

News analysis of the SDGs

1. Why SDGs won't make the world a fairer place

The much-hyped Sustainable Development Goals to be adopted by the UN summit starting this week in New York will not deliver the new economy that the world so desperately needs. Their creators want to reduce poverty and inequality without touching the wealth and power of the global 1%. They fail to understand a basic fact: mass poverty is the product of extreme wealth accumulation and over-consumption by a few ...

The contradiction of growth

The Zero Draft contains some truly excellent demands. The preamble affirms that “planet Earth and its ecosystems are our home” and underscores the necessity of achieving “harmony with nature.” It establishes a commitment to hold global warming below a 2° Celsius increase, and calls for “sustainable patterns of production and consumption”.

All of this reflects awareness that something about our economic system has gone terribly awry. The pursuit of endless industrial growth is chewing through our living planet, producing poverty and threatening our existence. And yet the core of the SDG programme for development and poverty reduction relies precisely on the old model of industrial growth — ever-increasing levels of extraction, production, and consumption. Goal 8 calls for 7% annual GDP growth in least developed countries and higher levels of economic productivity across the board.

In other words, the SDGs call for both less and more at the same time. How can they expect to succeed with such a profound contradiction at their root? ...

Growth does not reduce poverty

The Zero Draft promotes growth as the main solution to poverty, but this relationship is highly tenuous. Of all the income generated by global GDP growth between 1999 and 2008, the poorest 60% of humanity received only 5% of it.

Given the existing ratio between GDP growth and the income growth of the poorest, it will take 207 years to eliminate poverty with this strategy. And to get there, we will have to grow the global economy by 175 times its present size ...

Big unaddressed issues

Surprisingly, the SDGs offer little by way of solutions to many of the biggest known drivers of global poverty. For example, the SDGs say nothing about the unfair trade regime of the World Trade Organisation, or the many bilateral trade and investment agreements that liberalise global markets at the expense of the poor. In fact, instead of tackling this crucial issue, Goal 17.10 calls for more trade liberalisation and more power for the WTO ...

The mis-measurement of poverty

Nowhere is the compromised nature of the SDGs more evident than in the headline goal, to eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, as measured at \$1.25/day. It's high time we got around to eradicating poverty, but a growing number of scholars are pointing out that \$1.25 is actually not adequate for human subsistence. A number of recent studies suggest that if people are to achieve normal life expectancy and meet their basic needs as outlined in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, they need closer to \$5 per day.



So why do the SDGs stick with the discredited \$1.25 measure? Because it's the only one that will allow them to get anywhere near their goal of eradicating poverty by 2030. If we measure poverty by the more accurate \$5/day line, the total poverty headcount rises to 4.3 billion people, more than 60% of humanity.

Eradicating poverty of this magnitude would require more than just weeding around the edges of the problem. It would require changing the rules of the global economy to make it fairer for the world's majority. The SDGs fail us on this. They offer to tinker with the global economic system in a well-meaning bid to make it all seem a bit less violent. But, as Arundhati Roy has put it, "we are not fighting to tinker with reforming a system that needs to be replaced."

Abridged from Pambazuka News <http://www.pambazuka.org/governance/why-sdgs-won't-make-world-fairer-place>

2. Experts divided over value of UN sustainable development goals

When world leaders gather in New York this month at the UN General Assembly, they are set to endorse an ambitious package of global economic, social and environmental objectives for the coming 15 years.

The aims include ending poverty in all its forms everywhere; providing inclusive and equitable quality education for all; achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls; taking urgent action to combat climate change; conserving and sustainably using the oceans; and ensuring healthy lives and promoting wellbeing for all.

These sustainable development goals [SDGs] sound bold, perhaps even naively idealistic, but there is a precedent: the eight Millennium Development Goals [MDGs] ratified by their predecessors at the start of the century, which spanned poverty, hunger, education, health and the environment.

Since then, radical changes in thinking, evolutions within countries and political shifts in governance have overhauled the process of selecting — and the underlying substance — of the international agenda. Yet experts remain divided on the value of the MDGs in the past, and whether the SDGs will have any greater impact in the future.

Ban Ki-moon, the UN's secretary-general, summed up the effects of the eight MDGs in a final evaluation report this year as "the most successful anti-poverty movement in history". On paper, at least as far as the data can be relied upon, there has indeed been significant progress in achieving the goals endorsed in 2000. Extreme poverty in developing countries has fallen from 47 per cent in 1990 to 14 per cent this year, while annual global deaths of children under five have halved to 6m.

Yet even on their own terms, the achievements have fallen short of the goals. Despite the positive spin in the UN evaluation report, on current trends it will take another decade for child mortality to fall by the target of two-thirds, for instance. Many of those most in need of the MDGs — the poorest and those living in fragile, conflict-torn states — benefited least.

Just as important is how far the MDGs themselves have influenced what successes have been achieved. Most notably, if the single-greatest driver of declining global poverty since the turn of the

millennium was the remarkable internal economic growth of China, then the MDGs had next to no influencing role.

An analysis by the economist Howard Friedman in 2013 concluded that there was no global acceleration towards most of the development goals after 2000. And among a subset that did progress, the acceleration had generally occurred in the 1990s, before the MDGs were even launched.

... William Easterly, professor of economics at New York University, remains sceptical. “The MDGs communicated a very wrong idea about how development happens: technocratic, patronising and magically free of politics”, he says. “It’s not about western saviours but homegrown efforts linked to a gradual extension of political freedom.”

There was at least some attempt to reflect such concerns in the drafting of the SDGs, which involved a far more extensive consultation and debate over many months, and ensured a larger voice for developing countries.

Yet the result has been an explosion in the number of overall goals from eight to 17, and of specific targets from 18 to 169. Some fear that whatever benefits the MDGs had will be diluted and further progress on them set back. Mr Easterly says: “The SDGs are a mushy collection of platitudes that will fail on every dimension. They make me feel quite nostalgic for the MDGs.”

Abridged from Financial Times:

<http://www.ft.com/cms/s/2/1ac2384c-57bf-11e5-9846-de406ccb37f2.html#axzz3nCIAJPZE>



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