

# THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS: “Curse of the Sequel” or “Adopt, Adapt, Improve”?

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## **Framing the Issue**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) set targets and indicators for a global development partnership through 2015. At one level, the MDGs have been an enormous success. They have remained relevant and at the center of the global development discourse for over a decade, they have mobilized significant new resources for development, and they have aligned the efforts of a diverse range of actors from governments to businesses and non-profit organizations along seven main development outcomes. While there are many criticisms of the goals and skeptics who argue that the recent rapid decline in poverty cannot be attributed to the MDGs, few other international economic agreements have achieved more for the most vulnerable.

Thus it is natural to suggest a successor framework to the MDGs. Some have called for MDGs to be replaced with Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which would be focused on a much broader set of problems to tackle extreme poverty. Supporters of the SDGs believe they can be a flagship deliverable from the Rio+20 Summit, the first major international forum where this new idea will be discussed. But will the SDGs suffer from the ‘curse of the se-

quel’ and fail to improve on the original MDG framework? Or can they adapt experience gained over the past decade and apply it to a much more challenging set of tasks? And if the curse of the sequel is to be avoided, what process will surmount significant political obstacles to achieving consensus while ensuring effective learning takes place?

## **Policy Considerations**

The Secretary General of the United Nations has already argued that the SDGs should be universal (applicable to all countries, rather than just to the poorest) and comprehensive (covering the core interlinked issues of economic development that is socially just and environmentally sustainable). That is a tall order, taking the U.N. into territory that is both complex and highly politically contentious. The challenge is to design SDGs that reflect the many dimensions of sustainable development and are simple and focused enough to frame the broad development discourse with sufficient power to catalyze meaningful implementation.

One problem is how to ensure that the SDGs are relevant to all countries. When the MDGs were endorsed, the prospect of significant new resources being part of

the package (MDG 8) motivated developing countries to sign up. For their part, advanced countries were encouraged by the commitment to more concrete results (MDGs 1-7) in exchange for their aid. In each case, politicians were able to return home from Monterrey (where the agreement was finally reached in 2002) with specific ideas about how to “mobilize financial resources and achieve the national and international economic conditions” needed to meet the MDGs.

Today, it is harder to construct a package that has something for everyone. The advanced countries are showing signs of aid fatigue and may prove reluctant to bind their own societies to global goals. Middle income countries are also reluctant to orient development pathways to international norms, preferring to maintain maximum flexibility for domestic policy. Low income countries worry that the discussions on SDGs could dilute the focus on reducing poverty. Some are also wondering how quantitative international targets can be reconciled with the qualitative improvements in peacekeeping, statebuilding and the strengthened institutions needed to underpin poverty reduction.

Yet there is hope that countries will be brought together by a shared sense that the world today faces risks that require a new commitment to collective action and global solutions. Transnational threats like natural disasters, food price spikes and energy shortages are directly related to local problems such as economic instability, a lack of jobs, especially for the young, and urban blight. Many topics once believed to be purely national in scope, such as income distribution, have become international in their impact thanks to new research linking inequality to credit booms and financial crises. Current growth trajectories, meanwhile, continue to threaten the climate and other planetary boundaries that define ‘a safe operating space’ for humanity.

The world’s leaders could potentially use the SDGs as a vehicle to articulate a new vision that links global challenges and domestic angst, makes a case for how adopting global norms can improve the lives of citizens at home, and sets out practical steps that will help build a development model that is viable over the medium and long-term. The biggest hurdles to sustainable de-

velopment paths are political, not financial or technical. Thus, the SDGs must be framed in a way that is useful politically and that serves to connect individual citizens, wherever they live, to the great challenges of our day.

This would suggest a focus on: (i) areas such as energy, food, oceans, and biodiversity where global risks are pressing and collective action is essential if we are to maximize human welfare while respecting environmental limits, and where new quantitative targets have the potential to create new focus and momentum (climate may be added if agreements are reached under the UNFCCC process); (ii) topics where there is significant potential for innovation (green growth, sustainable cities, and disaster preparedness, for example) and where learning and dissemination can be accelerated with voluntary pledges of solidarity; and (iii) construction of a global safety net that will build on the MDGs, by protecting the most vulnerable and increasing the stability of fragile states, and where financial transfers against specific criteria are feasible.

The SDGs must also mobilize and be relevant to the large number of diverse actors that are needed to tackle sustainable development challenges. The MDGs were successful because they focused myriad development efforts onto a few major axes. Today, there are even more development actors who must “own” the SDGs if they are to be successful: the private business sector, international and local NGOs, mayors and local government officials, parliamentarians, trade union members, faith organizations and concerned citizens, philanthropists and celebrities.

These actors have different interests and perspectives on development. Some focus on the multi-dimensional nature of poverty and the prospect that it is now feasible to dream for the first time of eradicating absolute poverty within a generation. Others take a human rights perspective as the basic frame and are motivated by core moral principles, such as ensuring all children are healthy, well-fed, properly educated, and live in secure and stable societies. Environmentalists, meanwhile, are focused both on damage to natural systems and the potential impact on the poorest. Perhaps most important—and least engaged as

yet—is the private sector, whose investment decisions are the main determinant of the nature, speed, and sustainability of future development trajectories.

Reconciling these disparate perspectives will not be easy. It calls for a broad and inclusive dialogue, with ample space for prioritization within different countries and in key sectors such as energy, water, or agriculture. It requires ‘whole-of-government’ support for the SDGs, with Ministries of Finance brought to the center of the debate, Ministries of Foreign Affairs developing new capacity to build consensus across borders, and other government departments (Environment, Energy, Industry etc.) participating in an integrated effort. The international system will also need to experiment with mechanisms for creating, incentivizing, and holding accountable new types of partnership, and especially those that require real commitment from major corporate interests.

Putting all this together is a tall order. Here again, there are lessons to be drawn from the MDG process. By the time of the Monterrey Summit in 2002, there had already been considerable technical and political momentum behind these global development goals. In 1990, the World Development Report had recommended halving global poverty, while the 1990 World Summit for Children formulated a set of seven goals endorsed by governments, relevant U.N. agencies, development banks and a large number of NGOs. The MDGs, in their final form, were derived from consolidating these early discussions and endorsements, rather than as a single process starting from scratch. *Ex post*, it would seem that the most successful MDGs were those that had been subjected to inclusive and professional consultations over a long time span, and which also had committed political champions within influential governments.

### Recommendations for Rio+20

What then can be expected from Rio+20 to advance the agenda on the SDGs? We have three recommendations:

- **Endorse a process for arriving at the SDGs that brings together building blocks over time, rather than attempting to force a premature consensus in the short-term.** At least two such building blocks

are already in place. The Sustainable Energy for All initiative has technical depth and real political support, and has proposed three objectives for 2030: universal access to modern energy services; doubling the rate of energy efficiency improvements; and doubling the share of renewable energy in the energy mix. The MDGs are themselves another building block, with the potential to move from relative targets to those that aim to ‘get to zero’ by 2030 on a new set of poverty targets.

- **Encourage innovation and create incentives for new partnerships for sustainable development.** Green growth, sustainable cities and other agendas can bring together governments, businesses and civil society in novel ways and these coalitions are spawning a vast array of experimental approaches. A mechanism is needed to accumulate pledges to contribute; categorize and monitor implementation; and finally evaluate and disseminate lessons and best practices. A proposal for a ‘Compendium of Commitments’ could fulfill these functions, but only if it provides a sufficiently strong basis for encouraging accountability and for providing recognition for successful innovations.
- **Embark on a process capable of building broad political support for a post-2015 framework.** At best, Rio +20 will only launch a new process. A High Level Panel will then need to take up the baton, doing the hard work of developing concrete options for new goals, sponsoring deliberations on these options at international, regional, and local levels, and beginning the process of building support from political, business, and civil society leaders. The panel can hope to provide a foundation for agreement over the next year or 18 months. Sustained leadership will then be needed from a critical mass of G-20 countries, including rising and established powers, from influential developing countries such as the G7+, which brings together fragile and conflict-affected states, from campaigners, and from the business community. The task is already an urgent one. The MDGs took a dozen years to agree upon. Their replacement needs to be in place in less than a quarter of that time.