

Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): Less is More!

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be seen as the latest incarnation of a movement that started with the launch of the first Human Development Report (HDR) in 1990. Long before the first HDR, many thinkers had already strongly argued that GDP size and growth should not be considered the sole yardstick of development. Nevertheless, there is no doubt that the HDR and its companion, the Human Development Index (HDI), played a great role in mainstreaming the notion that development should result in better lives for people, something which GDP sheds little light upon. Although we surely cannot establish how much, it is fair to consider that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) benefited from the consensus, quickly formed in the international community, over the “people-centric” notion of human development.

Despite its many shortcomings, HDI gained in popularity because it evoked the widely supported notion that “money is not everything”. Money is worthless if you are unhealthy; and the sane majority of human beings do wish to live a healthy long life, to be educated enough to make choices with awareness of the options and of their consequences, and have enough to lead a comfortable life. The idea that development was much more than GDP won over the hearts and minds of the world. However HDI is based on averages, which—as is known—can hide very unequal distributions.

With the dawn of the 21st century, the world agreed upon the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which represented a great leap forward. The MDGs strategy kept the notion of human development, but in a sort of a Rawlsian inflexion changed the focus from the average to the minima. Instead of GDP or GNI, the MDGs looked at the extreme poverty headcount and gap. The MDGs required that people had a minimum level of income or consumption, that they were not malnourished or hungry, that all children had the chance to complete primary education and to live beyond five years of age, that people would have access to the treatment of diseases, to water and sanitation, and to decent housing.

In the original human development perspective, sustainability was understood as the non-depletion of resources and was relevant because it was good for the preservation of current and future generations of our species. In the MDGs, sustainability is conceived as not only for us (humans), but also for other species on the planet, not only because we co-exist within the same system, but because they, as us,

deserve to exist. Thus, the MDGs addressed the loss of biodiversity, the sustainable use of resources, and pollution that drives climate change.

Alas, the world will not meet all of the many targets set forth by the eight MDGs. Extreme poverty, child mortality and illiteracy, all of which are unacceptable, still plague the world. Should we substitute or add new goals before reaching the old ones? Or should all efforts be committed to guaranteeing the minima implied in the MDGs for all human beings, seeking more ambitious targets, such as the eradication of extreme poverty, hunger and of child mortality due to preventable causes?

Today, the world is debating the adoption of the SDGs. They can be understood as the MDGs recast in order to frame development across the three pillars: the economic, the environmental and the social. There is an emerging—and wrong—perception, that to cover these three aspects of development, the world needs a lot of SDGs. Activists of all sorts want to have their own SDG, or even more than one. Too many goals and targets will endanger the future SDG strategy. If we think about the MDGs, eight goals were already too much. Many people, even those who have certain familiarity with the subject have trouble recalling those eight and their many targets. What would happen if we had almost 20 goals and more than one hundred targets? Can we really mobilise people to fight for so many issues?

Another problem is that some debates are shifting from goals or targets to the ways of achieving them. It is always important to know how countries achieved success, which policies were put in place and what results were attained. Nevertheless, each country has its own path to follow. Recent history is full of examples of one-size-fits-all solutions and ready-made recipes for success that resulted in colossal failures for countries which went “by the book” adopting policies and processes that were deemed successful elsewhere. The debates surrounding the SDGs should be more about goals and targets, and less about policy.

The SDGs are about where we want to go, not how to get there. Few goals, around which there is an overwhelming consensus, will make it easier to mobilize people to fight for them. When it comes to the SDGs, less is more.

Reference:

SDG Open Working Group (2014) *Introduction and Proposed Goals and Targets on Sustainable Development for the Post2015 Development Agenda*. Accessed 15 November 2014 <<http://www.worldwewant2015.org/node/442161>>.