The SDGs: Changing How Development is Understood

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Abstract

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) constitute a truly transformative agenda which provides a framework to help us effectively confront the fundamental challenges of development in a way that the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) did not. This commentary briefly describes the very demanding, at times antagonistic, process that produced the SDGs, including the crucial role of the Open Working Group (OWG). It points out the strengths of the SDGs by comparison with the MDGs, with respect to both process and product. The SDGs, proposed and championed by a country from the Global South, for the first time defined development as a universal agenda, and upended the traditional division of countries into those who need to act and those called primarily to provide development assistance. Many countries across the development spectrum rejected this proposal, which was finally agreed thanks to persistence, lengthy negotiations and consensus building. In the end, the adoption of the SDGs also broke down the divide between environment and development, offering an integrated and inclusive framework for structuring solutions. Yet an agenda of such deep transformative potential faces implementation challenges, and this commentary emphasizes the need for the sort of analysis contained in the papers in this Special Issue in order to ensure that the SDGs are strengthened and continue to evolve.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were an attempt to revolutionize how we understand development, to create a framework that was more fit-for-purpose to tackle the daunting challenges we face as a global society that is rapidly breaching the capacity of earth systems to support life and facing growing inequalities at all levels. Yet several of the papers highlight the fact that Agenda 2030 and the SDGs did not embed transformative concepts such as planetary boundaries or 'beyond GDP'. In fact, the contestations that the papers analyse, surrounding core components of the SDGs, evidence just how difficult the journey was, and how challenging the road ahead. Arguably, however, the central question is whether the SDGs will have made a difference in getting us to effectively resolve issues that are ultimately existential and that address fundamental human rights; and in how we do so. The stakes are high so it is essential that rigorous and unflinching analysis lay bare areas where the SDGs need to be strengthened and further evolved, but one needs to also ask whether the appetite and commitment to addressing these challenges would have been the same if we had only had an 'MDG plus' architecture to guide our efforts during the next decisive decade.

Today, many see the SDGs as a natural and possibly inevitable evolution of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The outcome could have been radically different. The bitter rejection of the SDGs throughout much of the Rio+20 process (even during the last night of negotiations it was not certain that the text would be approved) speak to the fact that getting agreement on this concept was in itself transformative. The difficulties during the subsequent negotiations in the Open Working Group (OWG) and in the

definition of the indicators that the papers in this series allude to, reflect the efforts that were made to maintain a semblance of the status quo or, as many have noted, to water down the reach of this new framework. This is true whether it be from a political or a technical perspective.

With regard to the former, the proposition that a truly universal agenda was needed brought to the surface assumptions that were implicit in development assistance – that development was only actionable by so-called developing countries and that the responsibilities of the more developed countries' were only to provide limited finance and-often patriarchic-assistance. Global leadership, moreover, was the purview of developed countries. When the Colombian proposal for the SDGs first started to gain a minimum of traction in mid-2011, one of the most frequently asked questions was 'Why Colombia?' As Fukuda-Parr and McNeill note, 'framing is used by powerful states and organizations to exert power to influence policy agendas of other stakeholders'. And certainly, the minimalist understanding of development at the core of the MDGs was well received by developed countries. There is a parallel to this in the initial approaches to 'adaptation' within the UNFCCC that sought to frame it as a development side-show that affected only the least developed countries and could be addressed through short-term actions consigned to the NAPAs.[1] On the side of the G77, the resistance by many to the notion of a universal agenda was fierce as it undermined what they perceived as a foundational concept: the principle of 'common but differentiated responsibilities'. It is telling that for many months one of the leading developing countries in the negotiations advocated agreeing to two

separate frameworks: a universal one targeting rich countries and one for 'poor' countries. Moreover, many G77 members were also staunch advocates of the MDGs and could countenance only an "MDG plus" approach after 2015. They found comfort in the few discrete targets of the MDGs and feared that support for basic development needs would evaporate in the face of a more comprehensive agenda.

The SDG process had to break through another glass wall – the perennial divide between the environment and development communities. The MDGs were the backbone of the development community – a majority of bilateral and multilateral aid programs were structured around them. When the SDGs appeared on the horizon, the development community – again from all countries across the spectrum as well as the plethora of organizations that focused on MDG delivery – soundly rejected the mere idea. These divides spilled over into the negotiations, given often trenchant disagreements within delegations. Often, delegations spoke with more than one voice, depending on who was actually in the room.

From a technical perspective, the SDGs were unable to embed a conclusive understanding of the need for a fundamental economic rebalancing that shifts decisively away from current consumption and production models. As noted by Gasper, Shah, and Tankha (this volume), 'The now predominant faith is that economic growth can be decoupled from environmental degradation and resource depletion. Not regulation but technological innovation and transfer, via partnerships between governments, private sector and civil society, are emphasized....Technical innovations will supposedly allow consumption, and hence production, to grow indefinitely'. The same mechanics play out in the climate regime, where a recalcitrant belief in human ability for innovation and manipulation holds out the promise that runaway climate change could be eventually tackled through technology, in its most extreme form manifesting as efforts around climate geoengineering.

And yet, the SDGs did succeed in reshaping the understanding of the environmental dimension. 'The pattern of integration observed in the SDGs is that the environment is incorporated in targets across almost all policy areas represented by the SDGs ... It is especially notable that many of the most important means to improve the environment are found in the so-called economic targets'. (Elder and Olsen, this volume) A case in point is precisely SDG 13 on Climate Change. There were radically opposing views on the inclusion or not of this issue given the fraught UNFCCC process – not with a view to excluding climate but for many out of concern that it could derail difficult negotiations. 'Climate change is a major example of an integrated approach spanning a range of goals ... the key means for addressing it are mostly not under SDG 13; instead they are under other goals such as SDG 7 on energy (energy efficiency and renewable energy). Ending fossil fuel subsidies is under Goal 12 on SCP. Other climate measures are listed under other goals' (Elder and Olsen). In practice this signals that many of the actual means for tackling climate change are squarely where they need to be, that is, under the sectoral frameworks

where key actors will need to deliver. Putting everything under the rubric of 'climate change' could arguably make it harder for many to commit to some of these measures. It is cogent evidence of how seemingly insurmountable political obstacles were met, delivering a more technical framing that may ultimately contribute to more effective implementation.

What made this possible, the bedrock of what became the SDGs, was the creation of the Open Working Group (OWG). This was transformative. Revolutionary in many ways. And testament to this is the fact that the most bitter and churlish negotiations within the G77 throughout the *entire* process were – by far – around the proposal to adopt this format. Many delegations feared precisely that a format that sidelined prevalent political positions and posturing would in fact open the door to technical approaches that would make real headway in highlighting areas where deep, transformative shifts were needed – and, which some feared could morph into conditionalities. Some developed countries also rejected moving away from the comfort of established procedures. For Colombia, agreement on the concept of the SDGs without a clear-cut evidence-based process to actually develop them would have been tantamount to abject failure at Rio. Throughout the last two months of the negotiations Colombia's highest priority was to get agreement on the science-based format it was proposing. (The convoluted 7-month process after Rio to agree to the mere composition of the OWG evidences the fact that without agreement on the format, member states might have spent the following years fighting over this rather than discussing the actual architecture of the SDGs). The final compromise that Colombia and Pakistan brokered was that it would be completely open, but not 'open-ended': in exchange for the Group not operating under the aegis of the United Nations General Assembly rules – which would have entailed the traditional negotiation blocks – and having only a limited formal membership, it would be 'open' so that any country that wanted to participate could do so even if they were not a formal member of the OWG, and live-streamed so that it would be radically transparent. Nothing would be negotiated or agreed to behind closed doors.

In the end, it created a unique space for effective, active participation not just by all countries, but by all major stakeholders. It also enabled the Group to be highly technocratic, with the participation of both invited experts as well as those that delegations soon began to bring in from their own capitals. To a degree that would otherwise have been unimaginable, overt political considerations did not dominate most discussions. Seen through a purely academic or scientific lens this assertion may seem questionable, but the fact is that for a process that had to balance inputs and interests from 193 countries, and constituencies from every sector and every region, across the entire range of core development issues, the end result was a fairly sensible metric.

Which leads to the perennial question of whether it would have been possible to arrive at a smaller number of goals. The report of the High Level Panel (HLP) is often alluded to and it is pointed out that it has only 12 goals. But the reality of the deliberations within the HLP was quite different. One of the very final drafts had, in fact, 16 goals.

However, by the time the final draft was adopted, there were only a dozen goals. Getting down to this magic number entailed very difficult choices. Notably, for example, in a rapidly urbanizing world where cities are becoming increasingly decisive players, there was no goal on the urban agenda, the equivalent of SDG Goal 11. So, the fact that the most inclusive process in UN history, which sought to tackle the entirety of the development agenda, came up with just 17 goals, can arguably be considered an actual measure of success.

And yet, the OWG was part of a process that required the further evolution of the SDGs, the definition of indicators. It is one of the fascinating facets of the SDG process that while the OWG – which should have been highly charged politically throughout – was, to a remarkable degree, informed by science and technical experts, the process for the definition of the indicators – which would normally have been the quiet purview of statisticians – became more politicized. Certainly, as Fukuda-Parr and McNeill have noted, the choice of measurement tools brings politics to data. However, and especially in the case of environmental indicators, the reality that needs to be contended with is that data availability in many countries is quite limited, and the capacity and resources to generate the necessary systems for ramping up are unavailable. Moreover, even where the expertise and capabilities exist, 'Moving from an incremental and sectoral approach to measurement to a transformative and integrated approach proved very challenging for the statistical community' (Elder and Olsen). Yet there is movement in that direction, as for example, work on the Multidimensional Poverty Index bears witness to, as well as the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) that aims to integrate economic and environmental data. Exercises such as those undertaken by the authors in this Special Issue, which highlight key gaps and weaknesses, should spur higher commitment and even innovation in the evolution of the SDGs' indicator architecture.

It is still too early to tell if the aim of the SDGs, which was essentially to launch a revolution in responsibility, a revolution in how we understand and engage on development so as to be fit-for-purpose for tackling the risks inherent in an age we are already calling the Anthropocene, will be delivered. But progress is encouraging. Already, entire movements that bring together some of the biggest players in a given field have been launched such as Champions 12.3 to stem food waste. In the *Better Business, Better World* Report by the Business and Sustainable Development Commission, leading finance and business leaders conclude that 'achieving the SDGs in just four economic systems could open 60 market "hot spots" worth an estimated US$12 trillion by 2030', and commit to incorporating the SDGs into their core growth strategies, value chain operations and policy positions. The SDGs hold the promise of a revolution. The degree to which it materializes depends on us all.

Note

1. National Action Plans for Adaptation. The UNFCCC Conference of the Parties established the least developed countries (LDC) work program in 2001, that included the national adaptation programs of action (NAPAs), to support them to address the climate-related challenges given their vulnerability. NAPAs aimed to address 'urgent and immediate adaptation needs', and had 'a simple format, easily understood both by policy-level decision-makers and the public'. (https://unfccc.int/topics/resilience/workstreams/national-adaptation-programmes-of-action/introduction).

Author Information

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