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Mobilizing critical research for preventing and eradicating poverty

The Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) set up under the Rio process has published its Outcome document on the SDGs. While some issues are to be welcomed, many of the goals and targets are extremely weak. The authors point to six areas that urgently need to be redressed in the next phase of discussions:

- There is a need to frame the discussions in the discourse of human rights and to refer explicitly to the Universal Declaration of Human Rights and the many associated social rights such as the right to food, social protection, core labor standards and many others.
- The total eradication of poverty is postponed to 2030, with an unacceptably low target value of \$1.25 (2005 US currency purchasing power) per person per day. Two revisions are needed: a more adequate income poverty line and a more comprehensive definition of poverty because money-metric measures fail to capture many of the hardships that constitute poverty in the real world.
- The inequality goal needs to specify by how much the growth of the bottom 40% should exceed the national GDP growth average, if it is to be meaningful.
- The targets on climate change do not include a concrete commitment to combat climate change itself (mitigation) and not a single target is devoted to discouraging or ending the ecologically most damaging modes of production and consumption.
- The means of implementation make no reference to the structural reforms required to tackle the root causes of poverty.
- Accountability is the key to effective development goals. While the SDGs are commendable for their inclusion of goal-specific Means of Implementation, they fail to specify, for each proposed goal, whose goal it is supposed to be: i.e. who is supposed to do what to get it accomplished.

BIG HOLES IN THE SDG DRAFT

by Gabriele Köhler, Thomas Pogge and Mitu Sengupta

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which are due to be formally adopted by the UN General Assembly in 2015 are supposed to guide worldwide development efforts through to 2030. Charged with producing a detailed draft, the Open Working Group established under the Rio plus 20 agenda submitted its proposal of 17 SDGs to the UN Secretary General in July 2014. The SDG discussions among 30 governments and nine civil society groups were extremely tough. The progressive community in governments and civil society fought hard and well, and the proposal they negotiated may be the best achievable at this point in time.

There are a number of points in the SDG draft that one can welcome. For instance: it moves away from anachronistic and patronizing North-South thinking and sees the world and the planet as one entity. Decent work and social protection are part of the agenda. Gender empowerment is a goal on its own. It seeks to combat climate change and the loss of biodiversity and the text underlines the reality that environmental sustainability, as well as peace and democracy, are integral to development. There is a call to fundamentally change consumption and production patterns as well as to recognize the inequities within and among countries.

But there are far more areas where there are significant and potentially detrimental omissions and positions that fall far behind consensus reached in earlier decades. A non-exhaustive list of six areas of concern follows:

Rights

There are a set of social rights enshrined in the Universal Declaration on Human Rights, which have been agreed to by virtually all countries: i.e. the right to a life in dignity, rights to food, to income security, to social security, and more recently a right to water and sanitation, as well as a right to land. There are also the agreed human rights of women, of children, of migrants, of people with disabilities, of minorities and indigenous peoples. There are core labor standards and the rights of homeworkers and domestic workers. So far, this rights-focused thinking has been relegated to the fringes in the formulation of the SDGs—it is referenced in preambles to outcome documents, but does not shape the development agenda. This 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 merely calls for nationally appropriate social protection systems and measures for all, including floors.

Poverty

The goal for the total eradication of poverty and hunger is postponed to 2030. This means that another entire generation of children—those born between 2015 and 2030—are destined to grow up in absolute and relative poverty; another generation of working age persons is to remain without reliable, properly remunerated income, work and social security; and the current generation of seniors living in poverty is not to have a dignified, restful old age. Persistent hunger, malnutrition, food insecurity will remain. Even the stunting and wasting of children under 5 is not to be overcome until 2025. Moreover, extreme poverty—the type of poverty to be eradicated—is defined in terms of the unacceptably low value of \$1.25 (2005 US currency purchasing power) per person per day. Two revisions are needed: first, we need a more adequate income poverty line. \$10 is currently the world median income, and that could be a starting point of the discussion. Second, we need to use a more comprehensive definition of poverty such as those implemented in the multi-dimensional poverty index (www.ophi.org.uk/multidimensional-poverty-index) or the Individual Deprivation Measure (www.genderpovertymeasure.org), because money-metric measures fail 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, in the goal's title, of ending poverty in all its forms everywhere.

Inequality

The first target of Goal 10, on mitigating inequality, needs to specify by how much the growth of the bottom 40% should exceed the national GDP growth average. Here a suitable target would be to halve, by 2030, each country's logarithmic distance from a Palma ratio¹ of 1. In addition, there should be references to inequality reduction in the targets of other goals. Indicators used to monitor targets should be disaggregated into 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.

Climate change

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 being 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 means of implementation. 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 a single 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. The adaptation targets betray the SDGs' technocratic approach to climate change with only the 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.

Means of implementation (MOIs)

The implications of the lack of use of 'rights language' and the minimalist poverty goal are made even worse 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.

Accountability

Accountability is the key to effective development goals. While the SDGs are commendable for their inclusion of goal-specific MOIs, they fail to specify, for each proposed goal, whose goal it is supposed to be: i.e. who is supposed to do what to get it accomplished. Failing that, the proposed SDGs are, once again, a wish list only,

with little moral force. Take, for instance, the proposed target 5.1: to 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.

There is still time to fix the SDGs. A first great opportunity will come in September 2014 at the UN discussion of the Millennium Development Goals. Once more, it will be crucial for progressive forces to unite behind the most important revisions to be achieved. We have provided some candidates here.

Reference

Outcome Document – Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. 19 July 2014.

http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4518SDGs_FINAL_Proposal%20of%20OWG_19%20July%20at%201320hrsver3.pdf

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Note

- 1 The Palma ratio is based on the work of Chilean economist Gabriel Palma; it is defined as the ratio of the richest 10% of the population's share of gross national income divided by the poorest 40%'s share.

The CROP Poverty Briefs are a series of short research notes highlighting recent research and trends in global poverty. The ideas contained in CROP Briefs are those of the named authors and do not

necessarily reflect a consensus view of the Programme. They are distributed as worthy of consideration by those concerned to "mobilize critical research for preventing and eradicating poverty".

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