From simple-minded MDGs to muddle-headed SDGs*

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ABSTRACT
Respectable progress was made towards the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The challenge that remains is two-fold: environmental sustainability and high inequality. However, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), to be reached by 2030, dodge these challenges because the relevant targets lack precision and clarity. Agenda 2030 is not universal in scope because the few targets that are verifiable – those that contain conceptual clarity, numerical outcome and specific deadlines – apply primarily to developing countries. The omission of targets for overweight/obesity and breastfeeding exemplifies the reluctance of developed countries to commit themselves to specific, quantitative and time-bound targets. Most SDG targets that are verifiable are actually not dissimilar from the MDGs. They clearly constitute a difficult intergovernmental compromise, made increasingly arduous by the deepening North–South divide, a return of East-West tensions, and a resurging sense of nationalism in several member states. To a large extent, the context of weak multilateralism explains why the SDGs are not fit for purpose to address the dual challenge of environmental sustainability and high inequality. The article concludes by proposing two vital steps to help realize their transformative potential.

Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) spell out a comprehensive agenda for global development for the period 2015–2030. The question we examine here is not whether they represent a better framework than their predecessor, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), but whether they are fit for purpose. In order to establish the defining challenges of our time, the results of the MDGs are first reviewed. As planetary challenges are universal in scope, the SDGs must embody a ‘one-world’ agenda. It suggests two vital steps to realize their transformational potential.

Outcome of the MDGs

The world has made respectable progress in the field of human development over the past 25 years. One of the most striking statistics is that there were some 18,600 fewer cases of child mortality per day in 2015 than in 1990; notwithstanding the significant rise in the world population over that period. About three quarters of all births are now attended by skilled health personnel, leading to a substantial reduction in maternal mortality. Nearly as many girls as boys are enrolled in primary school. Malnutrition (underweight) has decreased from one-in-four children to one-in-seven. The incidence of diseases such as measles, malaria and polio has fallen drastically. Worldwide, the year 2015 saw fewer than 100 cases of polio, down from over 300,000 in 1990. New HIV infections have declined sharply and an estimated 14 million people living with AIDS now receive antiretroviral therapy. Virtually all pertinent chemicals that caused the ozone hole in the atmosphere have been phased out. Progress has been observed across all regions. It is incorrect to ascribe global progress to one single country – i.e. China – as is frequently insinuated. The data mentioned in this section stems from the United Nations, especially from the last issue of the annual MDG reports (UN 2015a).

We hasten to add that no firm conclusions can be drawn about the role played by the MDGs in these stories of success. For that, we need the counterfactual scenario, as well as a clear attribution of the progress to the MDGs. Both are missing. To state, for example, that ‘The MDGs helped to lift more than one billion people out of extreme poverty’ (UN 2015a, 3) is improper because it cannot be substantiated or tested by scientific analysis. Two analysts find that the rates of progress accelerated during the MDG period, compared to pre-
MDG years (McArthur and Rasmussen 2017). This is especially the case for low-income and Sub-Saharan African countries, and most notably for child mortality, maternal mortality and communicable diseases. They write, ‘On global health outcomes, the MDG era might have been the most successful period in history.’ (45) While statistically valid, the claim that the change in pace was caused by the MDGs cannot be sustained scientifically, for lack of clear attribution.

Whilst the world has made significant progress during the MDG-era, none of the global targets were met. Using traffic-light colors, we can assign green to the areas related to poverty, hunger, child mortality, maternal health, drinking water, and infectious diseases. This assessment is based on the view that target setting is not only about achieving but also about striving. Global progress in these domains has been more than respectable, even though the numerical targets were not met or data to support that claim is unavailable or insufficiently solid.

The color orange can be applied to the goals about basic education and gender equality, where progress could – and should – have been much faster. One in ten children still lacks access to primary school and the quality of education often remains sub-standard. Gender biases remain embedded in virtually all societies and shape people’s perceptions and aspirations from an early age (Bian, Leslie, and Cimpian 2017).

The color red must be given to the goal on global partnership for development – a goal mostly directed at high-income countries. Foreign aid has stagnated at around 0.3% of their combined national income, considerably below the agreed target of 0.7%. Furthermore, a considerable share of it goes to middle-income countries or is spent on services in rich countries. The global trading system remains biased in favor of developed countries (UNDP 2003; Stiglitz 2006) – because international trade agreements are laden with provisions that have nothing to do with trade but extend into domestic policy areas such as intellectual property rights, investor protection, government procurement, state-owned enterprises, and now e-commerce.

Last, but not least, red applies to the goal regarding the environment. Deforestation remains high, overfishing continues unabated and several species among amphibians, corals, mammals and birds are at risk of extinction; jeopardizing the planet’s biodiversity. Ecosystems and oceans are under severe stress. Greenhouse gas emissions soared by an estimated 50% between 1990 and 2015.

In sum, the outcome with the MDGs shows respectable progress in terms of human development but grave threats to the environment. The overall picture can be summarized by the one-liner ‘Progress for people, regress for the planet’. Whilst considerable progress is being made, it is not sustainable. Hence, the ‘S’ in the new acronym is fully justified.

The SDGs and environmental sustainability

However, the successor arrangement to the MDGs fails to address sustainability in earnest. It is remarkable that the relevant goal – ‘Take urgent action to combat climate change’ – ranks only in thirteenth position. Ranking matters because it indicates the relative importance accorded to the goal. Given that climate change is not among the top three priorities – which are occupied by MDG-like issues of poverty, hunger and child mortality – raises the question whether leaders really have the courage to address one of the most pressing issues the world is facing today.

More important than ranking, however, is the content of the targets. Most are formulated in a vague and fuzzy manner, lacking specifics and clarity. The first three targets under that goal read as follows: ‘13.1 Strengthen resilience and adaptive capacity to climate-related hazards’, ‘13.2 Integrate climate change measures into national planning’; and ‘13.3 Improve education on climate change mitigation’. Apart from the fact that none of them are verifiable, it is a moot question whether resilience, national planning and education can be considered as ‘urgent action’.

It may seem surprising but the SDGs do not set any verifiable target regarding climate change. The only numerical SDG-target is in the domain of climate finance, not climate change. Target 13.a indicates that ‘Developed-country parties are to mobilize jointly $100 billion annually by 2020 from all sources to mitigate climate change in development countries’. Its interpretation has now become a bone of contention between developed and developing countries. Most other targets use fuzzy language and omit the three essential components of a verifiable target, namely conceptual clarity, a numerical outcome and a specific deadline (Vandemoortele 2017). Espinosa and Walker’s (2011) description of the complexities involved regarding sustainability show that the SDGs fail to present a systems approach to the multiple problems the world is facing.

The SDGs and inequality

Besides being unsustainable, global progress over the past few decades has been inequitable too. Due to phenomenal economic growth in the emerging economies, the between-country inequality has probably decreased in recent years, although global inequality is hard to measure with any degree of accuracy (Hickel...
Global inequality, together with the so-called elephant graph (Milanovic 2016) may be of interest from an academic point of view, it is of limited significance because it is within-country inequality that really matters for people. As Judt (2010) writes:

most people live in a defined place: defined by space, by time, by language, perhaps by religion […] There is quite a lot of evidence that people trust other people more if they have a lot in common with them: not just religion or language but also income. (65–66)

A growing body of evidence indicates that income disparities within countries are widening. Since 1980, the income share of the top 10% rose in all regions with reliable data, albeit at different speeds (World Inequality Lab 2017). The striking feature is that inequality has risen almost everywhere. Mishel, Bernstein, and Shierholz (2009) and Rajan (2010) point out that a distinctive feature of the rise in inequality has been the extraordinary concentration of income at the very top, often the top 1% or the 0.1%. No matter how it is measured – e.g. Gini coefficient, Theil index, Palma ratio, income share of the top 10% or top 1%, ratio between the income share of top/bottom quintiles – it is no longer possible to dispute the evidence that inequality is on the rise in most countries. Palma (2011) finds that about 80% of the world population lives in regions where the median country has a Gini coefficient of close to 0.40, which indicates high inequality.

The rise in income inequality seems to have leveled off since the onset of the financial crisis in 2008 (World Inequality Lab 2017). Yet, the OECD (2013) writes, ‘Inequality has increased by more over the past three years to the end of 2010 than in the previous twelve.’ (1) In a recent update, it states, ‘the average Gini coefficient of disposable income reached the highest level on record since the mid-1980s’ (2016, 1).

Some are making a big deal of the reported decline in inequality in a few Latin American countries (Lopez-Calva and Lustig 2010). However, it must be kept in mind that these countries remain extremely unequal. It would be mistaken to interpret a decline in their Gini coefficient by a few percentage points as a sign that they have turned into equitable societies. Their Gini coefficient is still stratospherically high, often exceeding the level of 0.50. The reality is that most Latin American countries remain extremely unequal (Cornia 2017), perhaps just a touch less so.

A systemic bias against the least well-off people has also been observed beyond the money-metric aspects, such as education, health and nutrition (Minujin and Delamonica 2003; Moser, Leon, and Gwatkin 2005; Reidpath et al. 2009; Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Therborn 2013). Thus, to be more accurate, the one-liner mentioned earlier to summarize the MDGs’ outcome needs the insertion of the adjective ‘better-off’: ‘Progress for better-off people, regress for the planet’. Indeed, data shows that, in most countries, progress has bypassed the people at the bottom end of the social ladder.

Compelling evidence is emerging that shows that high inequality is harmful in many ways, not just for economic growth (Temple 1999) but also for society, the environment and democracy (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010; Stiglitz 2012; Dorling 2017; Payne 2017). People in equitable countries emit less CO₂, produce less waste, and use less water for personal use. ‘The poor pollute less when less poor and the rich pollute less when less rich.’ (Dorling 2017, 145) Stiglitz (2012) observes that the price we are paying for high inequality is ‘a democracy that has been put into peril.’ (xii) Several countries are showing signs of a hollowing out of their democracy, with falling membership of political parties, low voter turnout and high electoral volatility, especially for populist candidates who delegitimize their opponents, circumvent the system of checks and balances, and disregard the protection of minorities (Müller 2016; Levitsky and Ziblatt 2018). High inequality undermines equal access to public goods such as education, health, public transport, and an independent judicial system. This leads to more economic, social and racial stratification and deepens existing divisions within society (Payne 2017). The problem is not that some individuals earn more or have more than others, it is that high inequality jeopardizes the democratic tenet that ‘all people are created equal’. Indeed, extreme inequality is at odds with the principle of equal treatment of citizens (Swift 2001). Countless citizens across the world increasingly perceive government ‘of the 1%, for the 1%, by the 1%’, as Stiglitz puts it (2011).

Inequality is frequently seen through an ideological lens. Those on the right of the political spectrum usually dismiss concerns about inequality as ‘politics of envy’, believing that those who are less well-off are simply envious of their wealth and resentful of their success in life. For those on the left of the political scale, high inequality stems from excessive greed. Sandel (2013) expresses a more nuanced view: ‘If the only advantage of affluence were the ability to buy yachts, sports cars, and fancy vacations, inequalities of income and wealth would not matter very much. But as money comes to buy more and more – political influence, good medical care, a home in a safe neighborhood rather than in a crime-ridden one, access to elite schools rather than failing ones – the distribution of income and wealth looms larger and larger.’ (8) In other words, high inequality undermines the fundamental tenets of democracy and meritocracy.
Despite the evidence that inequality is rising, and that it is harmful for the environment, the economy, society and democracy, the SDGs pay only superfluous attention to it. As with climate change, the goal about inequality does not rank among the top priorities. One finds it in tenth position, which suggests that it is, at best, of secondary importance. More importantly, the goal does not quite address inequality. Target 10.1 aims to ‘progressively achieve and sustain, by 2030, income growth of the bottom 40% of the population at a rate higher than the national average’. At first glance, it seems to contain the three elements of a verifiable target: conceptual clarity, numerical measurability, and a specific deadline. However, it does not address inequality because the target focuses on one segment of the population – the bottom 40%. To truly address inequality, it should encompass the entire income spectrum, not only the poorest segment but also the rest – including the top 10%. As Atkinson (2015) argues, ‘we need to consider the distribution as a whole.’ (183) Payne (2017) points out that ‘inequality is driven as much by the wealth of the wealthy as by the poverty of the poor’ (202–203).

Meeting target 10.1 will not necessarily imply a decrease in inequality. If the faster income growth for the bottom 40% is caused by transfers from the next 50%, while leaving the top 10% unaffected, then the country will see an increase in inequality, although it will meet target 10.1. Several countries are observing a hollowing out of the middle class (Temin 2017), which remains unaddressed by the SDGs. In other words, target 10.1 may be necessary for reducing inequality, but is far from being sufficient.

The failure of the SDGs to adequately address inequality is not due to a technical error. It is driven by a narrative that dodges or even contests that high inequality is the prime challenge of our time. As a politically negotiated document among 193 member states, it was more convenient to focus the SDGs on extreme poverty rather than on extreme inequality. The slogan ‘Leave No One Behind’ was launched to mask the lack of political courage of member states to address inequality in earnest. The World Economic Forum is more straightforward in this regard. It rates ‘rising income and wealth disparity as the most important trend in determining global developments over the next 10 years.’ (WEF 2017, 6) Shiller puts it equally strongly, ‘The most important problem we are facing now today, I think, is rising inequality’ (quoted by Dorling 2014, 1).

The SDGs do not represent a universal agenda

Apart from failing to cover the twin challenge of environmental sustainability and high inequality, the SDGs also fall short in setting a truly universal agenda. Like the MDGs, they represent a global deal between the North and the South, more than a genuine universal agenda. To be truly universal, the SDGs would need to transcend the North-South divide and comprise performance targets for all categories of countries, not just for developing ones. As with the MDGs, however, they mostly contain a set of verifiable performance targets for developing countries and a few vaguely-formulated delivery targets for developed nations. As such, the SDGs still embody the old donor-centric view that development is something that essentially happens in the South. It can even be argued that the few verifiable targets contained in the SDG agenda are not dissimilar from the MDGs.

Admittedly, not all domains of a global agenda for development can be universal in scope. Different aspects will apply differently to different categories of countries. Targets regarding extreme poverty and universal primary education will apply more directly to low-income countries than to middle- and high-income countries. Yet, universality requires that, on balance, the SDGs apply to all categories of countries. Yet, they fail to achieve that balance. Most verifiable targets contained in the SDGs relate to developing countries, whilst few apply to rich countries. Those that apply to rich countries are formulated in a vague and fuzzy way so that they remain unverifiable. Thus, the SDGs cannot be considered to represent a universal agenda because they do not apply to all categories of countries in a similar way.

This is best illustrated by goal 2. It is obvious that ending hunger will not be as challenging for high- and most middle-income countries as for the least developed nations. As such, the goal of ending hunger by 2030 cannot be seen as a universal goal. Yet, the goal could have been formulated as universal in scope, simply by including numerical targets for overweight and breastfeeding. Growing obesity is a universal phenomenon in that it represents a serious public health concern in virtually all countries – rich and poor alike. If present trends continue, almost half of the world’s population will be overweight or obese by 2030, imposing enormous costs on people, societies and economies (James and McPherson 2017). The World Health Organization reports that the global prevalence of diabetes has nearly doubled since 1980, a trend largely driven by the unrelenting rise in overweight and obesity (WHO 2016). Nonetheless, overweight and obesity are not mentioned in the SDGs, which is almost beyond belief.

Neither is breastfeeding, although it contributes directly and significantly to other SDG goals, such as education, health and nutrition, including overweight and
diabetes. Noteworthy is that a global target for breastfeeding already existed when the SDGs were being discussed. It aims to ‘increase the rate of exclusive breastfeeding in the first 6 months up to at least 50% by 2025’ (WHO 2012, 60). It is not entirely clear why it was not included among the SDGs, but it is probably not a coincidence that breastfeeding is an area where high-income countries tend to lag (Victora et al. 2016) – thereby making the global target quite challenging for them.

These omissions are unlikely to be a simple oversight. They most probably stem from the reluctance among developed nations to commit themselves to specific, quantitative and time-bound targets. Hence, it was more convenient to focus the SDGs on ending hunger than to set verifiable targets for overweight/obesity and breastfeeding.

The SDGs are not fit for purpose

The claim that the SDGs represent a universal agenda is not tenable. Yet, it is frequently reiterated. The 35-page document that spells out ‘Agenda 2030’ claims not less than nine times that the SDGs are universal (UN 2015b). Kahneman (2011) explains that frequent repetition is a ‘reliable way to make people believe in falsehoods, because familiarity is not easily distinguished from truth.’ (62) Hence, the claim that the SDGs represent a universal agenda stems more from repetition than from its actual content.

A distinct aspect of the SDGs is the inverse relationship between their level of ambition and their specificity. The goals are boldly formulated but their scope and ambition are greatly diminished by the fuzziness of the targets and the inaptness of the selected indicators. For instance, target 16.5 aims to ‘substantially reduce corruption and bribery in all their forms’. Albeit an important target, its formulation lacks conceptual clarity, a numerical outcome and a specific deadline. It is obvious that Schumacher’s advice has not been heeded: ‘To measure the immeasurable is absurd and constitutes an elaborate method of moving from preconceived notions to foregone conclusions’ (1973, 38).

A great deal of the SDG targets are formulated in a similar fuzzy way like the target for corruption. A team of international and multi-disciplinary scholars examined the 169 targets from a scientific point of view (ICSU and ISSC 2015). They concluded that more than half provide insufficient specifics, pointing out that ‘without clearer wording and better quantification for the targets, it will be difficult to monitor and evaluate progress.’ (52) Given that several of the selected indicators are inapt, further diminishes the scope and the level of ambition of the SDGs.

The SDGs reflect weak multilateralism

The inevitable conclusion is that, in the realm of multilateral affairs, sustainable and equitable development remains an idea whose time has not yet come. The fuzziness of the SDGs can be attributed to three reasons. First, the aim was ambitious, namely to define a global agenda for development that is comprehensive and reflects the complexity of the development process. Second, the approach was inclusive. Extensive consultations were held with a wide range of stakeholders. Although the member states managed and directed the debate, ideas and suggestions were solicited from civil society organizations, think tanks, corporations, scientists, philanthropists and other relevant partners. Though commendable, such a participatory approach inevitably makes the formulation of the final text more complicated, often necessitating additional concessions and conciliations. Apart from the aim and the approach, the main reason for the fuzziness and lack of clarity of the SDGs is due to a third reason, namely the prevailing multilateral context.

Whereas the MDGs were formulated in a context of strong multilateralism, immediately following the end of the Cold War, the SDGs emerged in a context of weak multilateralism. A fundamental change that unfolded between the MDGs and the SDGs was the emergence of the Global South. New institutions and global bodies manifest this change, e.g. BRICS, G-20, New Development Bank (NDB), Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB). To some extent, this evolution defies the position of developed countries, which have traditionally dominated global fora and international organizations. Whilst they cling to their dominant position, developing countries gradually assert their role as key players in global affairs. As a result, global negotiations have become strained and the divide between the North and the South has widened and deepened. The respective positions taken at the United Nations by the Group of 77 (developing countries) and the B-group (developed countries) have gradually become more antagonistic. The growing schism has come to characterize most global debates and intergovernmental negotiations – be it on trade, development or climate change. In addition, the worsening relations between East and West further cloud the multilateral landscape.

These divides have made it exceedingly difficult to reach multilateral consensus. In 2015, four world summits took place: on Finance for Development in Addis Ababa, on Sustainable Development in New York, on Climate Change in Paris, and on Global Trade in Nairobi. Each yielded a precarious compromise and a declaration that lacked clarity. International
agreements are increasingly weakened by profound disagreements among member states. The fault lines run mostly North-South and East-West. In addition, the resurgence of a sense of nationalism in several countries have made multilateralism even more arduous. Member states have become too divided to adopt global targets that are clear, concise and computable: hence the fuzzy and convoluted nature of the SDGs. If the MDGs were arguably simple-minded, then the SDGs are undeniably muddle-headed.

In short, the SDGs emerged in a context of debilitated multilateralism, characterized by a deepening North–South divide, a return of East-West tensions, and a stronger sense of national sovereignty among government representatives. To a large extent, the multilateral context explains why the SDGs fall short of what is needed to address the dual challenge of sustainability and inequality in earnest.

Realizing the transformative potential of the SDGs

Despite the above criticism, the SDGs represent a better framework than the MDGs. Their scope is broader and now includes – albeit imperfectly – important issues such as environmental sustainability, inequality, good governance, remittances, migration, social protection, etc. However, considerable work remains at the national and the global level to realize their potential.

At the national level, each country must select from among the SDG items those that are most relevant to the local context. Agenda 2030 foresees this step: ‘Targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances’ (UN 2015b, 13). Many believe, however, that this will inevitably lead to a watering down of the SDGs. But that risk will only occur if the selection and adaptation of the global targets to the national context is done by government alone. Here, Agenda 2030 is clearly misguided because governments will prefer cherry-picking to setting ambitious targets. Only a participatory process can avert that outcome, by involving civil society, academics, social partners, and others relevant stakeholders. Others believe that selection and adaptation will make international comparisons impossible and muddle the narrative about SDG progress. Yet, innovative monitoring of the SDGs can preempt that, by combining qualitative information with quantitative data. International and regional organizations have not yet taken assertive action to encourage and support their member states to select and adapt the SDGs to a manageable list of priorities that is tailored to their domestic situation. This step is urgent and pressing, given that the SDGs have gotten very limited traction at the national level so far.

At the global level, the important step is to choose fitting indicators to help fix several of the flawed targets. For example, target 10.1 regarding inequality can be remedied by using the Palma ratio. The use of the body mass index will widen the scope of target 2.2 regarding malnutrition to include overweight and obesity. Unfortunately, member states have not included such indicators in the global indicator framework for monitoring the SDGs (UN 2016). It seems that governments are not ready to accept indicators that could reveal politically sensitive dimensions of reality. Steps must be taken to prevent politics from seeping deeper into statistics.

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