

A Skeptic's View of International Development

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The UN agencies and the development community have rejoiced at the successful completion of the 2015 summit that launched the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with 36 topics and 169 targets to be achieved by 2030. No doubt, the SDGs put a spotlight on some of the world's biggest issues such as globalisation, rising urbanisation, new demographic patterns, technological revolution and climate change, which are likely to disrupt our lives in the next 20-30 years. It is but natural that global leaders should have put their heads together and come up with plans and actions to mitigate the adverse impact and maximise the benefits of these forces. The question that arises, though, is whether the SDG agenda is appropriate and adequate to address these issues. Here the rejoicing turns into skepticism. At least seven factors can be identified that do not provide much optimism about the attainment of these goals.

First, the SDGs are not a continuation of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) but are quite different as they cover a much wider canvas – advanced and developing countries – compared to MDGs, which were confined to the developing world. The level of effort required to reach common understandings and resolve conflicts between these two groups with divergent interests is bound to be quite intense.

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Second, the MDGs, with only seven goals were focused on a main theme: to cut in half the proportion of the population living below the poverty line by 2015 compared to 1990. All other goals – universal primary education, gender equality and health – were aimed at contributing towards the overarching theme of poverty reduction. These goals were quantifiable, measurable and verifiable. The SDGs do not have any overarching theme or an integrative framework to encapsulate their 17 goals. The goals are too vague, unquantifiable and, therefore, are not amenable to measurement or verification and, hence, unattainable.

Third, these goals have been produced as a result of negotiations and consensus building among multiple stakeholders – 193 governments, UN agencies and multilateral organisations, private businesses, labour, NGOs, academics, etc. As each of these groups is wedded to their own single or multiple issues, the final outcome represents a contrived consensus accommodating all these diverse issues into an incoherent framework. The parts of the sum in this case exceed the sum itself.

Fourth, the danger in putting together a compilation in a linear fashion without evaluating the costs, benefits and the trade-offs involved is that the SDGs have become a 'wish list' that cannot be assailed. Who would, for example, disagree with the statement "[w]e resolve to build a better future for the millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives." Or "[p]eople who are vulnerable must be empowered." Would the elitist power structure and the political economy in countries such as Pakistan allow this to happen? Empirical evidence from countries that had made some advances such as Thailand, Turkey and Argentina, among, others, leads to quite the contrary conclusion. Entrenched groups usually displaced vulnerable groups from the spaces they were occupying.

Fifth, the international enabling environment today is more unfavourable compared to the buoyant and upbeat days of late 1990s and early 2000s when the MDGs were first announced. The global recession of 2008, the slowdown of economic activity throughout the world, the refugee and immigration crises, Brexit and stresses on the European Union, the popular perception that jobs in advanced countries are lost because of trade, the rise of nationalist sentiments in Europe and the US, the shifting economic balance in favour of China and Asia are pushing political leaders of these countries (US and European countries) to move away from greater integration with the rest of the world, thereby adopting an insular outlook.

Sixth, given this environment, resource availability to invest and finance these highly ambitious, costly and complex goals is going to be a major constraint. In 2015, official development assistance as well as private capital flows to developing countries declined. The political pressures are to help the poor and less privileged communities in their own countries rather than finance the kleptocratic regimes and tax evading elites of developing countries. The bill over implementing the SDGs over the next 15 years would spill into trillions of dollars.

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Seventh, is the a gigantic task for each country to determine its requirements, devise strategies, design plans, assess skills and finances, assign responsibilities and continuously track progress. Huge coordination among different tiers of the government, and between the government, and the private sector and civil society organisations, would be a herculean task for countries already facing capacity and implementation weaknesses.

What could have been a better option? As the MDG experience shows, it can be argued that the goal of cutting the proportion of the population living below the poverty line was successfully met by 2015, even if the rest of the goals were not as successful. The SDGs could have been improved through a stronger focus on the mitigation of inequality of incomes, gender, and regions damaging to both advanced and developing countries. All other goals should have been selected on the basis of their complementarity and contribution towards meeting this overarching theme. By 2030, the world might be a better place if eradication of poverty and mitigation of inequality were the main focus.