

The Post-2015 UN Development Agenda

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The main reports about the post-2015 UN development goals agree about the need for the agenda to encompass the three dimensions of sustainable development, be universally applicable, and adaptable to national priorities. Whatever the agenda's shape, however, its success will depend on a strong intergovernmental partnership for development and a system of accountability and effective monitoring coordinated by ECOSOC.

One of the success stories of the United Nations has been its capacity to serve as a forum to agree on global development goals. They include not only those set in the UN Development Decades, but also in the series of UN conferences convened since the 1970s and particularly the series of summits that started with the 1990 World Summit for Children.¹ The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which drew from the Millennium Declaration and that series of summits, and the ongoing discussions about the post-2015 UN Development Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) belong to this long tradition. This not only shows the convening power of the United Nations and its character as the most representative global institution (the Security Council aside), but also its strong historical partnership with civil society. Although goal setting has helped place many new issues on the global agenda, a downside has been the weak accountability and even deficient monitoring of international commitments.

For the post-2015 process, the UN has before it two major reports: the 2012 one by a task force of UN agencies² and the 2013 report of the High-Level Panel convened by the secretary-general for this purpose.³ We should add his own report to the 68th (September 2013) session of the General Assembly.⁴ These reports are cited here as UN Task Force, High-Level Panel, and SG Report. Also relevant are reports by the UN regional commissions and a summary of the “global conversation” organized by the UN Development Group.⁵

The implementation of the MDGs is the point of departure. In addition, the SG Report has defined the four building blocks: a vision, a set of concise goals and targets, a global partnership, and a participatory monitoring framework. This briefing refers to all five.

LESSONS FROM THE MDGs

The experience of the MDGs has been praised on several grounds. It set a concise set of clear and measurable, mostly human development goals, with a high level of visibility (see Box 1). They served not only as a framework for advocacy but also for numerous global, regional and national debates and, most importantly, for the design of the development strategies of several countries. They were strongly backed by the Bretton Woods Institutions, the official development assistance community, and numerous civil society organizations, thus realizing the aim of using the representative character of the UN to lead global action. Although accountability was weak, the UN system's monitoring process and common data base, with input from many other organizations, represented a significant advance. A regular feature was high-quality regular reports, including one by the World Bank.⁶ Despite difficulties in finding appropriate and comparable statistical information for all countries, this performance was the best case of monitoring UN goals in history.

FUNDS supports and helps accelerate change in the UN development system to increase effective responses to global development challenges—especially after 2015, the target date for the Millennium Development Goals. Recognizing the many frustrations that have accompanied UN reform efforts, FUNDS envisages a multi-year process designed to help build consensus around necessary changes. Financial support currently comes from the governments of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland.

Box 1. The Millennium Development Goals

1. Eradicating extreme poverty and hunger
2. Achieving universal primary education
3. Promoting gender equality and empowering women
4. Reducing child mortality rates
5. Improving maternal health
6. Combating HIV/AIDS, malaria, and other diseases
7. Ensuring environmental sustainability
8. Developing a global partnership for development

However, the MDGs were deficient in several ways. Although drafted on the basis of the Millennium Declaration, the selection of the goals and targets was highly centralized and lacked participation by UN member states. It was perceived to be donor-centric, partially because it resembled the 1996 agenda proposed by the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD).⁷ It has been generally recognized that MDG-8 on the “global partnership for development” was one of its weakest points. While the focus on human development was a strength, many critics pointed out that the MDGs ignored key issues, including economic development. In that regard, the 2005 World Summit made the first review of the Millennium Declaration and added “achieving full and productive employment and decent work for all”—but it was included as part of MDG-1 rather than a new goal, thus significantly reducing its scope. More generally, the MDGs captured only a small segment of the “internationally agreed development goals”—i.e., the goals agreed at previous summits and global conferences, which constitute the broader UN Development Agenda. For instance, many highlight this shortcoming in relation to MDG-3 on gender equality and empowerment of women and MDG-7 on environmental sustainability. Several targets were formulated for the poorest countries and left little room for the adoption of national targets appropriate for other countries (e.g., for middle-income countries).

VISION AND FRAMEWORK FOR SETTING THE GOALS AND TARGETS

There are certain agreements arising from all reports. The first is that the new agenda should encompass all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. The second is that the agenda should be universal, referring not merely to developing countries but also to goals that are applicable to *all* countries, rich and poor alike. The goals and targets for industrialized countries should thus include not only their support to developing countries but also their own development objectives (e.g., in relation to employment or reduction of inequalities) and their contribution to global development (e.g., in climate change or global financial stability).

The third area of consensus is that goals should take into account regional, national, and local circumstances and priorities. In particular, they should leave ample space for national policy design and adaptation to local settings. This critical element guarantees the “ownership” of this agenda by national governments and societies—without which, it will not be realized. The fourth is that, like the MDGs, there should be a limited set of goals that are “bold but practical” and include measurable indicators that are subject to monitoring and drive accountability. Finally, there is the implicit agreement that the post-2015 agenda should be adopted by the UN General Assembly and reflect an open consultative process, one that should converge with the open working group on SDGs.

Both the UN Task Force and the High-Level Panel also propose that the new agenda should incorporate not only areas covered by the MDGs but also some left off that agenda as well as “emerging issues.” Two common themes on which these two reports agree are peace and security and good national governance. The reasons are the minimal progress in development and even backwards movement that has affected countries afflicted by conflict and the recognition that peace and good governance are “core elements of wellbeing, not an optional extra,” according to the High-Level Panel (p. 9). In turn, the list of emerging issues that the UN Task Force proposes is a long one and includes: the persistence or increase in inequalities, including by gender; large and growing knowledge gap between and within countries; loss of traditional knowledge; shifting demographics (rapid population growth in Africa, population aging, internal and international migration, urbanization and the growing population living in slums); a growing environmental footprint (shrinking forests, growing scarcity of water resources, land degradation, climate change, biodiversity loss) and incidence of natural disasters; and governance and accountability deficits at the global, regional, national and sub-national levels. These are all important but careful scrutiny indicates that this long list dilutes the advantages of the future agenda.

Within these broad agreements, the UN Task Force and the High-Level Panel have put forward a vision and a framework to organize the agenda and, in the case of the panel, an indicative set of goals and targets. The UN Task Force’s vision reflects the fundamental principles of respect for human rights, equality and sustainability, and an agenda organized along four interdependent dimensions: inclusive social development through universal access to basic social services and the eradication of hunger; inclusive economic development through productive employment and decent work, and reduction of income poverty and inequalities; environmental sustainability, including new consumption and production patterns; and peace and security, including national governance based on the rule of law and political inclusion.

In turn, the High-Level Panel’s first sentence declares: “Our vision and our responsibility are to end extreme poverty in all its forms in the context of sustainable development and to have in place the building blocks of sustainable development for all.” It then proposes five “big, transformative shifts”: leave no one behind, taking into account income, gender, ethnicity, disabilities, and geography; put sustainable development at the core, integrating its three dimensions;

transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth; build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all; and forge a new global partnership for development.

The two agendas largely coincide but the four dimensions proposed by the UN Task Force may be a simpler (though more traditional) way to organize the discussion. The major difference between the two reports lies, therefore, in the proposed vision: while sharing the theme of sustainability, the High-Level Panel proposes that fighting multidimensional poverty should be at the center of the agenda, whereas the UN Task Force emphasizes respect for human rights and overcoming inequality. An alternative would be to start with the basic values set in the UN Millennium Declaration: freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature, and shared responsibilities.

The UN Task Force's vision is broader and fits better with traditional UN values and discourse. It places human rights at the center and thus is better grounded in the rights-based approach to development, so dear to the UN. The emphasis on equality also provides a broader framework, as it includes overcoming the multidimensional dimensions of poverty but also international inequalities and the rising domestic inequalities that have affected so many countries, rich and poor, in recent decades.

Although inequality is central for the High-Level Panel, its proposals explicitly exclude income inequality as an issue for the post-2015 global development agenda. In its view, this problem should be addressed by national (not global) policy in light of the vast differences among countries about acceptable levels of income inequality (p. 16). However, the same is true of other issues, including "good domestic governance." Rising domestic income inequality is such a crucial "emerging trend" and has been so central in the ongoing discussion of the post-2015 agenda that its absence from the panel's report is puzzling. In contrast, for example, ECOSOC's Committee for Development Policy argued in its 2013 report that the reduction of inequality should be included as a specific goal in the post-2015 agenda, with measurable targets, adding specific references to overcoming the high levels of abject poverty.⁸

The challenge of including peace and security and national governance on the agenda is a complex one. A major issue relates to the specific contours of the *development agenda* as opposed to the broader UN agenda, which most certainly includes these issues. The focus should be on the linkages between peace and security with the three dimensions of sustainable development, rather than on peace and security in general. It would also be difficult to adopt measurable targets in this area because of the imperfections and highly controversial character of existing indicators (including those used by the World Bank). Hence, it might be better to include good national governance in the framework of the post-2015 agenda rather than as a specific goal. Indeed, this is how the UN Task Force incorporates human rights. Furthermore, central to the long-standing vision of the global South in UN debates is the need to include good *global* not only good *national* governance.

The UN Task Force explicitly recognizes this issue, but the High-Level Panel does not.

Thus, a reformulated version of the UN Task Force's vision and agenda is a better way to organize the discussion. The post-2015 agenda should thus be grounded in a vision based on the respect for human rights, equality, sustainability, and good global and national governance, and should be organized around four major issues: inclusive social development, inclusive economic development, environmental sustainability, and links between peace and development.

THE GLOBAL PARTNERSHIP FOR DEVELOPMENT, MONITORING, AND ACCOUNTABILITY

The weakness of MDG-8 underscores the crucial importance of the global partnership in the discussion of the post-2015 agenda. Since the UN's creation, developing countries have restlessly and relentlessly insisted that any global partnership for development should include a change in the rules that govern global finance, trade, and technology generation and transfer; and that such a partnership should "broaden and strengthened the participation of developing countries and countries with economies in transition in international economic decision-making and norm-setting"—to repeat the words of the 2002 Monterrey Consensus.⁹ Furthermore, the issue of international inequalities is so central because about four-fifths of global income inequalities can be explained by differences across countries, rather than within countries.¹⁰

The most disappointing element of the High-Level Panel's report is that its proposed global partnership is really a collection of multi-stakeholder partnerships. Although the engagement of civil society, the private sector, foundations, and academia in the achievement of the global development goals is essential, it cannot substitute for *inter-governmental* cooperation not only in terms of resources and technical assistance but also in policy-making and norm-setting. In fact, multi-stakeholder partnerships have to be coordinated through inter-governmental processes in order to be effective, just as welfare provision at the national level is under the state's purview. Inter-governmental cooperation should encompass finance, trade, technology, environment, and even migration (the most slippery issue). Rethinking the structures of global governance is essential for this task.

Furthermore, to use the terms also agreed to in the Rio 1992 Earth Summit, the global partnership should be based on the principle of "common but differentiated responsibilities." This is explicitly recognized by the UN Task Force but remarkably absent in the High-Level Panel's report, which tries to reformulate it as "shared responsibilities in accordance with respective capabilities" (pp. 3 and 9). Again, the UN Task Force report is a better starting point.

An essential element of the Global Partnership is high-profile monitoring and accountability for at least some of the commitments, which requires what the High-Level Panel calls a "data revolution," a significant improvement in measuring the multiple dimensions of development that is comparable across countries. The system

designed to monitor the MDGs was an advance, but a much better system is necessary. As the High-Level Panel argues, it is probably inevitable that goals and targets be closely monitored but not legally binding, with the process including regular discussions of the evaluations at a high political level. However, in some cases it is worth discussing whether a stronger system of accountability should be put in place. And, furthermore, this might be the opportunity to design a system for monitoring not just the post-2015 goals and SDGs (which will hopefully be one and the same) but also other “internationally agreed development goals” agreed in previous UN summits and global conferences.

This responsibility could be given to the ECOSOC system—not merely the council but also its functional and regional commissions and expert bodies. Improving monitoring and accountability in the next phase could be one concrete way to strengthen the role of ECOSOC, which 2007 General Assembly resolution 61/16 recommends to be the “principal body ... for implementation of the internationally agreed development goals agreed at the major United Nations conferences and summits, including the Millennium Development Goals.”

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NOTES

1. See Richard Jolly, Louis Emmerij, and Thomas G. Weiss, *UN Ideas That Changed the World* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 2009).
2. *Realizing the Future We Want*, Report of the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (New York: UN, 2012).
3. *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development*, Report of the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (New York: UN, 2013).
4. *A Life of Dignity for All: Accelerating Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals and Advancing the United Nations Development Agenda beyond 2015*, Report of the Secretary-General, UN document A/68/202, 26 July 2013.
5. *A Regional Perspective on the Post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda*, UN document E/ESCWA/OES/2013/2, and United Nations Development Group, *The Global Conversation Begins: Emerging Views for a New Development Agenda* (New York: UN, 2013).
6. This includes the annual United Nations' *Millennium Development Goals Reports* and the more recent reports of the MDG Gap Task Force Reports on the global partnership for development (MDG-8), and the World Bank's *Global Monitoring Reports*.
7. Development Assistance Committee, *Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation* (Paris: OECD, 1996).
8. Committee for Development Policy, *Report on the Fifteenth Session*, UN document E/2013/33, 18-22 March 2013.
9. *Monterrey Consensus on Financing for Development* (New York: UN, 2003), para. 62.
10. Branko Milanovic, *The Haves and Have-Nots: A Brief and Idiosyncratic History of Global Inequality* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).

