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Sustainable Development Goals and Millennium Development Goals: an analysis of the shaping and negotiation process

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This article analyses the emerging scope of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the successor development instrument to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which are scheduled to end on 31 December 2015. The top priorities of the stakeholders involved in the shaping and negotiation process include poverty eradication, water sanitation, energy, economic growth, green growth, governance and employment. Current trends appear to favour a progression of the shaping and negotiation process which goes beyond the established MDG goals.

Keywords: Millennium Development Goals; Sustainable Development Goals; multi-stakeholders; United Nations processes

Introduction

Global sustainable development is becoming more and more critical as the international community advances into the future. Sustainability has been a concern for several decades and has now gained greater significance with the 2015 deadline of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the lack of significant advancement in the Rio+20 and United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) processes. Two separate processes are underway to determine the successor framework of the MDGs.

In addition, the various stakeholder groups and international organisations have begun their own discussions on what issues and priorities they feel need to be considered for a sustainable future. A single integrated framework is critical in order to successfully progress with sustainable development as well as concentrating resources on key targets for breakthrough development outcomes. The issues and themes that are classified as the top priorities will set the stage for policy choices concerning sustainable development goals and determine the progress of the world.

The two processes leading the discussions and methods for determining the MDGs successor framework include the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which derived from the Rio+20 Principles, and the Post-2015 Development Agenda. It is currently unclear how the SDG process and the Post-2015 Development Agenda will be integrated, but there are close linkages between them.

This discussion seeks to analyse the trends and issues of the SDGs as a post-MDGs response to the development challenges of countries remaining in states of poverty and

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underdevelopment. In addition, it establishes a cross-sector overview on the priorities and demands of various stakeholders representing governments, businesses and civil societies.

The Rio+20 and Sustainable Development Goals

The Rio+20 is the short name for the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development that took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, on 20–22 June 2012. At the conference, world leaders, along with thousands of participants from governments, the private sector, NGOs and other groups, came together to discuss how to reduce poverty, advance social equity and ensure environmental protection in order to progress into the world in which future generations would like to live.

There were two themes at the conference, both of which focused on sustainability (United Nations [UN], 2012b). The first is a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication. The second is the institutional framework for sustainable development. Sustainable development rests on the integration and the balance of social, economic and environmental goals in both public and private decision making. The concept of a green economy focuses primarily on the intersection between the environment and the economy.

Sustainable development has been recognised as an overarching goal for institutions at the national, regional and international levels since 1972 (UN, 2012c, p. 3). The institutional framework comprises the General Assembly of the United Nations (UNGA), the United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and the United Nations Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). There are three mutually reinforcing pillars of sustainable development – social, economic and environmental – at national, regional and global levels.

The 2012 Rio+20 Conference highlighted seven areas which need particular attention (UN, 2012a):

- (1) *Jobs*: Economic recession has taken a toll on both the quantity and quality of jobs. Economic action and social policies to create gainful employment are critical for both social cohesion and stability.
- (2) *Energy*: Energy is central to nearly every major challenge and opportunity the world faces today. Sustainable energy is needed for strengthening economies, protecting ecosystems and achieving equity.
- (3) *Cities*: Cities have enabled people to advance socially and economically. However, they face challenges such as congestion and lack of funds. Overcoming these challenges will allow cities to thrive and grow, while improving resource use.
- (4) *Food*: Soils, fresh water, biodiversity, oceans and forests are rapidly degrading. If done right, agriculture, fisheries and forestry can provide nutritious food for all and generate decent incomes, while supporting people-centred rural development and protecting the environment.
- (5) *Water*: Water scarcity, poor water quality and inadequate sanitation negatively impact food security, livelihood choices and educational opportunities for poor families. There is sufficient fresh water on this planet to achieve clean, accessible water for all.

- (6) *Oceans*: Careful management of oceans is essential for humankind to inhabit the earth. Rainwater, drinking water, weather, climate, coastlines and much food are all ultimately provided by the sea.
- (7) *Disasters*: Disasters caused by earthquakes, floods, droughts, hurricanes and tsunamis can have devastating impacts on people, environments and economies. However, resilience remains possible if people make intelligent choices about where they build their homes, how they grow their food, how their financial system operates and what they teach in schools.

The Rio Declaration proclaimed 27 principles that are needed to guide the way forward in order to ensure sustainability (UN, 1993). The principles illustrate narrower objectives in achieving sustainable development, opposed to the broader view provided by the MDGs. The majority of the principles encompass practices of the environmental sustainability and global partnership MDGs. Table 1 presents the comparative linkages between the MDGs and Rio+20 principles which reveal the convergent points and gaps.

The resolution adopted by the UNGA (2012) in its 66th session on 11 September 2012 included the following:

- Reaffirming the Rio Principles
- Assessing the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and addressing new and emerging challenges.

We emphasize the need to make progress in implementing previous commitments. We also recognize the need to accelerate progress in closing development gaps between developed and developing countries, and to seize and create opportunities to achieve sustainable development through economic growth and diversification, social development and environmental protection. To this end, we underscore the continued need for an enabling environment at the national and international levels, as well as continued and strengthened international cooperation, particularly in the areas of finance, debt, trade and technology transfer, as mutually agreed, and innovation, entrepreneurship, capacity-building, transparency and accountability.

- Sustainable Development

We underscore that the Millennium Development Goals are a useful tool in focusing achievement of specific development gains as part of a broad development vision and framework for the development activities of the United Nations, for national priority-setting and for mobilization of stakeholders and resources towards common goals. We therefore remain firmly committed to their full and timely achievement ...

An open working group shall be constituted no later than at the opening of the sixty-seventh session of the Assembly and shall comprise thirty representatives, nominated by Member States from the five United Nations regional groups, with the aim of achieving fair, equitable and balanced geographical representation. At the outset, this open working group will decide on its methods of work, including developing modalities to ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community and the United Nations system in its work, in order to provide a diversity of perspectives and experience. It will submit a report, to the Assembly at its sixty-eighth session, containing a proposal for sustainable development goals for consideration and appropriate action.

The process needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes to consider the post-2015 development agenda. The initial input to the work of the working group will be provided by the Secretary-General, in consultation with national Governments ...

Table 1. A comparison of Millennium Development Goals and corresponding Rio+20 Principles.

Millennium Development Goals	Rio+20 Principles
1. End poverty and hunger	Rio+20 Principles 1, 5
2. Universal education	Rio+20 Principle 21
3. Gender and equality	Rio+20 Principle 20
4. Child health	NA
5. Maternal health	NA
6. Combat HIV/AIDS	NA
7. Environmental sustainability	Rio+20 Principles 2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 24, 25
8. Global partnership	Rio+20 Principles 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 26, 27

Note: NA = not applicable.

Post-2015 Development Agenda and MDGs

The United Nations Millennium Campaign, started in 2002, supports and inspires people from around the world to take action in support of the MDGs. This project was commissioned by the UN Secretary General. The UN is working with governments, civil society and other partners to build on the momentum generated by the MDGs and carry on with an ambitious post-2015 development agenda.

At the September 2010 MGD Summit, UN Member States initiated steps towards advancing the development agenda beyond 2015. Secretary General Ban Ki-moon established a UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 Development Agenda in January 2012 to coordinate preparations beyond 2015 (United Nations System Task Team, 2012b). The Task Team comprises more than 60 UN agencies and international organisations. It is co-chaired by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Program. The Task Team published its first report, "Realizing the Future We Want for All", in June 2012. The report outlined the vision of the UN system on the global development agenda beyond 2015.

In July 2012, the Secretary-General announced the 27 members of a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLPEP) of the Post-2015 Development Agenda to advise on the global development framework beyond 2015 (UN, 2013c). The panel is co-chaired by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia and Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom, and includes leaders from civil society, the private sector and governments. The panel is expected to reflect new development challenges, while also drawing on experience gained in implementing the MDGs, both in terms of results achieved and areas for improvement.

The MDGs are quickly approaching their 15-year deadline. There has been a mixture of reviews directed toward the millennium campaign process. While some are optimistic and praise the achievements of the goals, others are more critical and focus on the shortcomings and grandiose expectations. Analysis of the MDGs is conducted with regard to the indicators or targets set for each goal. These targets assess how well the goal has performed. While some targets have been met or are expected to be met by

2015, others have not been met, having made insufficient progress or even experienced deterioration.

In terms of the positive results from the goals, targets for poverty and hunger eradication have been attained in various degrees. Extreme income poverty has fallen, with the proportion of people living on less than US\$1.25 per day declining from 43.1% in 1990 to 22.4% in 2008 (European Union [EU], 2013). The biggest progress was made in Eastern Asia due to China's work in reducing poverty. In addition, several regions significantly reduced the mortality rate of under-5-year-olds by two-thirds (EU, 2013).

With regard to MDG progression, more attention is paid to the failures and faults of the goals. For example, while the target of reducing poverty by half has been accomplished, there still remain extreme cases of poverty in sub-Saharan Africa, Southern Asia and Oceania. Simply because a target has been met does not affirm that the issue is no longer prevalent (UN, 2013b). On accomplishing a target, it should be redefined with new, more specific standards to continue the progression where it is most needed. Most critics have expressed this need strongly in their reviews of the MDGs.

Critiques embody a common idea that the purpose of the MDGs was to distort priorities and to focus attention on a few key goals and targets as a means to improve development outcomes (EU, 2013). By focusing on social sectors, the MDGs reduced the importance that donors had attached to infrastructure, agriculture and industrial development, which may have detrimentally effected growth. In addition to distorting priorities, the MDGs have been accused of omitting issues of key importance such as climate change, governance, conflict, migration and security (EU, 2013). While these priorities may not be able to be categorised into specific goals, they need to be included in targets and taken into consideration. The most significant criticisms directed toward the MDGs are those expressing concern that the goals may have been too broad and that there needs to be a narrower standard applied to them in order for there to be concrete, tangible change and progression.

Specific areas in need of attention are highlighted in *The Future We Want* (UNGA, 2012). Included are: poverty eradication; food security and nutrition and sustainable agriculture; water and sanitation; energy; sustainable tourism; sustainable transport; sustainable cities and human settlements; health and population; promoting full and productive employment, decent work for all and social protection; oceans and seas; small island developing states; least developed countries; landlocked developing countries; Africa; regional efforts; disaster risk reduction; climate change; forests; biodiversity; desertification, land degradation and drought; mountains; chemicals and waste; sustainable consumption and production; mining; education; gender equality and women's empowerment.

Sustainable Development Goals: 2013–2015 policy debates

In June 2012, governments agreed at the UN Conference on Environment and Development (Rio+20) on launching a UN-led process to create a set of universal SDGs. The goals should be based on Agenda 21 (UN, 1993) and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (UN, 2002), respect the Rio Principles, be consistent with international law, build upon commitments already made and contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major summits in the economic, social and environmental fields (UN, 2012c, p. 46).

This process will run parallel to discussions on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (UN, 2012c, p. 47), an initiative of the UN Secretary General, currently undertaking a

series of consultations and assessing the options for the successor framework of the MDGs. It is currently unclear as to how the SDG process will fit into the Post-2015 Development Agenda, but there must be close linkages between the two.

Ideally, both processes – the SDGs and Post-2015 Development Agenda – will need to be part of a single integrated framework. Therefore, it is important for stakeholders to closely follow both processes. Many governments and stakeholders are already advocating for a single framework coming out of the two processes so that efforts are not dispersed and the different dimensions of sustainable development are at the heart of this agenda in an integrated way.

In documents and declarations, the phrase, “three dimensions of Sustainable Development” has been referred to numerous times. The Rio+20 proposes a comprehensive path toward sustainable development comprising three dimensions (UNGA, 2012): environmental sustainability, economic sustainability and social (sociopolitical) sustainability.

The Post-2015 Development Agenda is led by the UN Secretary General through the UN Task Team and High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons. The SDG process is led by the UNGA through the Open Working Group (OWG). The Development Agenda responds to a mandate from the 2010 High-Level Plenary Meeting of the UNGA on the MDGs to include recommendations for efforts to accelerate MDG progress. The Secretary-General presented his suggestions in a report at the 68th session of UNGA in September 2013. The SDG process was agreed at the June 2012 UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) where member states agreed to set up an intergovernmental process with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the UNGA in 2015.

One of the main outcomes of the Rio+20 conference was the agreement by member states to launch a process to develop a set of SDGs. Rio+20 did not elaborate specific goals, but stated that the SDGs should be limited in number, aspirational and easy to communicate. The goals should address in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and be coherent with and integrated into the UN development agenda beyond 2015. A 30-member OWG of the UNGA is tasked with preparing a proposal on the SDGs.

The OWG was established on 22 January 2013 by the decision of the UNGA. The Rio+20 outcome document *The Future We Want* stated:

at the outset, the OWG will decide on its methods of work, including developing modalities to ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community and the United Nations system in its work, in order to provide a diversity of perspectives and experience. (UNGA, 2012)

The first meeting of the OWG on the SDGs was held on 14–15 March 2013. The primary output from the group was to prepare a proposal on the SDGs to be presented to the sixty-eighth UNGA in September 2013. The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons of the Post-2015 Development Agenda submitted a report to the Secretary-General containing recommendations in May 2013. The Secretary-General presented his report to the sixty-eighth session of UNGA in September 2013.

As expected, gaps exist between the two sustainable development processes. It is unclear how the SDG process will be integrated into the Post-2015 Development Agenda. While each process is headed by two different groups, some communication does exist between the OWG and the UN Task Team and High-Level Panel of Eminent

Persons. The most pertinent gap is the level of sustainability addressed in each process. The OWG is focusing its attention on narrow set of themes and issues, such as water sanitation, green energy, risk reduction and management of natural resources. The SDGs are more specific and can be classified under the MDGs in many instances. The UN Task Team and High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons, on the other hand, are directing their attention to the MDGs which are a broader set of issues. The MDGs can, and may eventually, encompass the SDGs. It is hoped that there will soon be a decision on how to integrate the processes.

Sustainable development is a critical issue in today's global world. Serious damage has been caused to the earth by human behaviour, with little effort to remedy the effects. Inaction is not an adequate response to the issue. There needs to be effort and support to eliminate these harmful effects on the world. The costs society pays for inaction are numerous. A few identified costs include common and natural resources disappearing, dramatic weather patterns, sea levels rising at monstrous yearly rates, deforestation, and health issues spreading (Kanninen, 2013). The costs that global community pays are uncountable. The most significant cost is directly related to the human species alone.

If inaction persists as a dominant mindset among citizens of the world, human progress will begin to wither. The earth is unable to adapt to our rapidly changing behaviour and practices. Our behaviour and habits as human beings will, and can, no longer be supported. Denial remains high, making us believe that our actions do not have a significant impact on the earth. Humans will begin to suffer from the effects of their own actions when the world cannot provide and sustain the lifestyle to which they have been accustomed. Support, encouragement and initiative are necessary to propel the human population into action to save all that it has evolved to be.

Timeline and results of key meetings toward 2015

The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons of the Post-2015 Development Agenda met in Monrovia, Liberia, 31 January–2 February 2013, with the theme of “National Building Blocks for Sustained Prosperity.” The panel delved into real issues of development, including what and how to prioritise. It enumerated national building blocks for economic transformation, and reaffirmed its vision to end extreme poverty in all its forms and make poverty eradication gains irreversible. It also agreed that the new agenda should support sustainable development and growth that creates jobs; protects the environment; and ensures peace, security and equity at all levels.

The panel stated that it will “make every effort to achieve a single, cohesive post-2015 agenda integrating economic growth, social inclusion, and environmental protection” (HLPEP, 2013c). Economic growth, while crucial, is not sufficient to ensure social justice, equity and sustained prosperity for all. Changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production (SCP) is necessary even in high-income countries. The panel is also exploring policy options for green growth. It recognises that political stability is a recurrent theme and emphasises the need to build strong, accountable institutions. These matters are underpinned by three pillars in the post-2015 programme: combating poverty, sustainable development, and growth with employment.

The first session of the UNGA OWG on SDGs took place at the UN Headquarters in New York, 14–15 March 2013. The OWG elected Csaba Körösi, Permanent Representative of Hungary, and Macharia Kamau, Permanent Representative of Kenya, as co-chairs (Sustainable Development 2015, 2013). A general discussion was held,

including an interactive discussion on “conceptualising the SDGs”. This discussion provided an opportunity for delegates and panel representatives from different sectors to exchange thoughts and ideas. Delegates appeared relieved and excited that the OWG was finally holding its first formal meeting after months of deliberations on the composition of the group (Sustainable Development, 2015, 2013). Most of the meeting was dedicated to statements, allowing delegates to position themselves on the OWG process and SDG priorities. Speakers addressed the importance of SDGs at the international level. Participants shared views on both the process and the substance of the SDG framework. Statements included general considerations for the SDG framework, and others outlined priorities for issues to be included in the goals. According to Co-Chair Körösi, the main areas of emphasis were poverty and hunger eradication; employment and decent jobs; sustainable consumption and production; gender equality and empowerment of women; access to, and good management of, the essentials of human well-being (food, water, health, and energy); and means of implementation.

In addition, numerous delegates expressed views on integrating the SDGs with the post-2015 development agenda. Many delegates also called for a continuing focus on the implementation of the MDGs. A number of participants highlighted complementarities between MDGs and SDGs and the potential for convergence, while others argued that the two approaches should be kept separate. At the end of the meeting, the co-chairs said they would talk with the delegates to finalise the dates of upcoming meetings, ensuring more advanced notice for future sessions.

The High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons met again in Bali, Indonesia, on 25–27 March 2013. The panel discussed how to build a global partnership and the means of implementation for their development agenda. It agreed on the need for a renewed global partnership that enables a transformative, people-centred and planet-sensitive development agenda to be realised through the equal partnership of all stakeholders. The panel’s vision is to “end extreme poverty in all its forms in the context of sustainable development and to have in place the building blocks of sustained prosperity for all” (HLPEP, 2013b).

The panel (HLPEP, 2013b) again recognised the need to promote a single and coherent post-2015 development agenda that integrates economic growth, social inclusion and environmental sustainability – on the understanding that all post-2015 intergovernmental processes and outcomes, including the Rio+20 outcomes and its follow-up, must be coherent and mutually reinforcing. The panel (HLPEP, 2013b) highlighted five key areas in which progress is needed to achieve its post-2015 vision:

- Reshape and revitalize global governance and partnerships

... strengthen global governance to ensure it is fit for its purpose; avoid overlap and the duplication of efforts; and encourage joint work to address cross-cutting issues ... Enhanced and scaled up models of cooperation among all levels of governments, the private sector, and civil society at global, regional, national, & sub-national levels will be needed.

- Protection of the global environment

... address global environmental challenges, strengthen resilience, and improve disaster preparedness capacities.

- Sustainable production and consumption

There should be a changed behavior in all countries in order to make more efficient use of environmental assets and resources.

- Strengthen means of implementation

Adequate, stable, and predictable financing as well as efficient use of resources are required to support development.

- Data availability and better accountability in measuring progress

Substantial improvements in national and sub-national statistical systems and the availability, quality, and timeliness of baseline data will be needed.

Millennium Development Goals outlook and predictions

Sustainable development policy is an ongoing process and is constantly evolving throughout the world. The current SDGs can be linked to, and even categorised under, two of the eight MDGs: MDG 7 – environmental sustainability; and MDG 8 – global partnership (see Tables 2 and 3). The stated SDGs aim at more specific areas/themes of the broad MDGs. Trends appear to be favouring a progression that focuses on the SDGs as part of new target areas within the MDGs.

The priorities and trends for post-2015 development (see Table 2) indicate that the SDGs are priorities of the multi-stakeholders focusing on the MDG development process. In addition, post-2015 emerging themes (see Table 3) are apparent under the “outlier” categories for each stakeholder. The emerging themes and SDGs are setting the stage for the post-2015 development process.

With regard to the various stakeholders, links are apparent between them and the themes they appear to be favouring based on their development priorities (see Table 2). Arguably, the most important theme is global governance. Without governance, sustainable development cannot be accomplished. There needs to be strong enforcing leadership to drive the process forward. Those who suffer the most are the poor and developing countries. Sustainable development is needed most in these countries, so without the governance for coherent policy interventions and concerted efforts, poorest and fragile countries will fail.

Based on current trends and the priorities of the multi-stakeholders, there are several priorities that can be expected to remain in the post-2015 development process. The priorities include poverty eradication, water sanitation, energy, economic growth, green growth, governance and employment. These matters are most apparent across the board when looking at common themes among the stakeholders (see Table 2). It is hoped that they will be covered in the future development goals and shape countries’ ongoing sustainable development policies, steering toward creating a sustainable world.

Negotiations in 2013 on the post-2015 development agenda establishment proceedings

Between April and October 2013, continued progress was made on the part of the various organisations within the UN toward the goal of establishing a post-2015 development agenda and a set of SDGs. The two processes involved, though currently evolving separately, are interrelated and would work most effectively if integrated into

Table 2. Priorities and trends for Post 2015 development

MDGs	SDGs		MDGs						Nation States
	Rio+20 Principles	Thematic Areas	OWG	WBCSD	ICC	GDN	ECOSOC	UN/IO	
1. End Poverty and Hunger	1, 5	Poverty eradication, Food Security/nutrition & sustainable agriculture Education	Poverty eradication, Food security, sustainable agriculture Education	Food & hunger	Poverty	Poverty, Sustainable agriculture	Poverty reduction	HLP Eminent Persons	G20
2. Universal Education	21	Education	Education	Universal Education	NA	Education & training	NA	NA	NA
3. Gender and Equality	20	Biodiversity	Gender, Equity, Biodiversity	Biodiversity	NA	Gender, Inequality	NA	Ensure equality	NA
4. Child Health	NA	Health & population	Health	Universal Health	NA	Health	NA	NA	NA
5. Maternal Health	NA	Health & population	Health	Universal Health	NA	Health	NA	NA	NA
6. Combat HIV/AIDS	NA	Health & population	Health	Universal Health	NA	Health	NA	NA	NA
7. Environmental Sustainability	2, 3, 4, 6, 7, 8, 12, 13, 15, 16, 17, 22, 23, 24, 25	Water sanitation, Energy, Oceans & seas, Disaster risk reduction, Climate change, Forests, Desertification/land degradation/drought, Chemicals & waste, Sustainable consumption & production	Water sanitation, Energy, Climate change, management of natural resources, Sustainable consumption & production, Oceans & seas, Disaster risk reduction, Desiccification, Waste management, Green economy, Forests	Water sanitation, Energy, Climate change, Maintenance of ecosystem & ecosystem services	Water policy, Energy, Climate change	Water, Energy, Environment, Climate change,	NA	Environment	Energy, Green growth, Climate change

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

SDGs		MDGs						Nation States		
MDGs	Principles	Thematic Areas	OWG	WBCSD	ICC	GDN	ECOSOC	UN/IO	HLP Eminent Persons	G20
8. Global Partnership	Rio+20 3, 5, 6, 7, 9, 10, 11, 12, 13, 14, 18, 19, 26, 27	Health & population, Small island developing states, Least developed countries, Landlock developing countries, Regional efforts, Disaster risk reduction, Sustainable consumption & production	Means of implementation, management of natural resources, Sustainable consumption & production, Economy & macroeconomic stability, Disaster risk reduction, Peace & security, good governance, land management, Corporate/social responsibility	Economic growth, Goals relating to good governance & human rights	Economic growth, Governance	Development finance & aid effectiveness, Domestic resource mobilization, Globalization & trade, Governance, Macroeconomics & economic growth, Urban development & global south	Economic development, Trade	Economic growth, Peace & security, Sustainable consumption & production, Governance, Means of implementation	Economic growth, Peace & security, Sustainable consumption & production, Governance, Means of implementation	Economic growth, Strengthen financial systems, Interconnected global economies, Aid fragile states
		Outliers Sustainable tourism	Outliers Tourism			Outliers Innovation	Outliers Job creation	Outliers Job creation	Outliers Jobs and employment Infrastructure	
		Sustainable transport Sustainable cities and human settlements	Transport and infrastructure Cities and housing			International affairs Transport	Outliers Job creation	Data availability		
		Promoting full and productive employment, decent work for all and social protection Africa	Employment			Labor & social protections				

(Continued)

Table 2. (Continued).

SDGs		MDGs						
MDGs	Thematic Areas	OWG	WBCSD	ICC	GDN	ECOSOC	UN/IO	Nation States
Rio+20 Principles							HLP Eminent Persons	G20
	Mountains	Information and communications technology Community culture and spirituality			Information and communication technology Law & rights			
	Mining				Migration Private sector development			

Table 3. MDGs and SDGs with corresponding post-2015 emerging themes.

Millennium Development Goals	Sustainable Development Goals
(1) End poverty and hunger	Poverty eradication, Food security, Education,
(2) Universal education	Biodiversity, Health, Water sanitation, Energy,
(3) Gender and equality	Oceans & seas, Disaster risk reduction, Climate
(4) Child health	change, Forests, Desertification/land degradation/drought,
(5) Maternal health	Chemicals & waste, Sustainable consumption &
(6) Combat HIV/AIDS	production, Small island developing states, Least
(7) Environmental sustainability	developed countries, Regional efforts
(8) Global partnership	

Post-2015 emerging themes

Poverty eradication, Food security & sustainable agriculture, Education & training, Biodiversity & equality, Health, Water sanitation, Energy, Climate change, Environment, Management of natural resources, Sustainable consumption & production, Oceans & seas, Disaster risk reduction, Waste management, Desertification, Green growth, Forests, Means of implementation, Good governance, Economic growth, Trade, Macroeconomics, Financial systems, Interconnected economies, Corporate/social responsibility, Domestic resource mobilization, Urban development & global south, Aid fragile states, Peace & security, Sustainable tourism, Sustainable transport, Infrastructure, Sustainable cities & human settlements, Employment & job creation, Africa, Mountains, Mining, Information and communication technology, Community culture and spirituality, Innovation, International affairs, Labor & social protections, Law & rights, Migration, Data availability, Private sector development

a single functional framework within which they could implement the methods required to achieve their ends.

Spearheading the negotiations for the post-2015 development agenda, the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons issued a report to the UN Secretary-General in May 2013 that provided recommendations for the post-MDG development framework. The 30-member OWG established by the UNGA to advance a proposal on the SDGs held two more sessions in May and June 2013. In addition to the themes allocated to earlier meetings spanning from March through April, the sessions discussed the topics of “food security and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, desertification, land degradation and drought, water and sanitation, employment and decent work for all, social protection, youth, education and culture, and “health [and] population dynamics” (UNGA, 2013b, pp. 3–4). At the end of the June session, the OWG submitted a progress report of its work to the 67th session of the UNGA.

In September 2013, the UN Secretary-General presented a report to the sixty-eighth session of the UNGA outlining recommendations on how to accelerate progress in attaining the MDGs and developing a post-2015 agenda. Soon thereafter, the president of the UNGA organised a Special Event to discuss the follow-up efforts made toward achieving the MDGs, producing an outcome document in which member states reaffirmed their commitment to the MDGs and agreed to convene in September 2015 at a high-level summit to adopt a new set of goals (UNGA, 2013a).

These efforts at preparing development goals that go beyond the 2015 MDGs deadline increasingly incorporate public input via surveys, community interviews and Internet polling, with attempts to include people from all walks of life (including the poorest) in the process (Nawaz, 2013). However, although some agreement is visible in the priorities of development goals – especially the overarching issue of alleviating poverty – there is still uncertainty over whether the methods of implementing the new set of goals will truly be universal and have far-reaching effects.

Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons

This extensive report¹ is a major stepping stone in the process of setting post-2015 development goals. It describes a collective agenda that aims to stamp out extreme forms of poverty and provides an outline for achieving the goals of sustainable development. From the outset, it identifies the shortcomings of the MDGs and explains how these will be addressed in the future agenda. It portrays the MDGs as too narrow in focus, as well as failing to reach the poorest people and excluding the developmental effects of violence and conflict. It appreciates that the most notable shortfall (which the post-2015 agenda seeks to correct) is the failure of the MDGs to integrate the three aspects of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental (HLPEP, 2013a, executive summary).

Perhaps the most crucial evidence of progress that this report puts forth is a preliminary set of 12 goals for the post-2015 agenda: end poverty; empower girls and women and achieve gender equality; provide quality education and lifelong learning; ensure healthy lives; ensure food security and good nutrition; achieve universal access to water and sanitation; secure sustainable energy; create jobs, sustainable livelihoods and equitable growth; manage natural resource assets sustainably; ensure good governance and effective institutions; ensure stable and peaceful societies; and create a global enabling environment and catalyse long-term finance. These goals are accompanied by five essential transformative shifts: leave no one behind; put sustainable development at the core; transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth; build peace and effective, open and accountable institutions for all; and forge a new global partnership.

After describing the organisational components of the OWG's functions, the report presents the highlights of the group's work to date, placing the most emphasis on the conceptualisation of the sustainable development goals.² Like the High-Level Panel report, the OWG report also stresses the need for transformative change to attain universal human development and eliminate poverty, and further adds that the SDGs should "reinforce and build upon existing international commitments in the economic, social, and environmental fields" (UNGA, 2013b, p. 5). Along with presenting the need for the SDGs to be more ambitious and comprehensive, this essentially extends the reach of the SDGs a step beyond the MDGs, instead of depicting them as being entirely encompassed by the latter.

While a large portion of the report concentrates on elaborating the proposed objectives for the SDGs, it also identifies a starting point: the completion of the MDGs that have currently drifted the most off-course. An interesting and crucial aspect of development mentioned by the report is the need to consider "enablers and drivers", such as governance, human rights-based approaches, and wider participation in decision-making, which would facilitate the achievement of the SDGs (UNGA, 2013b, pp. 5–6).

Special Event Outcome Document

The UNGA adopted a draft resolution following a Special Event held on the MDGs and post-2015 agenda in September 2013. The resolution urges members to strengthen their efforts to accelerate the achievement of the MDGs, setting their aims on goals lagging in progress and targeting vulnerable and disadvantaged populations (UNGA, 2013a, pp. 1–2).

The resolution also implores developed countries to fulfil their monetary commitments to development assistance and, in order to increase intergovernmental transparency and encourage stakeholder participation in the process of formulating a post-2015 development agenda, it calls on the Secretary-General to submit an input synthesis report in 2014 (UNGA, 2013a, pp. 3–4). Conclusively, it announces the launch of a negotiations process at the start of the 69th session of UNGA that will lead to the adoption of a concrete and unified post-2015 agenda, as well as requiring the OWG and other processes pertaining to sustainable development to finish their work by September 2014 (UNGA, 2013a, p. 4).

The importance of *A Life of Dignity for All*

Largely as a result of almost identical aims, all of the above-mentioned documents have very similar attributes in terms of expectations for the post-2015 development agenda and of methods for achieving the current MDGs. These general characteristics are excellently summarised in the UN Secretary-General's recent report entitled *A Life of Dignity for All* (Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2013).

On the MDGs, there is consensus on a renewed commitment to accelerate progress, with a focus on goals that are most left behind. To this end, the Secretary-General discusses policies that have so far been successful in advancing the MDGs, such as inclusive economic growth, agricultural reforms and rural employment (as in East Asia) and skills training and nutrition education programmes (like those implemented in Latin America). He also emphasises the successes of national initiatives, as in expanding the provision of water and sanitation (Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2013, pp. 6–8).

In regard to the post-2015 agenda and SDGs, five major common elements emerge that seem to define the framework for addressing the wider scope of issues:

- (1) Universality and adaptability. This alludes to the need for a single framework for the post-2015 development agenda that would apply to all countries, developed and developing alike, while also accounting for each country's unique national circumstances (Secretary-General, 2013, p. 13).
- (2) Eradicating poverty³ and promoting sustainable patterns of production and consumption. The eradication of extreme poverty by 2030 is seen as imperative, with a specific emphasis on income poverty in the regions of South Asia and sub-Saharan Africa. This overarching goal requires universal access to basic services (e.g. water), necessitating the strengthening of institutional capacities, which in turn means addressing weaknesses in governance.
- (3) Addressing cross-cutting issues. This objective advocates the use of approaches that enhance progress across all the MDGs – particularly the empowerment of women and the promotion of gender equality. It also accentuates the interconnectedness between many of the issues under discussion, such as how the eradication of poverty is inextricably linked to food security.
- (4) Strengthening global partnerships and facilitating transparency. Multilateralism will play a crucial role in both the achievement of the MDGs and the establishment and success of the post-2015 development agenda and the SDGs. Multi-stakeholder partnerships have already proved successful and have the potential to create a facilitating international environment by strengthening political will and coordinating global action. With such global partnerships, the importance of creating transparency in international processes also arises – entailing more

participation by different parts of civil society, academia, the business sector, and international organisations. In cases such as the Special Event Outcome Document, efforts to include outside input demonstrate the practicality and usefulness of this transparency. At the same time, global partnerships can help to strengthen existing governance institutions and international organisations. For instance, the World Trade Organization (WTO) has the potential to serve as a “powerful legal instrument that could exert sanctions on non-compliant policies and deviant behaviour” (Saner & Filadoro, 2013, executive summary, p. 6), thus upholding and promoting future SDGs. Institutions could further integrate the post-2015 agenda into their work through methods such as incorporating solutions to halt climate change within the trade agreements and policies of the WTO.

- (5) Data revolution. All of the reports include some provisions for robust accountability mechanisms and the need to have quantifiable targets within the post-2015 agenda, as well as a need for better capacity to collect accurate data in order to adequately assess progress. A recent report titled Indicators for Sustainable Development Goals drafted by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN, 2014) offers an integrated framework of 100 indicators for the goals and targets of the SDGs. The report was commissioned by the Secretary-General. The SDSN mobilises scientific and technical expertise from academia, civil society and the private sector in support of sustainable development problem solving at local, national and global levels.

Conclusions

Although the new developments arising from negotiations and debates held since April 2013 appear to foster a more consolidated view on the objectives for the post-2015 agenda, some discrepancies still exist in the discourse. For one, the idea of creating a framework that is simultaneously universal and adaptable to individual states seems to contradict itself: the very concept of universality excludes details and challenges at the local level (Nawaz, 2013). Moreover, despite talk of improving global partnerships (though still vague in terms of how this will be brought about or who exactly should be the key players), the lack of discussion on the topic of the recent financial crisis (Bissio, 2013) and its lingering consequences in both the developed and developing world raise doubts as to whether a feasible economic basis for the growth of such global partnerships really exists. This is unsettling because the SDGs and post-2015 development agenda, like the MDGs before them, will most likely be “donor-led” (Nawaz, 2013) and may thus be compromised since they are arriving at a time when the Secretary-General is pressuring developed countries to bear higher costs and provide more aid when aid levels have actually been dropping (Bissio, 2013).

In addition to these tensions, which are becoming even more strained amidst UNGA calls for IMF and World Bank reform (Bissio, 2013), the Secretary-General’s ambitious and extensive list of goals – especially when placed within his desired human rights-based framework – opposes the very nature of his plans for a simply designed development agenda (Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, 2013, p. 4). In general, many aspects of both his report and the other documents discussed here come across as idealistic and nebulous. Of course, structures within the UN will continue to negotiate

the final series of post-2015 goals until the 2015 MDGs deadline (Nawaz, 2013), so there is still time for the recuperation of global financial conditions, as well as for the improvement of global governance processes and the development of clearer and more efficient methods for executing the new agenda.

Differences and gaps remain between countries, regions and societies in terms of policy priorities and concrete targets. Consensus does exist that triple bottom lines – economic development, environmental sustainability and social inclusion – are essential to ensure human well-being. There is a growing awareness that current practices are not sustainable in the longer term. For example, unfettered trade liberalisation and excessive deregulation have led to global “tsunamis” and destroyed hard-won economic and social development in many societies from the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) countries to the least developed countries.

The SDG project is a follow-on call for concerted efforts by the world community to tackle the ongoing challenges posed by poverty and environmental deteriorations and increasingly extreme weather patterns. While acceptable trade-offs between economic gains, environmental sustainability and social justice are hard to articulate and to achieve globally, the SDGs have to be defined and made operational as quickly as possible to prevent any prolonged gaps between the ending of the MDGs and the start of the SDGs. Without a smooth and continuous transition from the MDGs to the SDGs, development policies and international cooperation to reduce poverty and ensure environmental sustainability might reach impasses, opening the door to new conflicts and environmental crises that could become entrenched and difficult to prevent or mend in the future.

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Notes

1. After this recommendations report was issued in May 2013, the UN System Task Team released a report on the statistics and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda. More information on this report can be found at <http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/publications/statistics-and-indicators-for-the-post-2015-development-agenda.html>. The pdf version can be retrieved from http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/UNTT_MonitoringReport_WEB.pdf
2. The Sustainable Development Goal Technical Support Team has released issue briefs on 11 major topics covering some of the issues that the Open Working Group presents in its thematic clusters: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1528>
3. Although poverty eradication is the prevailing topic, it is just one of the 26 thematic clusters of issues proposed by the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. For more details, see the UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform website page on thematic clusters: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1565>

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