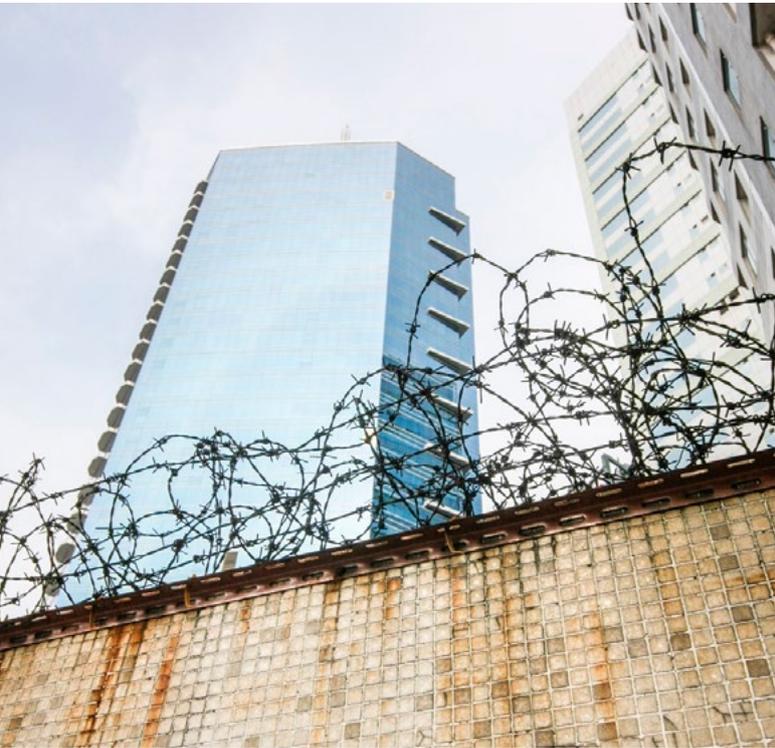


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Mobilizing critical research for  
preventing and eradicating poverty



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This brief argues that:

- As a whole, the SDGs do not constitute a universal agenda, despite the claim that they do. As with the MDGs, they reflect the old world view in terms of North-South divide.
- It is astounding that the SDGs, as the global development agenda for the next 15 years, remain silent about overweight and obesity, which constitute major public health challenges in countries across the world.
- The basic premise of the SDGs is wrong. It is not extreme poverty that represents the biggest challenge the world is facing today, but extreme inequality.
- Although they pretend to do so, the SDGs do not address inequality.
- The SDGs contain many items but only a few numerical targets.
- The SDGs use absolute benchmarks and mix collective and country-specific targets. This sets the stage for biased assessments of country-level performances in the future.

## A SERENE LOOK AT THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS (SDG)

Jan Vandemoortele

### Introduction

Almost two years in the making, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were agreed by UN member states in August 2015. Before they are called 'ground breaking', 'momentous' or 'historic', a dispassionate look at the SDGs may be warranted. Conceptually, the development agenda is becoming more holistic and the SDGs contain more areas of concern. The process has seen more participation and consultation than was the case with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The discussions have paid more attention to the link between global goals and national targets. Given that the report card regarding the MDGs can be summarised under the one-liner 'progress for people, regress for the planet', it is absolutely justified to focus on sustainability this time around.

All this is commendable, yet the SDGs fall short in several ways. The brief examines the basic premise of the SDGs and their universal nature. It also looks into some technical aspects, such as their level of ambition, benchmarking and type of targets. The brief argues that any irrational exuberance about the SDGs would be misplaced; yet they might serve a useful purpose if a couple of targets were to be taken seriously and placed in the limelight.

### Wrong premise

The SDGs are not based on the right premise. The preamble and the second paragraph state that, 'eradicating poverty [...] is the greatest global challenge'. The very first of the 169 targets is to 'eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day'. In several places, the text pledges 'that no one will be left behind'. This train of thought may sound convincing, but is it correct?

Several scholars and experts think it is not. Robert Shiller, Nobel laureate in economics, puts it quite categorically: "The most important problem we are facing now, today, is rising inequality." In the 2014 Human Development

Report, another Nobel laureate, Joseph Stiglitz, argues, *"We need to begin thinking of inequality not just as a moral issue—which it is—but also as a fundamental economic concern"*. The Economist admits that *"Growing inequality is one of the biggest social, economic and political challenges of our time."* Many other voices could be added to the refrain, including those of Robert Wilkinson and Kate Pickett, Thomas Piketty, Danny Dorling, Anthony Atkinson, James Galbraith, the United Nations, the International Monetary Fund, and the World Economic Forum. Nevertheless, the SDGs repeat the old view that poverty rather than inequality is the central issue, and negates the reality of extreme inequality.

### **'Leave No One Behind' (LNOB)**

Related to the wrong premise is the mantra 'Leave No One Behind' (LNOB). The report card on the MDGs shows that progress for people has seen a systemic bias against the least well-off — hence the LNOB-mantra. Despite the considerable progress achieved across the world — in monetary and non-monetary terms — evidence shows that people at the bottom of the social ladder have seen little or none of it. In 2003, two UNICEF colleagues, Alberto Minujin and Enrique Delamonica, examined in detail data on infant mortality in 24 developing countries. They concluded that, during the 1980s and 1990s, progress for the bottom quintile (i.e. the poorest 20 per cent of the population) was *"modest, and in most countries it was not statistically significant"*. Several other studies have since confirmed this trend. Given the evidence, the LNOB slogan may look like a no-brainer, but appearances can be deceiving. While apparently innocuous, LNOB is potentially harmful because it focuses attention on the symptom (extreme poverty) rather than the cause (extreme inequality).

Although the SDGs pay nominal attention to inequality, they do so superfluously. While goal 10 is supposed to cover inequality, target 10.1 is about poverty, not inequality. It aims to 'progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average'. One cannot claim to deal with inequality when the target covers only the bottom 40 per cent of the population. To be genuine about inequality, the target must cover the entire spectrum; not just the poorest. Anthony Atkinson insists that *"we need to consider the distribution as a whole"*. It is perfectly possible, for instance, for the bottom 40 per cent to see faster income growth than the national average, and yet to witness growing inequality within the country — i.e. through the hollowing out of the middle class.

Hence, the attention paid to LNOB is misplaced because it helps to dodge the real challenge of our times — eliminating extreme inequality. If tackled in earnest, reducing extreme inequality would automatically resolve extreme poverty. The failure of the SDGs to focus on extreme inequality is unlikely to be an oversight.

Addressing extreme poverty offers a more convenient scenario for all member states than to zero in on extreme inequality. For rich countries, concentrating on poverty and hunger is in line with their patronising North-South world view; while developing countries prefer to talk about inequality between countries. Hence, LNOB is little more than a diplomatic construct to hide the fact that world leaders have failed to lead and act with courage. While not totally unwelcome, any irrational exuberance about LNOB is therefore out of place.

### **Global, not universal**

It is common to hear that the SDGs represent a universal agenda. This is seen as a major achievement as it supposedly moves the discourse beyond the North-South divide. But a set of global targets does not necessarily make up a universal agenda. The global targets for poverty, health and hunger that are contained in the MDGs are not applicable to rich countries. As such, the MDGs do not constitute a universal agenda. The same can be said about the SDGs. Take nutrition, for example: An agenda that is genuinely universal would not only deal with hunger but also with obesity. Yet, the proposed SDGs do not mention the problem of being overweight or obese; they only set the target 'to end, by 2030, hunger and all forms of malnutrition'. This is a global target whose reach is not universal.

It is absolutely astounding that the SDGs, as the development agenda for the next 15 years, omit obesity, when solid evidence confirms that it represents a serious threat to public health in most countries, rich and poor alike. Experts refer to it as an epidemic; some talk of a tsunami for public health — including diabetes, stroke, hypertension, cardiovascular disease, cancer and depression. If current trends persist, there will soon be more children in the world who are overweight than underweight. An agenda that sidesteps the problem of obesity cannot claim to be universal in nature.

It would be naive to believe that this omission is due to a simple oversight. The fact is that rich countries are not yet ready or willing to commit themselves to a universal agenda with concrete targets. For them, it is more convenient to focus on ending extreme poverty and hunger. The patronising world view of North and South is not yet something of the past.

Nonetheless, the claim that the SDGs are universal is frequently reiterated. The agreed document containing the SDGs — a text of less than 30 pages — repeats nine times that the SDGs constitute a universal agenda. An entire paragraph (#71) is even devoted to making that very point. Why? Daniel Kahneman, Princeton psychologist and winner of the Nobel Prize in economics, offers the answer. He says, *"A reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods is frequent repetition, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth"*.

## Immeasurable items

The SDGs violate the three Cs that lie at the root of the MDGs' success: clear, concise and computable. A global agenda cannot be comprehensive and concise at the same time. Had all the aspects mentioned in the Millennium Declaration been incorporated in the MDGs, they would never have had the same staying power. Any belief in the perfectibility of a global agenda for development is illusionary. Therefore, the UN SDGs are likely to turn out to be the 'unsustainable development goals' because their fuzziness and comprehensiveness will make it exceedingly difficult to keep them in the limelight.

Regarding computability, take the example of target 10.7, which says, 'Facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people, including through the implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies'. How can such a target be monitored in an objective and numerical fashion?

We agree that measurability is not necessarily the be-all-and-end-all of a target. The maxim that 'not everything that counts can be counted' is certainly valid. Yet, targets must maintain a degree of objective measurability because solid evidence is the ultimate defence against ideology-based policy-making. The British economist Schumacher writes, *"To measure the immeasurable is absurd and constitutes an elaborate method of moving from preconceived notions to foregone conclusions."* More recently, the French economist Thomas Piketty concludes his (hefty) bestseller with the following sentence: *"Refusing to deal with numbers rarely serves the interests of the least well-off."*

## Items, not targets

Grouped under 17 goals, the SDGs comprise 169 targets, although the latter is a misnomer. According to the dictionary, a target is a precise result you intend to achieve by a specific date. It requires that the aim is clear; that the level of achievement is specific; and that the deadline is well-defined.

On that count, most of the SDGs fail the test. Indeed, the majority of them do not contain a numerical outcome but use vague language such as 'substantially reduce/increase', 'support and strengthen', 'progressively improve', 'achieve higher levels of', 'take urgent action to', 'ensure', etc. In addition, many fail to set a specific deadline. When they do, it is mostly for the year 2030, although, bizarrely, the years 2020 and 2025 apply for some targets. As such, they are not fit to be called 'targets'.

The International Council for Science (ICSU), in collaboration with the International Social Science Council (ISSC) reviewed the 169 targets from a scientific point of view. Their report card is rather harsh on the SDGs, stating that more than half of the stated objectives should be reformulated. According to the more than 40 leading researchers who worked on the report, 29 targets (nearly 1 in 5) are best thrown out, because they are too vague or redundant.

When we eliminate those that lack either a clear deadline or a specific level of outcome, we are left with 45 of the 169 'targets'. Still, several of these 45 — for which a specific outcome is set by a specific year — fail the first condition, namely conceptual clarity. Take item 4.7, for instance, which aims to 'by 2030, ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development'. Or item 7.1 that says, 'ensure, by 2030, universal access to affordable, reliable and modern energy services'. Compared to target 3.1, which stipulates, 'by 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births', the above-mentioned two examples do not quite cut it as targets. When we eliminate those with fuzzily-formulated objectives, we are left with only 29.

Thus, the SDGs contain lots of items but few numerical targets. Indeed, the SDGs are a mixture of generalities and ideals, sprinkled with some concrete targets. For example, item 1.4 aims to 'ensure, by 2030, that all men and women have equal rights to economic resources'. This is a laudable objective but it is not about reaching a precise outcome for a clear objective. Several other examples could be mentioned here. Suffice to cite one more: item 16.5 aims to 'substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms'. Stiglitz calls campaign contributions and lobbying *"corruption, American style"*. It is not clear whether 'target' 16.5 will lead to campaign finance reforms in the US. In sum, when it comes to the SDGs, it is important not to confuse general items with specific targets.

## Ambition, benchmarking and type of targets

Some of the SDG targets are setting the bar exceedingly high. It is unrealistic, for instance, to expect that malnutrition will be zero in 2030. Over the past 25 years, child malnutrition has been cut from 25 to 14 per cent, which is a respectable achievement. One wonders, however, how the annual rate of progress will be doubled over the next 15 years. The target set for maternal mortality is ambitious too, yet not unrealistic. The target for child mortality seems achievable at the global level, but not in all countries. It is here that some of the targets really become problematic.

It is noteworthy that (almost) all SDG targets use absolute benchmarks, whereas the MDGs used mostly relative benchmarks. Both relative and absolute targets can lead to biased and inaccurate assessments. Arguably, targets that combine relative and absolute benchmarks constitute the best way of overcoming their shortcomings. Yet, this counsel has been ignored; the SDGs adopt mostly absolute benchmarks. They are likely to yield more unfair and incorrect assessments for particular countries, especially the least developed nations. As with the MDGs, the narrative is likely to persist that Africa is missing the targets; when in fact we are missing the point.

Another notable aspect of the SDGs is that they include collective and country-specific targets. The collective targets need to be achieved at the global level, but not necessarily in each and every country. The target 'to reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births' is obviously a collective target. It can be achieved globally, even if several countries still end up with a ratio above 70, because others will have a ratio below that level. But the target to reduce under-five mortality to at least 25 per 1,000 live births 'by all countries' is clearly country-specific; it has to be achieved by every single country.

It is not clear why the SDGs set collective targets for some objectives and country-specific ones for other aims. Country-specific targets, especially in combination with absolute benchmarks, can be quite hard to achieve, if at all. Moreover, country-specific targets that are set in New York are problematic in the sense that they violate the principle of national ownership and fail to give due cognizance to local contexts.

To end this brief on a positive note, we flag two surprises that are contained in the SDGs. The first is target 1.2, which aims to 'reduce, by 2030, at least by half the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions'. This is perhaps the sole SDG target that is truly universal in nature — unlike the very first SDG target, which is to eradicate extreme poverty based on the \$1.25/day yardstick. The latter is not universal because it is not applicable to rich countries.

The other surprise is target 10c, which states, 'reduce to less than 3 per cent the transaction costs of migrant remittances and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5 per cent'. Remittances are money that migrant workers send to their families in the country of origin. They reportedly exceed \$400 billion annually. This makes them an economic lifeline for many families and of macro-economic importance for several developing countries. It is important that transaction costs are brought down.

Targets 1.2 and 10c are clear and tangible. If they are taken seriously, then the SDGs may still make a difference by 2030.

## Author

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