



Setting the ground for sustainable and inclusive development: A focus on the SDGs

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Abstract

The United Nations summit, aimed at adopting the development agenda for the next fifteen years, took place from September 25 to 27. The meeting, held at the UN headquarters in New York, saw around 140 heads of state and government discuss and approve the new set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) due to expire at the end of this year. By promoting sustainable and inclusive development, SDGs are the expression of a new vision of development able to foster economic goals while addressing the major societal and environmental challenges of our time. Besides the words, however, the real challenge will be implementation.

Introduction

The United Nations summit, aimed at adopting the development agenda for the next fifteen years, closed its doors on Sunday, September 27th. The meeting, held at the UN headquarters in New York, hosted also the 70th sessions of UN General Assembly (UNGA) to which around 140 heads of state and government convened to discuss and **definitively approve the set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**, which will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) due to expire at the end of this year. Major experts in the field and NGO representatives, as well as a number of VIPs and celebrities, attended the summit to support the cause and participate in the wide number of events taking place in parallel with the summit.

At the opening plenary on Friday morning, performances by singers Shakira and Angelique Kidjo were followed by speeches from personalities including Pope Francis, the 2014 Nobel peace laureate Malala Yousafzai, and UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon, who reminded government representatives how crucial their task in New York was for the eradication of poverty, hunger and inequalities, as well as the promotion of education, health and environment.¹

After the speeches, at 11:46 am EST, Danish Prime Minister Rasmussen, acting as co-chair of the session, gavelled the adoption of the document “**Transforming our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development**”, leading participants to rise in a standing ovation, cheering and welcoming the new goals.²

A new 2030 agenda: toward sustainable and inclusive development

The contents of the 2030 agenda are not new. The idea of establishing a set of SDGs was launched at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in Rio de Janeiro (Brazil) in June 2012. After a **three-year process** within the United Nations, a “zero draft” outlining the 17 SDGs and supporting targets was released in early June 2015 as a base for the next negotiating sessions, whose final step took place at the New York Summit.

The new Development Agenda builds on the foundation laid by the 8 MDGs, with the aim to **meet the goals that still lag behind and respond to new challenges**. It is worth noting here that not all of the MDGs, which were due to be achieved by 2015, have been successfully met. According to the 2015 Progress Chart, some good progress has been made on increasing access to primary education, reducing child mortality, improving maternal health, and developing a global partnership, but poor progress registered for other objectives such as eradicating extreme poverty and hunger, combating HIV and other diseases, ensuring environmental sustainability, and promoting gender equality.³

The scope of the **new goals is broader and more comprehensive than the Millennium Development Goals**. They cover a wider range of economic and political issues expressed by **169 target actions grouped into 17 goals**, belonging to 6 essential areas: i) Dignity: to end poverty and fight inequality; ii) People: to ensure healthy lives, knowledge and the inclusion of women and children; iii) Prosperity: to grow a strong, inclusive and transformative economy; iv) Planet: to protect our ecosystems for all societies and our children; v) Justice: to promote safe and peaceful societies and strong institutions; vi) Partnership: to catalyse global solidarity for sustainable development.⁴

In detail, the goals are to:

- 1) End **poverty** in all its forms everywhere;
- 2) End **hunger**, achieve **food security** and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture;

¹ IISD, 2015. Earth Negotiations Bulletin, [Summary of the Sustainable Development Summit 25-27 September](#)

² UN General Assembly, 2015. Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, A /70/L.1, 18 September 2015.

³ United Nations, 2015. [Millennium Development Goals: 2015 Progress Chart](#)

⁴ See footnote 1.

- More than a fresh list of objectives, the SDGs are the expression of a **new vision of development** that intends to foster economic goals while addressing the major societal and environmental challenges of our time. Notably, the issue of sustainability runs through almost all of the SDGs, in relation to development, growth and industrialization, in addition to energy access, water management, agriculture, consumption and production, cities, and the use of oceans and ecosystems. In addition, the text mentions the word “inclusive” 6 times, supported by the word “all” that appears 10 times, to highlight the idea that exclusion and inequality in all their forms are the major obstacles to achieving sustainable development.

[illegible]

Implementing the SDGs: what's next?

Once the SDGs were approved, the debate quickly moved from contents to **means of implementation** as a next step to accomplish this new global challenge. In the words of the UN secretary general Ban Ki-moon, implementation will be “the true test of commitment to the new global goals”. Beyond noting progress and calling for additional efforts, two main issues, in particular, have been repeatedly mentioned as **key elements for a successful implementation** of the new 2030 objectives: **indicators to evaluate progress and tools for financing**.

As for the first, the importance of a robust accountability and monitoring system to track progress in the implementation of the SDGs, as well as review mechanisms, was remarked from several parts. To this purpose, a **set of specific indicators** is currently under development by the UN Statistical Commission and will be released **by March 2016**. Indeed, not all of the 169 targets underlying the SDGs are quantifiable at the moment. For example, some environmental sustainability targets are **considerably more vague** (e.g. “ensure sustainable food production systems”) than social ones. In particular, a recent report found that **54% of the proposed targets could be strengthened** by being more specific, while **17% requires significant work**⁵. Both public and private entities as well as research institutes offered their support in the process of selecting indicators and reporting advancements towards the achievement of the new goals.⁶

Disaggregated data will be therefore crucial to allow measurement of selected indicators and ensure that the 2030 Agenda leaves no one behind. However, this implies strong national data collection systems, which can be particularly challenging for developing countries. A recent study, carried out by the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and prepared by a broad coalition of experts, estimates that for **77 lower-income countries** to improve or put in place statistical systems able to **measure and support the implementation of SDGs**, a total investment of **US\$ 902 to 941 million per year** will be needed. Estimates include utilizing survey, census, administrative, economic, geospatial, and environmental monitoring tools, but exclude the costs of strengthening administrative data collection across all ministries and departments as well as those related to strengthening statistical literacy, analytics, and communications. Furthermore, human resources and the costs associated with putting in place appropriate policy and legislative frameworks are also excluded.

These figures highlight the crucial role finance will play in achieving the 2030 development Agenda. During the Summit, the **Addis Ababa Action Agenda** - the plan delivered at the end of the July conference on finance for development – was welcomed as a **solid financing framework**.⁷ However, least developed countries and small island States called for the UN to provide all of the necessary **support for the implementation** of the goals. Besides data systems mentioned above, **improving infrastructure** is one of the major challenges to ensure that the SDGs will be achieved. On this regard, recent UNCTAD estimates say that developing countries face an **investment gap ranging between \$1.9-3.1 trillion per year in infrastructure** related to sustainable development. Indeed, the investment needed in developing countries to meet SDGs in 2030 amounts to **\$3.3-4.5 trillion** annually against the current flows (including both public and private sources) that are \$1.4 trillion. At the global level, total investment needs are on the order of **\$5 to \$7 trillion per year**.⁸ The private sector contributions therefore emerge as indispensable to fill the gap.

Against this background, the summit offered the chance for both national governments and institutional representatives to make **new financial pledges**. Among the others, Christine Lagarde, Managing Director of the **International Monetary Fund**, took the opportunity to renew the Fund's commitment to **increase by 50% concessional resources** made available to the poorest countries, and to intensify support for fragile and conflict affected states. Also, the **King of Spain**, Don Felipe

⁵ ICSU, ISSC. *Review of Targets for the Sustainable Development Goals: The Science Perspective*. Paris : International Council for Science (ICSU), 2015.

⁶ Further information about FEEM contribution to the debate are available on ICCG Director's Blog “[Measuring and assessing sustainable development goals](#)”

⁷ For further information see: “Financial pathways to sustainable development in the Addis Ababa Action Agenda” published on Climate Policy Observer, on 27th August 2015

⁸ UNCTAD, 2014. [World Investment Report 2014: Investing in the SDGs: An Action Plan](#).

VI, expressed his country's commitment to **provide 0.7% of GDP by 2030 to developing countries**, as required by Goal 17. The Russian Federation said they cancelled US\$20 billion in debt and are instituting debt-for-aid swaps for the poorest countries.

But the widest and perhaps most unexpected announcement came from **China's President Xi Jinping**, introducing a **US\$2 billion assistance fund for South-South cooperation** to implement the SDGs, as well as increasing investment in Least Developing Countries (LDCs) to **US\$12 billion by 2030** and the **exemption of debt owed by poorest countries** on interest-free loans⁹. In addition, \$10 million will be donated to the UN Women for the implementation of the Beijing Declaration and related women empowerment goals.

The time is now

The good news emerging from the three-day marathon of speeches is that the implementation of SDGs has already begun. National governments, public institutions, and the private sector highlighted **sustainable development initiatives already in place** or promised significant steps forward.

In particular, **Ethiopia's** Prime Minister said his country spends more than 70% of the national budget on pro-poor areas such as education, health, and agriculture. Also **Mali's** President pledged to allocate 15% of the national budget to end hunger in the country.

As for the fight to inequalities, the **Netherlands** announced new programmes to address inequalities for women and young people, fund leadership opportunities for women, and increase lobby and advocate activities for all women and girls. **Qatar** said that enhancing women's potential and their social and economic engagement will be one of major pillars of the country's 2030 national vision. On September 26th, the **Republic of Korea** announced the Better Life for Girls Initiative, which will support vulnerable girls in developing countries **with US\$200 million dollars** over the next five years.

Finally, with **Brazil and Peru** announcing their climate change contributions, and **Panama** committing to restore 50% of its deforested areas over the next 20 years, the UN Summit clearly showed the importance of exploiting synergies between the SDGs and other negotiating process. In addition, Climate Week took place in New York at the same time as the sustainable development summit, reminding summit participants of the close linkages among Goal 13 and an ambitious climate deal to be achieved in Paris in a few months.

Conclusion

The three-day UN Summit, which saw a large gathering of global leaders and a new set of goals to guide the world's development, mainly represented an occasion to build momentum and renew commitments towards a sustainable and inclusive future. It was a crucial opportunity to reflect on the major challenges of our time, from poverty and hunger to climate change and inequalities, without forgetting current migrants and war crises.

However, as usually with this kind of event, it is only a step further. Besides the words, the real challenge will be implementation. With their political and infrastructural gaps, least developed nations will be the hardest places to reach. Without a supportive and innovative agenda that takes the peculiarities of these countries into account, the 2030 goals risks remaining on the paper. As US President Obama said on the last day, political will, resources, and coordination from all actors are key to achieve results.

The first test of the global community's actual will in building a sustainable, low-carbon, and resilient future will be the upcoming UNFCCC climate conference in Paris in December, where global leaders will gather again with the objective of defining new cooperative actions for combating climate change.

⁹ Specifically to LDCs, Landlocked developing countries (LLDCs) and Small Island Developing States (SIDS)