselves by the extent that they are affected by, and willing to bear part of the responsibility for, global challenges. The absence of strong global leadership continues to be an issue that raises questions in these uncertain times. There may be insufficient leadership to transform the consensus that has already been achieved into a broad political consensus and we may witness a steadily worsening leadership deficit in multilateral processes.

The multi-polar world order that has been taking shape since the end of the last century is characterised by growth and uncertainty. Ongoing globalisation and economic growth in the emerging countries and regions have changed the playing field of global political power. Traditional North-South relations continue to fade, making way for increased mutual interdependence. Multiparty negotiations on peace and security, climate, health, trade, finance and development treaties are becoming increasingly complex, even impossible at times. The role of the United Nations and international financial institutions as old strongholds of power is increasingly being called into question. And while the urgency of global challenges continues to increase, uncertainty is also on the rise about how the world's problems can best be tackled. This became painfully evident during the economic and financial crisis that unfolded in the first decade of this century. And it is still confirmed on a daily basis by developments in Syria, Ukraine, Gaza and West Africa. As the search goes on for a way to translate the new configuration of international power into a new system of global governance, our world has become particularly fraught with instability and uncertainty.

¹ Paul G. H. Engel and Anna Knoll are, respectively, Director and Policy Officer at ECDPM, the European Centre for Development Policy Management (based in Maastricht, the Netherlands).

“Development is... a process of change that has to take place within the societies of both the developing countries themselves and the developed nations, and, furthermore, has to drastically change the structure of relations between the countries of the world” (HRH Prince Claus of the Netherlands, in Bieckmann 2004: 95).

Thinking ahead in times of uncertainty is always a hazardous occupation. It is something that many people shy away from, if only because of the impossibility of predicting the consequences of long-term decisions taken now. So, it is especially remarkable that in recent years, under the leadership of the United Nations, a worldwide process has got under way to shape an ambitious new global development agenda by 2015. In this essay, we would like to ask ourselves three questions. First of all, what is the background of this new process? In particular, we examine what we have learned from our earlier experience with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Second, we ask ourselves what is different today, as we make our way towards the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in terms of process, participation and targets, and what might be the practical consequences of these differences. Finally, because we still have a year to go before the SDGs are to be finalised, we would like to think ahead to their chances of success and the potential impact of this ambitious global undertaking.

The Millennium Development Goals: Global action and learning process²

The UN Millennium Declaration, adopted in 2000, defines a number of shared principles and priorities for inclusive and sustainable development. Following from this declaration, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were formulated. These set out concrete objectives to be achieved by 2015. Now, with 2015 drawing near, various studies have looked at the extent to which the MDGs have indeed helped to expand and improve development, relieve poverty and bring a dignified existence within closer reach for everyone. The 2013 *European Development Report* assessed the achievements of the MDGs by examining, based on joint research, three areas of their impact and making a number of critical observations about the way the MDGs were developed and applied (ODI, DIE & ECDPM 2013).

A first area of impact is progress towards actually achieving the Millennium Development Goals. The first MDG, to half the extreme poverty in the world by 2015, seems likely to be reached. Extreme poverty – the percentage of people subsisting on less than \$1.25 per day – has dropped particularly sharply in Asia, thanks mainly to the success of China. In sub-Saharan Africa this has been much less the case. There, only a handful of countries seem on their way to achieving this goal (Ethiopia, Ghana, Senegal and Uganda). From a global perspective, progress has been made on seven of the eight MDGs, but on only three of them (income poverty, gender equality in primary education and access to safe drinking water) have seen advances sufficient to actually achieve the goals by 2015. On three others (nutrition, universal primary education and child mortality), there is still a possibility of achieving them. Yet on one, reducing rates of maternal mortality in childbirth, we remain far from achieving the targets, and will certainly not do so if we continue at present rates (Kenny & Sumner 2011). Looking at the national level, half of the developing countries seem on track to achieve the MDGs related to poverty, universal primary schooling, gender equity in education, and water and sanitation. However, no more than one third are likely to achieve the goals concerning nutrition and child and maternal mortality.

A second area of impact is that among donors. Since 2001, there has been remarkable consensus among donors, and they have substantially increased their levels of official development assistance (ODA), especially focusing on the MDG-priorities of social infrastructure and services. The MDGs have also been utilised for public awareness-raising in developed countries, which has been essential in times of growing scepticism about the possibility of actually bringing poverty to a halt worldwide.

Finally, the *European Development Report* examined the impact of the MDGs on the policies of developing countries. While it is difficult to draw general conclusions in this regard, it seems likely that the MDGs have helped to inspire developing country governments to forge ahead with their poverty reduction, health care, education and clean drinking water programmes, and even to intensify these in some cases (ODI, DIE & ECDPM: 20).

² This section is based on research done in preparation of the 2013 European Development Report, *Post-2015: Global Action for an Inclusive and Sustainable Future* (www.erd-report.eu/erd/report_2012/).

Summarising, we can state that the formulation and agreement of concrete goals at the global level did contribute in a number of ways to raise the welfare of the poor in developing countries. At the same time, we must acknowledge that not all of the goals will be achieved and that the achievements at the global level have not been translated one-to-one into results in individual nations. This leads, among other things, to a number of critical observations and possible lessons to be drawn from the MDG process.

The first observation is that the formulation and agreement of the MDGs were dominated by a small group of donors, with minimal input from the governments of developing countries. This has aroused resistance, and continues to do so today. The world is simply not willing to blindly embrace a development agenda that it considers to be “Western”. The recent establishment of the BRICS Development Bank is just one demonstration of this fact. To shape a genuinely shared global development agenda will require a process that is more inclusive from the very start, with inputs from developing countries given prominence and taken seriously.

A second observation concerns the choice to focus development efforts, via the MDGs, on a limited number of mainly social priorities. This has served to divert donors’ attention towards the social sectors and away from infrastructure, agriculture and industrial development, with possible negative effects in the long run due to neglect of the productive sector and employment creation (see also WRR 2010). It has furthermore led to exclusion from the MDG agenda of a variety of topics of great national and international interest and with major influence on global development, such as climate change, law and governance, inequality, migration, conflict and security, vulnerable minorities, energy and transport. A new agenda will have to address these diverse, interconnected challenges in an integral way.

A third point of criticism is that the emphasis on achieving global and national goals has helped to mask growing inequality: goals can be achieved without the most vulnerable being structurally better off because of it. Short-term successes, therefore, do not necessarily translate into structural improvements in the long term. Or, as Kofi Annan remarked, “We cannot talk of growth when millions of people are left behind”.³ A new agenda will need to focus on social transformation for sustainable and inclusive development.

Our fourth lesson concerns the commitments of national governments. MDG 8 -- the “Global Partnership Goal” -- was intended to lock in the commitment of rich countries. But it was never translated into specific, quantified and scheduled targets, or buttressed by a strong monitoring and accountability framework. The result was that donors could largely continue going their own separate ways -- and that progress on issues requiring collective action, such as the pursuit of greater policy coherence for development, was uneven. The difficulty of translating the MDGs into national policy in developing countries became clear as well. A new agenda will need to provide better ways to translate global goals into specific national policy objectives.

Towards Sustainable Development Goals: An ambitious project

The singular focus on the social sectors was abandoned fairly early on in the preliminary work towards a new global development agenda. The Millennium Declaration was put back on the table, emphasising -- in addition to poverty reduction, the social sectors and responsibilities of developing countries -- also the importance of human rights, governance, peace and security, and ecological sustainability. A collective vision of global development was then elaborated that was thought to do justice to the challenges the world faces as they have emerged since 2000. Moreover, a link was established with the sustainable development goals that sprang from the Rio+20 process. Finally, resilience in the face of climate change was underscored as a key priority. Continuity in international decision-making was thus maintained while scope was created for a more integral approach post-2015. The greater inclusiveness of the current process, furthermore, has opened space for involvement of new players and for addressing the new challenges facing the world. Thus, the post-2015 process, from its very start, has been of a fundamentally different nature than the process that led to the MDGs. The main differences can be summarised, in our view, under four headings: “inclusiveness”, “integrality”, “universality in diversity” and “leadership”.

³ See his speech to the World Economic Forum on Africa (www.weforum.org/news/opening-world-economic-forum-africa-declares-continent-needs-prioritize-economic-transformation?news=page).

An inclusive design and negotiation process

Just like the Millennium Declaration – but not the MDGs – the post-2015 process rests on a series of intergovernmental negotiations in which all countries can have considerable input. These ensure, for example, smaller countries opportunities for full participation, as demonstrated by Timor-Leste, Sierra Leone and Liberia (IISD 2014: 24). Moreover, the current process was preceded and has been continually fed by multi-stakeholder dialogues in which civil society organisations, the private sector, academia, experts and other interested parties are invited to raise their voices and be heard. The global private sector was an active participant in the High-Level Panel on the post-2015 development agenda established by the UN Secretary-General and it developed, via the so-called “Global Compact”, robust contributions of its own. A Tanzanian representative at the Open Working Group session remarked that the process had been “truly inclusive” and was grateful for civil society’s presence and support (ibid.). Furthermore, much of the negotiations can be closely followed by the public, which has allowed them to hold governments accountable for their contributions in the negotiations so far. Processes, where this inclusiveness has not been the case, or has been less so, have met sharp criticism, as recently experienced by the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Finance (Dodds 2014).

Towards an integral global development agenda

The new agenda extends far beyond the traditional concept of development aid. Not that poverty and the social sectors are no longer central, but they will now be addressed in conjunction with the maintenance of global public goods, sustainable development and management of global risks. Peace and security, ecological sustainability, climate change, financial stability, economic transformation, private-sector development, human rights and the right to nutritious food, clean drinking water and human health are thus also high on this agenda. The new global development agenda will therefore offer opportunities as well as place demands on civil society organisations that promote more inclusive development and on businesses that consider it their responsibility to do their part to improve the circumstances of vulnerable countries and groups. The resources for implementation of this agenda will come from domestic resources of countries themselves, from international investments and private financial flows and, lastly, less and less development aid. The active role of the international business community in this new agenda, therefore, cannot be understood as a free ride. Meaningful contributions will have to be made towards achieving the future development goals. Already, public-private partnerships are one of the most rapidly growing components of international cooperation.

Towards tailored development within a universal agenda

The current aim is to formulate goals that apply to everyone and that everyone is committed to working towards. This should generate a global dialogue that rises above the traditional North versus South dichotomy. Countries will no longer distinguish themselves only as either “developed” or “developing” now, but in how they tackle their problems, the way they organise themselves politically, economically and socially, and the extent to which they are affected by, and willing to bear part of the responsibility for, global challenges. This means that the implications of universal goals will vary considerably from country to country and that countries themselves will have to take responsibility for development of tailored solutions. Nonetheless, as developing countries have pointed out, this cannot be taken to mean that the developed countries no longer bear responsibility for solving, or helping to solve, the problems developing countries face. The notion of “common but differentiated responsibility”, therefore, has already been a source of friction in preparation of the new agenda. The root of this idea is that while developing countries should take responsibility for protecting the environment, the industrialised countries, as the main historical contributors to the current global environmental ills, must shoulder a heavier burden in terms of financial and other contributions to resolve them.⁴

⁴ The principle of “collective but differentiated responsibility” was established for the environment by the 1992 Rio Declaration; many developing countries would like to see it applied in other sectors too.

Is global leadership still hard to find?

An ambitious process towards a new global sustainable development agenda will require strong global leadership in order to produce results that are satisfactory to everyone. To that end, a number of encouraging steps have already been taken, such as the kick-off of the process by the UN High-Level Panel in 2013, the considerable emphasis placed on social transformation, and the extensive work done in 2014 by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals in preparation for the final negotiations. Nonetheless, the absence of strong global leadership continues to be an issue that raises questions in these uncertain times. Will there be sufficient leadership and impetus to transform the consensus that has already been achieved on the main points into a sufficiently broad political consensus, with task-oriented agreements and allocation of adequate resources for implementation? Or, will we witness yet again a “steadily worsening leadership deficit” in multilateral processes, as argued by Evans (2013: 3)?

Post-2015: Global collaboration 4.0?

Today, at a time of rising instability and uncertainty in international relations, industrialised countries, emerging economies and developing countries are working together on a new agenda for broad-based, worldwide cooperation. The process under way appears to have taken to heart many of the lessons learned from collaboration on the Millennium Development Goals. Broad but ambitious agreement is being sought between governments, and space is being provided for a clear role for partners from the national and international business community, philanthropic institutions, civil society organisations and centres of expertise. The first promising steps have already been taken, as overall agreement appears to have been reached on the general aims to be pursued (box 1). But now comes the more difficult part. Now is the time for the negotiations between the states in a multilateral context. The UN Secretary-General’s synthesis report is expected in November 2014, after which we will enter the final stretch that should lead to a new post-2015 global development agenda which, in addition to goals, also specifies the corresponding tasks and resource commitments for implementation.

Considering the turmoil in the world today, it is easy to be sceptical about what the possible final results of these negotiations might be. One might question the leadership of the United Nations or doubt the will of the industrialised countries, the emerging economies or the rapidly growing developing countries to really commit themselves to such a comprehensive collective project with so many, possibly far-reaching, consequences for their own society and the economy at home. One might also question whether parties that are now positioned in such stark opposition to one another on the Middle East, on Syria and on the Ukraine will be able to come together and agree on such an extensive worldwide project. But perhaps the question that we should instead be asking ourselves is just how necessary such a new agenda is for the world.

The European Think Tanks Group⁵ has argued that for the European Union and its member states it is a matter of enlightened self-interest to take the lead in further deepening and expanding international cooperation (ETTGT 2014). Europe has much to offer, but there is also much it needs from the rest of the world. This applies equally to the EU member states. They will need to act together more often and more effectively if Europe is to continue to pull its weight on the global scene. We know that various emerging economies are thinking along similar lines. They too have much to offer but also much to ask of the rest of the world. Let us hope that the many thousand participants in the process towards a new global development agenda will find the fortitude to square their shoulders and think ahead, and that international entanglements won’t stand in their way.

⁵ The European Think Tanks Group is made up of the UK Overseas Development Institute, the German Development Institute (DIE), the Spanish-based FRIDE European Think Tank for Global Action and the European Centre for Development Policy Management (ECDPM), based in the Netherlands.

Box 1: Proposed Sustainable Development Goals (Open Working Group, July 2014)

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development including finance, technology, capacity building, trade, policy and institutional coherence, multi-stakeholder partnerships, data, monitoring and accountability.

Box 2: Contributions of the Netherlands in developing the SDGs

The Netherlands has been a foremost advocate of broad civil society dialogue towards development of a new post-2015 global development agenda, and itself has taken a very active role in these discussions. Particularly prominent has been the involvement of Dutch civil society, the business community and centres of expertise, as well as the collaboration between the Minister for Foreign Trade and Development Cooperation and other cabinet ministers. As formulated in a policy document setting out the Netherlands' vision on the post-2015 development agenda (BUZA 2013), guiding factors in these efforts are the priorities of current Dutch development assistance, which is focused on aid, trade and investment. In addition to food and nutrition security, on which a broad global consensus seems to be evolving, the Netherlands, in line with its integral vision on poverty reduction and sustainable development, has called attention to promotion of "green" and inclusive growth, sexual and reproductive rights, the rule of law, peace and security and judicious use of scarce resources, particularly water. It has asked for particular attention and commitment to combating gender and income inequality, to linking development and human rights, and to reducing the harmful effects of climate change. The Netherlands has certainly been a global leader in the pursuit of a larger role for women and girls (Ó Súilleabháin 2014) and in the emphasis it places on sensitive topics, such as promoting women's rights and the role of young people. Regarding the latter, the Netherlands, together with the United Kingdom and Australia, were instrumental in ensuring that the UN Youth Delegate (Ralien Bekkers⁶) could participate in the sessions of the Open Working Group. With the support of these same two countries and other EU member states, the Netherlands succeeded in including policy coherence for sustainable development as part of a new, strengthened global partnership goal.⁷ With this, a key cornerstone was laid for the further development of the Dutch vision on development, trade and investment, towards a more integrated, universal, global development agenda. The main challenge in the run-up to 2015 seems to be finding enough support to achieve similar successes on particularly sensitive topics concerning women and sexual and reproductive rights. This will demand the utmost of the collective Dutch engagement.

⁶ @RalienBekkers tweets: "Thank you very much @UKUN_NewYork @AustraliaUN troika for asking for youth & future generations in #OWG13 #SDGs chapeau (at 3AM...)"

⁷ Australia, the Netherlands and United Kingdom Sustainable Development Goals Open Working Group, 11th Session, May 2014 Constituency Statement (<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/9578australia8.pdf>).

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info@ecdpm.org
www.ecdpm.org
KvK 41077447

HEAD OFFICE
SIÈGE
Onze Lieve Vrouweplein 21
6211 HE Maastricht
The Netherlands Pays Bas
Tel +31 (0)43 350 29 00
Fax +31 (0)43 350 29 02

BRUSSELS OFFICE
BUREAU DE BRUXELLES
Rue Archimède 5
1000 Brussels Bruxelles
Belgium Belgique
Tel +32 (0)2 237 43 10
Fax +32 (0)2 237 43 19

