Do the UN SD Goals Promote Sustainable Development?

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Sustainable Development

Authoritative, Brundtland definition:

‘development which meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs’ (WCED: 43)

Contains two key concepts:

1. Needs
2. Limitations

And states that:

While technology and social organisation can be both managed and improved to make way for a new era of economic growth, limits are nonetheless imposed ‘by the ability of the biosphere to absorb the effects of human activities’ (WCED, 1987: 8) and by the need to ‘adopt life-styles within the planet’s ecological means’ (WCED, 1987: 9). There are thus ultimate limits to growth
SD Goals

• Build on legacy from Stockholm Conference (1972) through to MDGs (2000)
• Part of Post-2015 Development Agenda (Rio+20, *The Future We Want; UN 2030 Agenda for SD*)
• Lessons from MDGs:
  • Sustained systemic change cannot be achieved through single-sector goals and approaches
  • More integrated approach promoting cross-sectoral decision-making & solutions needed
Basic Features

• Overriding aim: eradicate extreme poverty by 2030 and to ‘leave no one behind’
• Targets key drivers of, and barriers, to transformative change
• Seen as *universal agenda* reflecting global nature of challenges
• All countries and all sectors of society need to act
17 Sustainable Development Goals

- **Goal 1** End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- **Goal 2** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- **Goal 3** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- **Goal 4** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- **Goal 5** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- **Goal 6** Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- **Goal 7** Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- **Goal 8** Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- **Goal 9** Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- **Goal 10** Reduce inequality within and among countries
- **Goal 11** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- **Goal 12** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- **Goal 13** Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
- **Goal 14** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- **Goal 15** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- **Goal 16** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- **Goal 17** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for SD
Can SD Goals Promote Sustainable Development?
They Offer Hope

• Result of global conversation that keeps SD on agenda
• Reflects emerging consensus on limits of current economic models
• Presents more holistic and ambitious agenda
• Offers major improvements on MDGs - address systemic barriers to SD
• Provides better coverage of, and balance between, three dimensions of SD (EES)
• Deals with institutional/governance
• MDGs dealt only with developing countries; SDGs deal with all countries
• Four goals discuss global environmental issues
• More advanced social perspective - references to inclusiveness in several SDGs.
• Adds need for peace, justice and good governance
There are Important Synergies

• Win: Win:
  • E.g. ending poverty (SDG 1) cannot be achieved without food security (SDG 2), macroeconomic policies related employment (SDG 8), reduction of inequality (SDG 10) and enhancing resilience to climate change (SDG 13)

  Success in these will lead to better health and wellbeing, thus contributing to achievement of SDG 3

• Some targets reinforce each other
  • E.g. increasing water efficiency in agriculture can ensure more irrigation water reaches plants, helping achieve target for increased agricultural productivity
5 Big Questions to Ask

1. Will we see national ownership and ambition?
2. Will the private sector engage?
3. Will they empower local actors?
4. Will finances be mobilized and effectively used?
5. How can we ensure accountability and legitimacy?
Are They Well Developed?

• Targets: 49 (29%) are well developed, 91 targets (54%) need to be more specific; 29 (17%) require significant work (ICSU & ISSC)

• Many environmental sustainability targets vague e.g. ‘ensure sustainable food production systems’

• Vague on what societal actors are expected to contribute

• Details lacking on spatial scale of implementation and monitoring

• Need to be aligned with existing international agreements
Measurability?

• Some targets lack focus for effective implementation
• Several targets not quantified
• Measurability depends on availability of data and capacity to measure targets – danger: we measure what we can target and target what we can measure!
• Capacity to collect reliable data at national level differs
• Accuracy of some indicators needs to be confirmed
Weaknesses in Treatment of Governance

• National governments only one type of actor in global governance
• Framework not sufficiently reflect and address other groups/actors required to deliver (beyond aid agencies)
• Fails to reflect private sector perspectives and growing importance of private governance regimes
Targets are Interconnected

- Some targets **interdependent**
- Other targets impose **constraints**
- Action to meet one target could have **unintended consequences** on others if pursued separately – how to joint up?
- **Trade-offs exist** among several goals and targets
- **Critical** trade-offs may also occur – need to identify them
- Many targets may contribute to several goals BUT some goals and targets may **conflict**
- Some targets are mutually **incompatible**
  - E.g. goal 8: Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable **economic growth**, incompatible with SD with its focus on limits to growth imposed by earth system and planetary boundaries
Where is the Transformative Development Pathway?

‘Narrative of change’ missing
  • No clear articulation of what development agenda involves
  • ‘Ultimate end’ of SDGs in combination not clear

• Goals (e.g. human wellbeing) AND enabling means or conditions need to be distinguished
  • ‘constituents’ (health, happiness, freedom) and ‘determinants’ (access to food, nutrition, water, shelter, knowledge) of development

• Unclear how goal implementation can induce social change

• Is framework universal while respecting local contexts?
How to Proceed?
Develop Narrative of Development

• Necessary to have compelling narrative to describe how world could look when SDGs are fully achieved.
  • How is SD understood here?
  • How do we promote SD in context of climate change?
  • How to take account of planetary limits?
• Articulating this narrative enhances capacity to deal with trade-offs and synergies - since it must describe world where trade-offs and synergies resolved
• It can also enhance public discussions on type of future we want
Develop Interlinking Targets Common to Different Goals

• Make targets and indicators represented within or linked to other goals

• Each goal could include overall carbon intensity target so that implementation does not undermine targets in climate or other environmentally-related goals

Most targets are inherently cross-sectoral anyway!
Formulate an Overarching Goal

• ‘Ultimate end’ of SDGs – an overarching goal – needed and how 17 goals and targets contribute to achieving this end

• An overarching goal – e.g. ‘a happy, high quality of life that is equitably shared and within planetary boundaries’ - could be used to group goals and make list more understandable/appealing

• We need new approach to measuring economic progress toward SD
  • Successor to GDP should contribute to establishing and measuring sustainable wellbeing
Some Concluding Comments

- The goals are addressed without reference to possible links with other goals
- Trade offs are ignored

Unless a principled priority is given to sustainable development (after all, they are the SD Goals), then:

- They cannot ensure that development takes place within sustainable levels of resource use at either the global or regional scale
- The framework as a whole will remain internally inconsistent – and as a result will not promote sustainable development