

Taking Stock of the SDGs

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Abstract

The emerging consensus in most academic and policy discussions is that the pace of action on achieving the SDGs is slow and that a sense of urgency is needed if the goals are to be achieved by the 2030 deadline. There is also considerable debate on the nature and type of efforts by state and non-state actors required across the 17 SDGs without losing the focus on poverty reduction. My aim in this chapter is to better understand the current status of policymaking and implementation of the 2030 Agenda at global, national and local levels. I begin with a brief overview of the contested theory of change upon which the 2030 Agenda rests and thereafter go on to critically examine three overarching and interrelated sets of challenges that are slowing down progress on the SDGs: awareness; institutional set-up, policy coherence and methods for tracking progress; and development finance.

Introduction

With the adoption of the 2030 Agenda and its accompanying 17 SDGs in 2015 – grouped under overarching themes of people, planet, dignity, prosperity, justice and partnership – sustainable development is back in the international limelight. By closely linking “sustainability” with “development” through the principles of “universality”, “integration” and “leave no one behind”, the 2030 Agenda has been much celebrated in academic, activist, business and policy circles as a means to stimulate a radical shift in world affairs.¹

The SDGs have been widely praised for a strong articulation of an environmental dimension, in addition to breaking new ground with goals on inequality, economic growth, energy, and peace. But they have also been criticized for their unrealistic ambitions and lack of focus. For example, the economist William Easterly has described the SDGs as “Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled”.² Others, however, have argued that despite being imperfect and highly ambitious, the SDGs are the result of a comprehensive participatory process, unparalleled in the history of global development.³ Indeed, while its predecessor – the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – focused exclusively on development through foreign aid, the SDGs encompass a broader agenda, which applies to both rich and poor countries alike and is “buttressed by science and evidence”.⁴ While the SDGs are not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for the achievement of the 17 Goals.

With just 12 years left to the 2030 deadline, the emerging consensus in most academic and policy discussions is that the pace of action is slow and that far too many people of the world are still being left behind. There is also a need for greater efforts across the goals without losing the focus on poverty reduction.⁵ Over the past year or so, I have attended numerous events on sustainable development and interacted with UN and World Bank officials, country representatives, academics, civil society organizations and think tanks. My aim has been to better understand the current status of policymaking and implementation of the 2030 Agenda at global, national and local levels. I begin with a brief overview of the contested theory of change upon which the 2030 Agenda rests and thereafter go on to identify three overarching and interrelated sets of challenges that are slowing down progress on the SDGs.

The underlying theory of change

Several studies over the past few years have focused on the feasibility of achieving the SDGs and the actual impact of the 2030 Agenda on global development.⁶ A first set of issues that has attracted scholarly interest relates to the 2030 Agenda’s underlying theory of change and the benefits and pitfalls of formulating goals and targets, together with the resulting trade-offs.⁷ The SDGs represent a normative agenda which promotes a theory of change involving

¹ Banik, D. and Miklian, J. (2017) “New Business: The Private Sector as a New Global Development Player”, *Global Policy*, <https://www.globalpolicyjournal.com/blog/24/11/2017/new-business-private-sector-new-global-development-player>

² <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/28/the-sdgs-are-utopian-and-worthless-mdgs-development-rise-of-the-rest/>

³ Doane, D. (2016) “We Won’t Conquer the Mountains of the SDGs Without Humility”, *The Guardian*, <https://www.theguardian.com/global-development-professionals-network/2016/jul/07/sdgs-progress-stay-humble>

⁴ UN (2015) *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, <https://goo.gl/BbG4PF>; UN (2014) *The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet*, http://www.un.org/disabilities/documents/reports/SG_Synthesis_Report_Road_to_Dignity_by_2030.pdf

⁵ UN (2017) “An End of Term Report from the President of the 71st Session of the General Assembly”, <https://www.un.org/pga/71/wp-content/uploads/sites/40/2016/11/PGA-End-of-term-report.pdf>

⁶ Two web portals provide an overview of selected research on the SDGs: <https://www.eadi.org/sdg/>; <https://unu.edu/explore>

⁷ Langford, M. (2016) “Lost in Transformation? The Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals”, *Ethics & International Affairs* 30(2): 167-176; O’Connor, D. et. al. (2016) “Universality, Integration, and Policy Coherence for

several longstanding contestations over ideas of development. Thus, some question the viability of current approaches to economic growth, the influence of neoliberalism and the inability to identify specific duty-bearers who can be held to account for inaction and failure to achieve the goals.⁸ Others wonder whether the SDGs really represent a new way of thinking on global development and whether the agenda articulated at the world stage will be capable of reshaping and influencing institutions, policies and practices on the ground. Thus, one of my colleagues has posed the question: “Is the 2030 Agenda mainly changing semantics, or is it changing practice?”⁹

There has also been considerable focus on identifying and agreeing on measurable indicators and the methodology for tracking progress on the SDGs, including effective monitoring systems and accountability mechanisms¹⁰ and the most logical sequence of implementation.¹¹ However, some argue that the development of an indicator framework for the SDGs has resulted in a slippage in focus and ambition, and that the controversial aspects of development, including trade-offs, are often hidden in the technicalities of what is measured.¹² Despite embedding numerous contested theories of development, an excessive reliance on numbers gives that impression that nothing in the 2030 Agenda is controversial. A focus on numbers also downplays the role of politics in development.

Unsurprisingly, a growing amount of scholarly interest focuses on the national and local implementation of the SDGs and the challenge of achieving the three key SDG principles – universality, integration, leave no one behind. For example, while the mainstream SDG rhetoric insists that “no goal should be met unless it is met for everyone”, what this means in practice remains unclear.¹³ Some argue that the pressure of goals and targets can encourage governments to ignore the neediest. Still others point to unreliable and poor-quality data in large parts of the developing world and question the capacity of countries to reach “the furthest behind first” without knowing who they are.¹⁴ The emerging consensus has, however, highlighted the importance of pursuing an integrated approach to economic, social and environmental aspects of development. This requires interdisciplinary research in addition to intersectoral collaboration and knowledge sharing. One such framework that has gained considerable momentum in recent years is the concept of ‘planetary boundaries’,¹⁵

Sustainable Development: Early SDG Implementation in Selected OECD Countries”, World Resources Institute, https://www.wri.org/sites/default/files/Universality_Integration_and_Policy_Coherence_for_Sustainable_Development_Early_SDG_Implementation_in_Selected_OECD_Countries.pdf; Seidman, G. (2017) “Does SDG 3 have an Adequate Theory of Change for Improving Health Systems Performance?”, *Journal of Global Health* 7(1).

⁸Engebretsen, E., Heggen, K., & Ottersen, O.P. (2017) “The Sustainable Development Goals: Ambiguities of Accountability”, *The Lancet* 389(10067): 365; Weber, H. (2017) “Politics of ‘Leaving No One Behind’: Contesting the 2030 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda”, *Globalizations*, 14(3): 1-16.

⁹https://www.sum.uio.no/english/sdg/blog/nikolai-hegertun/politics_2030_agenda.html

¹⁰ Nilsson, M., Griggs, D., & Visbeck, M. (2016) “Policy: Map the Interactions Between Sustainable Development Goals”, *Nature* 534: 320-322; GBD (2016) “Measuring the Health-related Sustainable Development Goals in 188 Countries”, *The Lancet* 388: 1813–50; UNDP (2017) *Monitoring to Implement Peaceful, Just and Inclusive Societies*, UNDP Oslo Governance Centre.

¹¹<https://www.sdgsinorder.org/>

¹²https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24969hlpf_presentation_july_2017_clean.pdf

¹³ Le Blanc, D. (2015) “Towards Integration at Last?”, *DESA Working Paper No. 141*, http://www.un.org/esa/desa/papers/2015/wp141_2015.pdf

¹⁴Jerven, M. (2014) “Benefits and Costs of the Data for Development Targets for the Post-2015 Development Agenda”, Copenhagen Consensus Center, https://www.copenhagenconsensus.com/sites/default/files/data_assessment_-_jerven.pdf; Melamed, C. (2015) “Leaving No One Behind: How the SDGs can Bring About Real Change”, *Briefing paper*, Overseas Development Institute, <https://www.odi.org/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/9534.pdf>

¹⁵Rockström, J., W. Steffen, K. Noone, et al. (2009) ‘A Safe Operating Space for Humanity’, *Nature* 461(7263): 472–475; Steffen, W., Richardson, K., Rockström, J. et al. (2015) “Planetary Boundaries: Guiding Human Development on a Changing Planet”, *Science* 347(6223): 1259855.

which defines the environmental limits within which humanity can safely operate and which, when crossed, can result in sudden and irreversible environmental changes.

SDG awareness

Several studies find that many outside the UN system are not familiar with the SDGs, even though the goals represent everyday problems. This also applies to countries such as Colombia and Denmark that have laid a solid foundation for monitoring the goals.¹⁶ Civil society activists argue that the SDGs will not be achieved without significant public awareness and engagement, including new forms of citizen-generated data.¹⁷ Despite growing attention, the SDGs continue to be largely unknown outside specialist circles. Numerous surveys confirm this trend. And this problem is not limited to low-income countries. Citizens all over the world, including in many high-income countries, remain largely aware of the existence of the SDGs. Still others mistakenly believe the SDGs apply only to poor countries and hence a matter of foreign aid policies. While large businesses in many parts of the world have embraced the SDGs (and there is increased attention on discussing the SDGs at schools), there is an urgent need to re-engage all sections of society on the 2030 Agenda, including civil society, businesses, local and national politicians, city and regional associations, citizens groups and academics. The key in many parts of the world is to frame the issues in a language that emphasizes the relevance of the SDGs to “us” rather than only the “them”. Although many in the UN system insist that the SDGs are now well-known in large parts of the world, all available evidence from national surveys (even in the most affluent parts of the world) prove otherwise. But not all is doom and gloom. Some national governments, even in the poorest regions of the world, are finally making an effort to make the SDGs widely known. One such example is Malawi, which is translating SDG-related documents from English to Chichewa, Tumbuka and Yao as a first step towards promoting “localization of the 2030 Agenda”.¹⁸

Institutional set-up, policy coherence and tracking progress

Many countries are yet to harmonize and integrate the SDGs into national plans and strategies. This resembles a similar delay that occurred in large parts of the world during the first few years of the Millennium Development Goal (MDG) era, when some countries were slow to get things started. Indeed, many national governments are yet to begin mapping existing policies and programs against SDG-targets. Experts as well as local officials frequently cite lack of capacity and expertise and the lack of political commitment. The problem of weak or non-existent institutional set-ups is, however, not limited to low-income countries, and applies to many in the Western world, some of whom have adopted a decentralized approach – leaving the planning, monitoring and reporting to individual ministries rather than strengthening policy coordination (and thereby coherence) at the highest political level (e.g. at the office of the Prime Minister or President). But there are also several examples of countries with strong political support for the SDGs. Rwanda is one such example, where there is considerable SDG-talk at the highest political and administrative levels. And Bangladesh has appointed a senior official as Chief Coordinator

¹⁶Risse, N. (2017) “Getting Up to Speed to Implement the SDGs: Facing the Challenge”, *IISD Policy Brief*, <http://sdg.iisd.org/commentary/policy-briefs/getting-up-to-speed-to-implement-the-sdgs-facing-the-challenges/>

¹⁷Lämmerhirt, D., E. Jameson, and E. Prasetyo (2017) “Acting Locally, Monitoring Globally? How to Link Citizen-Generated Data to SDG Monitoring”, <http://civicus.org/thedatashift/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/Acting-locally-monitoring-globally-Full-Report.pdf>; Sriskandarajah, D. (2018) “Toward an Accountability Revolution? Citizen Participation and the SDGs”, in Raj Desai et al. (eds.), *From Summits to Solutions: Innovations in Implementing the Sustainable Development Goals*, Brookings Institution Press.

¹⁸<https://zodiakmalawi.com/malawi-national-news/govt-translates-sdgs-into-local-languages>

for SDG Affairs in the Prime Minister's office, tasked with coordinating policies across government ministries.¹⁹ However, there is little evidence so far on how and to what extent such institutional arrangements have broad political support and whether they are continued with when a new political party or coalition assumes power.

There is considerable on-going work at the UN and at country levels on defining indicators and improving the quality of available data specific to the SDGs. However, national statistics offices in large parts of the world remain notoriously understaffed and underfunded. Thus, a major challenge is to strengthen statistical capacity that is required to generate high quality, timely, reliable and disaggregated data that can support effective policy and decision-making. Some UN officials as well as scholars also worry that only 40% of the SDG indicators are well-defined and regularly reported. Others point to the distinction between data used in implementation (more timely, reliable and quick data in the form of administrative reports, citizens-based reports, etc.) versus data for monitoring (many goals call for eradication, which is different from monitoring). Another growing concern in many countries such as India, is how the SDGs resonate with and complement and/or contradict with existing (and often ambitious and large-scale) social protection programs. Related to this is the extent to which there is interest at regional and local levels to integrate and align current development interventions with an overarching focus on sustainable development promoted by the SDGs.

Financing development

Although some estimates find that achieving the SDGs will require at least USD 45 trillion,²⁰ a key question that has dogged the 2030 Agenda since its inception relates to funding ambitious programs in low-income countries. Three main sources of funding for the SDGs are typically identified: own funding by poor countries through taxation, foreign aid from developed countries, and private sector finance.²¹ But there are growing concerns that many of the poorest countries will not be able to self-finance programs and that recent threats to aid from the Global North will stall efforts to advance the SDGs – thus making a stronger case for involvement of the private sector and the trillions of dollars for business opportunities that the SDGs open up.²² However, operationalizing the SDGs requires a clearer understanding of the inter-connected yet distinct role of national governments, international agencies and businesses. This is particularly urgent in low-income countries and conflict-prone fragile states, which are confronted with the dilemmas and potential pitfalls associated with coordinating the activities of numerous competing actors. Another key issue relates to state capacity and ability of local public administrations to identify, articulate, coordinate and implement development programs aligned with the national interest, while also making it sufficiently attractive for both domestic and international private sector actors to become involved in SDG-related activities. Governments must therefore develop the capacity to distinguish profit-making initiatives that can promote social and economic development from those that can thwart such progress. In particular, it is questionable

¹⁹<https://bdnews24.com/bangladesh/2016/11/28/abul-kalam-azad-appointed-as-chief-coordinator-for-sdg-affairs-in-pmo>

²⁰<https://oecd-development-matters.org/2017/07/20/where-to-start-with-the-sdgs/>

²¹ Rudolph, A. (2017) "The Concept of SDG-Sensitive Development Cooperation: Implications for OECD-DAC Members, *Discussion paper 1/2017*, German Development Institute; SDG Africa (2017) "SDG Financing for Africa: Key Propositions and Areas of Engagement", https://sdgcafrica.org/wp-content/uploads/2017/03/sdg-financing-for-africa_key-propositions-and-areas-of-engagement-pdf

²² Business Commission (2017) *Better Business Better World*, http://report.businesscommission.org/uploads/BetterBiz-BetterWorld_170215_012417.pdf

whether low-income country governments will be able to say “no” to powerful business interests when they come calling with enticing offers of help.²³

Despite numerous international commitments and initiatives that have highlighted the importance of increased flow of grants, loans and investments together with greater domestic resource mobilization for achieving the SDGs, many low-income countries continue to cite lack of adequate resources as the single most important constraint in achieving faster progress. While China’s Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)²⁴ is increasingly being viewed as an important alternative for filling the financing gap, particularly in infrastructure development, others worry that poor countries will be unable to repay Chinese loans, thus creating a new era of highly indebted countries that will require bailouts in the near future. And although there is widespread agreement that businesses all over the world should take the lead to reduce the finance gap, activists often question the real motives of the private sector and claim that businesses are incapable of fruitfully engaging with national and local governments in most developing countries. Rather, many scholars and practitioners highlight the need for multilateral development banks to better coordinate their strategies in terms of the public and private sides of their development portfolios. For example, the World Bank, through its Senior Vice Presidency for the 2030 Agenda, has highlighted a “cascade approach”,²⁵ which aims to mobilize private sector finance while using guarantees and risk-sharing instruments in high-risk contexts. The Bank also insists that it aims to work with governments on reforms aimed at improving project feasibility. And that public resources ought to be used in such projects only when market solutions are not possible.

The fast approaching deadline

The world faces considerable challenges ahead, not least in terms of reducing extreme poverty and hunger and the adverse impacts caused by climate disruption. Many of these challenges have been well-documented in the SDG Atlas²⁶ published recently by the World Bank, drawing on its World Development Indicators. For example, after several years of decline, world hunger is on the rise again, partly due to conflicts and natural disasters but also due to climate disruptions. Urban-based residents in both developed and developing countries are more exposed to air pollution than in previous decades and several hundred million people lack access to safely managed sanitation facilities. And almost a billion people around the world still lack access to electricity, and recent projections show that unless drastic changes take place, 674 million people will continue to live without electricity in 2030.

Such challenges require the world community to renew its commitments to sustainable development. At the same time, we cannot underestimate the numerous developmental successes that the world has witnessed in recent decades. Indeed, as Steven Pinker has recently argued, in relation to health, prosperity, safety, peace, and happiness, humanity is much better off today than ever before in history.²⁷ And although such achievements have not been equally replicated in all arenas (e.g. the environment), it should deter us from asking what “success” means in practice, and how such ideas can be mobilized to apply to the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. For example, according to the UN’s Sustainable Development Goals Report 2018, maternal mortality has declined by 20% and child mortality by 50% since 2000 in Sub-Saharan Africa. In South Asia, the risk of child marriage for girls has declined by over 40%. And in the poorest countries of the world, the share of

²³ Banik and Miklian, 2016, op.cit.

²⁴<http://english.gov.cn/beltAndRoad/>

²⁵<http://www.worldbank.org/en/about/partners/maximizing-finance-for-development#6>

²⁶<http://datatopics.worldbank.org/sdcatlas/>

²⁷<https://www.theguardian.com/books/2018/feb/14/enlightenment-now-steven-pinker-review>

population with electricity has more than doubled in the past two decades.²⁸ We can and must learn from such successes while addressing current and future challenges. Achieving the SDGs requires not just the dedication and goodwill of governments, but also greater participation from citizens who must hold their governments to account for failure to promote sustainable development. Indeed, our actions must keep pace with our aspirations. A particularly worrisome fact is that the most disadvantaged and marginalized groups are not being prioritized and that youth unemployment is steadily increasing in many parts of the world. Thus, UN Secretary General Guterres aptly observes, “With just 12 years left to the 2030 deadline, we must inject a sense of urgency” in our efforts to achieve the SDGs.

²⁸<https://unstats.un.org/sdgs/files/report/2018/TheSustainableDevelopmentGoalsReport2018.pdf>