

Views on Development

No 3, 22 September 2015

SDG - A Disservice to the World's Poorest

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It is remarkable that the world has managed to bring the huge, complex and ambitious processes for the post-2015 development agenda to a successful conclusion. Next week the Sustainable Development Goals will be adopted in New York. In a relatively participatory process a successor agenda for the Millennium Development Goals has been decided upon that will be integrated with the sustainability agenda.

On closer inspection, however, it becomes obvious that this could only be achieved in gross disregard of one of the key cornerstones. Just to remind you: The General Assembly resolution called on the creators of the post-2015 development agenda to formulate goals that are "action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities." While the SDGs are indeed global and ambitious and should be explicitly broken down into national targets, one can hardly say that the 17 goals and 169 targets are 'concise, easy to communicate and limited in number.'

After the MDGs that initially contained 8 goals, 18 targets and 45 indicators, the SDGs have inflated to a multiple of targets and even more indicators (There are an estimated 1,000 indicators).

This inflation of goals, targets and indicators played a central role in ensuring the negotiations were successful: In this way the negotiators were able to avoid any discussion about priorities and to please everybody. Each UN Organisation got the goals it wanted, bilateral donors could have their favourite goals included and NGOs had many of their concerns considered as well. Of course it's not difficult for everyone to agree then.

But is that a problem? At the end of the day, (almost) everything you read in the SDGs is desirable, and the world would certainly be a better place if all of these targets were achieved. Unfortunately, however, it is a big problem when it comes to implementing this agenda. What can a government in a poor developing country do with this agenda? They were already hardly able to compile the relatively manageable performance indicators for the MDGs and now they are suddenly supposed to gather and analyse 20 times as many? Statistical capacities certainly need to be enhanced, but it would be far better to begin by gathering the key economic and social data reliably rather than trying to cope with a flood of new indicators.

The fact that no prioritisation is even attempted presents a serious problem. Reducing child mortality is treated the same as recycling waste water, the eradication of extreme poverty is a target on the same level as regional development planning or improved public

procurement procedures. And how can one ever develop a prioritised policy for a country from 169 targets?

The SDGs are also a source of great confusion as to which targets are directly related to people's quality of life and which are merely means to achieve them. For example, the reduction of maternal mortality is an end in itself, while an improved price information system for agricultural goods and agricultural supplies at most is one (of many) means to combat hunger. Regional and development planning is hardly an end in itself. But all three are categorised as targets. The emphasis of certain means as a separate target still suggests that there is something like a 'one size fits all' approach; but actually we learnt that there are many ways to overcome poverty and promote health and education.

The inflation of the goals and targets also undermines the other cornerstones of the SDGs. In implementing the SDGs at the national level it has now become a completely arbitrary exercise which things countries focus on. In fact, many countries actually won't have to do anything by way of implementation because some of the 169 targets will certainly be already goals in their current development policy. Whether countries will really focus on the things that are central to overcoming poverty and improving the quality of life, is uncertain. And how can then monitoring take place in a binding fashion in this maze of goals, targets and indicators?

This also weakens the global aspiration of the SDGs. Instead of requiring in particular the industrialised countries to make a substantial contribution to ending extreme poverty, hunger, unnecessary deaths, lack of education and worsening climate change, many rich countries can, if they ever take the SDGs seriously at all, simply point out that they are already complying with many of the SDGs in their own country. Germany can, for instance, continue to ignore the target of spending 0.7% of its gross domestic product on development aid and instead point out that we are pretty good at recycling water. It is therefore not surprising that the results at the conference on financing for the SDGs held in Addis Ababa in June were so paltry with such a hodge-

podge of non-binding goals for all the countries in the world. As a consequence, implementation and monitoring will be difficult.

The worst thing about all this is, however, that the plight of the poorest in the world has been removed from the focus of the SDGs. Roughly 1 billion people still suffer from extreme poverty and hunger, millions die each year from preventable causes, and lack of education (especially high-quality education) and lack of employment opportunities affect many of the poorest. While there are goals in the SDGs for all of these issues, they get lost in the flood of targets which often have little or nothing to do with overcoming all this preventable suffering. This is all the more regrettable since we have seen in recent years that (perhaps because of

the focused targets contained in the MDGs) great strides in reducing mortality, poverty, hunger, and lack of education are possible and we, in fact, would have the unique opportunity to create a world without extreme poverty, hunger and preventable mortality in the coming decades. But this will only be possible if these most dire problems in the world are at the heart of our global efforts.

Are there any chances that this will be corrected in the implementation of SDGs? This will only succeed if we realise that the SDGs do indeed constitute a global agenda, but there must be prioritised national agendas within this framework that focus on far fewer goals and also identify clear responsibilities for these goals.

What could that kind of prioritisation for an industrialised country such as Germany look like? In the implementation it would be crucial to include clear commitments and concrete measures and quantitative targets, such as how Germany seeks to contribute to the eradication of poverty and hardship in developing countries as well as overcoming global challenges such as climate change. And in future Germany must then be largely measured according to the extent to which they comply with these commitments.

Which parts of the SDG agenda Germany undertakes to implement domestically should be a completely separate matter and should not be mixed with its global responsibilities. ■