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Some rich people in disadvantaged countries are wealthier than many rich people in the advantaged ones: Mukesh Ambani's private high-rise domicile in Mumbai. © Dinodia/picture-alliance/dpa

Multilateral policymaking

## Work in progress

The international community has decided to draft Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The matter is challenging – and urgent. The sooner humankind reverses unsustainable development, the better.

By Tetsuro Yoshida and Ikuho Miyazawa



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Rio+20, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), was held in Rio de Janeiro in June to assess the results of the 1992 Earth Summit that resulted in the UN conventions on climate change, biodiversity and other issues. The problem, however, is that the overall trend of unsustainable

development has not been reversed. Climate change, for instance, is no longer a theoretical danger; it has become a devastating reality. We are witnessing an increasing frequency of droughts, storms and floods.

Among other things, the international community, at Rio+20, therefore decided to establish a working group with the mandate of defining SDGs. This task is very important. It is not enough for humankind to have over 500 multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs) and a great number of other targets and commitments, many of which are legally binding. Stringent action must follow.

### **Agenda setting**

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) have shown that global goals and targets can help to set the agenda for policymakers, business leaders and concerned citizens all over the world. The MDGs were defined by the UN in 2000. They are about reducing poverty in specific fields, relate to the statistical baselines of 1990, and spell out quantified ambitions for the year 2015. Any new set of global goals must reflect the strengths of MDGs and address their shortcomings at the same time (see box below).

Defining the SDGs is a challenging and difficult task. Rio+20's outcome document lists some characteristics and principles, which are mostly based on the MDG experience. Relevant aspects include:

- • The SDGs must cover issues that were not included in MDGs, such as energy and biodiversity.
- Each goal needs to take into account the three dimensions (economic, social and environmental) of sustainability.
- The SDGs should be limited in number and universally applicable to all countries.
- They must be action-oriented, aspirational and easy to communicate.
- The SDG agenda must be consistent with international law and past commitments, but must, at the same time, respect national policy ownership.
- All SDGs must be assessable by targets and indicators.

At the time of writing in September, there were three separate processes going on in the UN context. A high-level panel was considering a post-MDG agenda for the years after 2015, the country-level consultations and thematic consultations facilitated by the UN Development Group (UNDG), and a working group of 30 representatives was being prepared to develop an SDG agenda. Many contributions at the UN General Assembly in New York were in favour of merging the two agendas, but it remains to be seen to what extent that will succeed.

Indeed, the two camps must not compete with one another. They must cooperate. And the agendas are certainly compatible. Let's bear in mind that poverty eradication is not only the key MDG objective but also a core component of sustainable development.

The SDGs, moreover, must not be divided into three pillars of economic, social and environmental targets. They must be about sustainability in its holistic sense. The reason is that the three aspects of sustainability are interrelated. One cannot be had without the other two. Economic growth that results from unsustainable use of natural resources cannot be sustainable. Environmental protection, however, will be unsustainable if it compounds poverty. And poverty will prove persistent unless there is economic growth. Humanity must therefore reconcile these issues.

At the global level, climate change and the loss of biodiversity are the two most important threats to sustainability. But it is not enough to rise to these two daunting challenges at the global level however. Local, national and continental problems must be tackled too.

The SDGs will be limited in number. Accordingly, they cannot cover everything that is desirable. At the same time, it does not make sense to reiterate legally binding targets that are already being dealt with in other multilateral contexts. In regard to climate change, for instance, the SDGs should therefore not define some kind of target for reducing carbon emissions, which is the remit of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change and its Kyoto Protocol. Instead, a meaningful SDG could focus on raising the share of clean energy in a country's energy mix.

It is challenging to define universal SDG targets for all countries. The international community is very diverse. Every nation faces specific challenges. No doubt, we will need to consider common but differentiated responsibilities.

For most developing countries, basic access to essential natural resources (such as clean water) is the priority. For middle-income countries, however, efficient resource use is the main challenge. Developed countries, in turn, must change their lifestyles if the global trend of environmental degradation is to be reversed.

In this context, it would make sense to set a triple goal regarding electric power with the dimensions of universal access (most relevant in the least developed countries), improved efficiency (most relevant in emerging markets) and more reliance on renewable sources (most relevant in the rich world).

It is noteworthy, however, that all the three aspects must – and do – apply to all countries. In the course of globalisation, the categorisation of countries is becoming blurred. The divide between the rich and the poor tends to be growing within countries.

Today, even some poor people in developed countries lack access to clean water and essential energy. At the same time, some of the rich in “poor countries” are better off than many wealthy people in “rich countries”. In any case, the consumption habits of prosperous people in developing countries are often environmentally unsustainable. The SDGs must be designed in a way that reflects all relevant situations.

### **Learning to be content**

Most individuals and communities in the world naturally aspire to a higher standard of living, with the consumption levels for goods and services going far beyond basic needs. In Japan, we have the saying: “I only learn to be content.” It implies that we must be conscious of what we are doing. Especially in the advanced nations, smarter, healthier and more sustainable lifestyles may not necessarily require more and more material goods.

Indeed, it may be time to revisit the true meaning of happiness based not only on material wellbeing, but what is often inherent in many traditional values around the world such as community and social bonds, as well as knowing what is enough for one's genuine wellbeing (see essay by Petra Pinzler in D+C/E+Z 2012/04, p. 164f.).

Defining the SDGs is a more complex challenge than defining the MDGs was. The MDG focus is on fighting poverty. The SDGs will be about that issue plus environmental and economic sustainability. The MDG agenda, moreover, was launched in a time of relative financial stability and strong multilateralism.

To trigger a renewed and shared sense of purpose, the SDGs must make sense to many people just as the MDGs did. The world certainly cannot afford to wait for action to tackle the broader challenges threatening sustainable development, and poverty cannot be overcome without strong political will.

Finally, the SDGs must be themselves sustainable. By definition, achieving sustainability is a continuous process. No doubt, we need policy coherence. ▣

# MDG lessons

Thanks to quantifiable, time bound indicators the Millennium Development Goals mobilised many actors. Another strong point was that the MDG agenda defined ends, not means. That mattered because it left developing countries space for domestic policymaking. Earlier, international goals had tended to be more patronising and basically reflected donor priorities.

Nonetheless, the MDGs have not been an unconditional success. Critics have pointed out that terms such as “slum dwellers” or “safe water” were not defined precisely, so the extent to which respective MDGs have been met remains debateable. Moreover, the statistics on global poverty are based on complex calculations and various assumptions; they do not result from direct observations. Assessing achievements is thus less straight-forward than appears at first glance.

The thorough and careful review of the MDGs is a precondition for setting meaningful and effective Social Development Goals. Unmet MDGs should be revisited and adjusted as necessary when developing post-MDGs. There can be no doubt, however, that the MDGs have broad public appeal and have left their mark on policies all over the world. Humankind needs similar momentum for the sake of sustainable development too. *(ty/im)*

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# Background



## Commodities

The exploitation of natural resources can generate strong export revenues. Whether that serves development, is another question.

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