

**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS
AND POST 2015 DEVELOPMENT
AGENDA OF UNITED NATIONS;
SOME CONCERNS**



**Sustainable Development Goals and
Post 2015 Development Agenda of the
United Nations; Some Concerns**

Sustainable Development Goals and Post 2015 Development Agenda of United Nations; Some Concerns

February 2015
New Delhi, India

Editor: Ajay K Jha

©Copyright this publication can be reproduced for
non-commercial purposes citing and acknowledging the
writer/editor.

UN Conference on sustainable development in June 2013 set afoot a number of processes led by the UN with the primary objective of making the growth sustainable and inclusive, and integrate economic, social and environmental dimension of growth. The high level panel of eminent persons to look into unfinished agenda of the MDGs, discussions held by the President of the General Assembly, discussions on financing sustainable development etc were important among these processes. However, the most important of all these was setting up of the Open Working Group to formulate sustainable development goals (SDGs). The open working group was 30-seat group having 130 members including India onboard. It held comprehensive discussions with member states, UN agencies, experts & NGOs over 13 months and came up with Open Working Group proposals on the SDGs in July 2014. The proposal laid down 17 goals and 169 targets touching almost every aspect of development including poverty, inclusion, food security, trade, economy etc. these goals will be debated and negotiated during Jan to July 2015, to conclude in 69th session of the UNGA in September 2015.

Purpose of Sustainable Development Goals

The main message from the Rio Conference on sustainable development was economic growth has dominated over social and environmental aspects of growth, which resulted in failure in stemming poverty and adversely affected environment. In the light of this revelation, the main purpose of the open working group was to transform economies and traditional imaginations of growth in a manner, which will benefit all and will respect planetary boundaries. Accordingly the open working group adopted the inspirational slogan of “leave no one behind” from the title of the Report of the HLPE. However, the processes and the results till now belie this hope!

What are the Sustainable Development Goals

The proposal on the SDGs laid down 17 goals and 169 indicators. On one hand they look very comprehensive. It touches almost every aspect of development and growth. The goals relate to poverty elimination, ending hunger and achieving food security, health and well being, education, gender equality, access to water and sanitation, universal access to clean and affordable modern energy, sustained and inclusive economic growth and employment, resilient infrastructure and sustainable industrialization, inequality, sustainable cities, ensuring sustainable consumption and production patterns, urgent steps to combat climate change, sustainable use of ocean, seas and marine resources, sustainable terrestrial ecosystems, forests and biodiversity, peaceful and inclusive societies and access to justice etc. A tall order indeed! 17th goal is on means of implementation (MOI) including trade, finance, technical assistance, policy and institutional framework etc. targets are aligned with the goals, based on which indicators will be developed to make the progress measurable and monitorable. It is expected that countries will adapt these goals and targets to their respective national circumstances, priorities and requirements and implement them.

How are the SDGs Different from the MDGs

SDGs are different from MDGs in many respects. First and foremost, SDGs are universal as opposed to MDGs, which were to be implemented by poor and developing countries. In the MDGs, developed and rich countries were only responsible for providing leadership in mobilizing means of implementation. The MDGs had mixed outcomes. While in some countries it witnessed decent progress in poverty reduction, improving education and especially girls education, increasing access to basic services, in some countries it remained largely unachievable. It would be safe to surmise that MDGs success

was uneven and insufficient. The weakest link in the MDGs was the failure of international partnership, which aimed at mobilizing 0.7% of the GNP of developed countries for poor and developing countries (as decided by the Monterrey consensus, 2000). Few developed countries though performed better on their commitments and few countries (and regions) received better aid, largely international cooperation remained awfully short of what it could have achieved. At best it could mobilize only 0.3%. In the lack of financial commitments from developed countries, results of the MDGs were not completely unexpected. However, even in the face of this deficiency, most remarkable outcome of the MDGs was convergence of global political opinion on eliminating poverty, and splendid work at social and community level in many countries, and the anticipation it generated among the poor of the world.

SDGs are though definitely an improvement on the MDGs in terms of their coverage of issues and geographical area, international cooperation is more crucial here and without an enhanced and resolute commitment to provide means, it may be unable to deliver what it sets out to do.

What is Good about the SDGs

Sustainability is equally important in every part of the world and in each country whether rich or poor, all countries need to work in tandem, this acknowledgment sets SDGs far apart MDGs. Willingness to work together on contemporary and critical issues plaguing development viz. poverty reduction, food security, access to health and basic services, education, climate change and sustainable consumption and production patterns, in itself is highly inspirational. Make cities and industrialization sustainable and judicious use of marine and land ecosystem are equally laudable goals. Looking into economic architecture, trade disparities, ills of financial markets and institutions and advocating increasing voice of developing countries in global institutions, are few things,

which has been looked as part of the solutions for the first time in a global landscape. Reducing subsidies on fossil fuels and agricultural exports, stopping illicit finance flow, reducing remittance costs of the migrants etc are by far the most radical proposals coming from the UN. However, despite these marvelous suggestions, whether SDGs will be able to eradicate poverty and ensure equality, whether they will truly make the development inclusive, whether they can prevent overexploitation of natural resources and reverse the impact of economic growth on the environment, are the big questions. The bigger question is whether a quest for sustainable development in a world where the resources are finite, a worthwhile pursuit? Nobody has answer, but lets keep the hope afloat!

What are the Major Disappointments with the SDGs

Many of us believe that SDGs side step the gaping contemporary challenges, which demand nothing less than radical transformation of our views on life, living, economy and development. It requires fundamental changes in global economic and trade architecture and global governance. Tinkering global governance without an attempt to look into root causes of poverty, inequality and disempowerment, will only result in more business as usual. The primary cause of the ills of the world is neoliberal framework and logic of increasing profit from overexploitation of natural resources and labor, and concentration of wealth and power in few to the exclusion of large majority. Past few decades have given us ample undeniable evidences. These tendencies have resulted in concentration of wealth among 85 richest persons in the world as equal to the wealth in half of the world's population. These forces have enough influence on the process, which is why poor people are compelled to take global responsibility while the rich are only responsible to themselves. The SDGs are victim of forces, which strongly believe in maintaining *status quoism* with little tinkering. Looking for solutions in the same

framework, which is reason for the global decadence, is quite unwise. Unless these are addressed there can be no transformation.

If we look at goals in the light of current challenges and requirements, they look quite unambitious. Defining poverty in terms of income and that too at USD 1.25 per day reflects inadequate understanding of multidimensionality of poverty. Income of USD 1.25 per day may be livable in many parts of the world now, however, it will be penury in 15 years to come. Poverty coupled with inequality is the most persistent challenge today, SDGs is very soft on inequality and specially inequality among the countries. Goals on gender equality lack teeth in the absence of time bound targets (GE is the only goals with not targets aligned to timeline). Climate change remained the most talked about aspect in the open working group process; however, the goals make everything dependent on the outcomes of the UNFCCC negotiations. The global expectation from Paris agreement has already hit rockbottom, nobody believes that it can result in an agreement, which respects science and will allow development space for poor countries. The most important requirement to prevent runaway climate change is to stop wasteful energy use and significantly reduce fossil fuel driven energy and GHG emission, SDGs disappoint by not having anything to say on this.

International Commitment on Means of Implementation

Lack of MOI was the weakest link in the MDGs, in the prevailing circumstances SDGs too, are destined same fate. The requirements of developing and least developed countries for combating climate change, facing up disasters, and adopting low carbon development pathways is rising with each successive estimate. They need additional, enhanced, predictable long-term financial support, which looks difficult to come by. The goals emphasize on south- south cooperation and

resource mobilization from market and private sources, and the commitment of developed countries is stuck at Monterrey consensus (0.7% of the GNP to developing and LDCs), which is definitely not adequate. The role of private sector in mobilizing resources for almost each goal raises suspicion of their influence on the process, and whether this is to legitimize their income from the business of sustainable goals!

Politics in the SDGs Process

The open working group discussions manifested traditional clear lines of demarcation between the developed and developing countries. Even after more than one and half years of discussion, all issues are still open to being defined variously; an all conflicts ready to flare up. This division was clear on the issues of “universality vs. uniformity.” While developed countries stick to a narrow definition of universality and expect all countries to implement SDGs equally, developing countries have been arguing that universality does not mean uniformity and that similar application of same goals on countries, which are in different stages of their economic, social and political development will result in great inequality. They favour universality with developed countries providing leadership as far as means of implementation, SCP, removing inequality etc are concerned. This is also related to another big politics over common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR). Developed countries have argued that based on the Rio Earth Summit (1992) and Rio Declaration (2013), CBDR is an integral principle in debates over sustainable development, and requires developed countries to acknowledge historical responsibility, and though all countries will make efforts but they have to provide leadership by doing more. Any debate cannot avoid this basic principle, they insist. However, developed countries and specially USA has been clearly opposed to CBDR, which according to them applies only environmental area, they also define it as an outdated principle not reflecting current realities. They agree to a new definition of differentiation between the developed and developing

countries but insist that CBDR is a deal breaker.

In the discussions most talked about issue was climate change, however, the goal on climate change as stated earlier has hardly anything to discuss. Some developing countries including India and China and the USA are against having standalone goals on climate change. India insists that having a goal on climate change will bring more responsibility on the developing countries, and suggest having goals on drivers of climate change like energy, SCP, industrialization etc, well taken, but that has hardly reflected any impact on already weak goals and targets in these sectors. The USA is against taking any meaningful step with regard to emission reduction and its opposition to climate change goal is understood. The current stage makes everything dependent on climate negotiations outcome, which is palatable to all big players, as none of them hope stringent decisions at Paris.

Another controversial issue was goal 16 which now reads as “promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels,” as against the earlier title of “Rule of Law.....” Many developing countries including India and countries in situations of conflict were against “Rule of Law,” argued that it was not related to sustainable development, and liable to be used as an externality for countries in conflict resulting in incitement to violence and instability, and foreign occupation. More or less all countries seem satisfied with the current formulation.

Definitional implications of poverty and inequality also raised controversies and sharp divisions, as did gender equality, sexual and reproductive rights. Islamic countries and developing countries including India, argued against it, citing non-recognition of sexual rights of women in domestic religious, social and political settings. However, these rights were retained in non-threatening formulations due to insistence of global campaigns led by NGOs.

Politics also dominated the discussions on the MOI. Developed countries wanted to get away with perfunctory commitments on finances and by putting all responsibility on the FfD 3 to be held in July, 2015. Developed countries insist that shape of international cooperation has changed with more emphasis on south-south cooperation and mobilization of resources from market, private sector and financial markets. They also opposed having MOI aligned to each goal, which developing countries insisted for. However, despite the entire fracas, the goal on MOI is still very weak with no clear commitments!

Last but not the least, another aspect of political struggle is related to the question of leadership of the process, though much of it remained under wraps rather than upfront. While UN wants it to be a UN led process, member states are clearly not in agreement. The United Nations suggests that let the SDGs be simple, and its unfair to look for all the problems of the world in the process. It also wanted to limit the number of goals to 10. Its preference for simplicity and limited number of goals is based on convenience in communication, avoidance of politically sensitive issues so that they can be applicable globally conveniently. The UN wants SDGs to become an easy communication tool, which can be put on a single poster like the MDGs, therefore, 17 goals and 169 targets are little too many it can handle! Highly placed officer in the process cited ease of mobilizing global political opinion while shaping the MDGs created due to leadership of the UN, and wanted to emulate it in the SDGs process. However, simplicity can have reductionist effects, and member states, particularly, developing countries were convinced about it. They wanted to make the most of it. Failure of the UN to mobilize global partnership on the MDGs also might have attributed to member states fighting for member driven space than allow UN to have its cake. Developing countries have been categorically in favor of member led process and repulsed all efforts to undermine it. However, Secretary General's synthesis report on the SDGs confounded the confusion. The report brought out in December 2014 and titled "the road to dignity by 2030; ending poverty,

transforming all lives and protecting the planet” clubbed all the goals under six essential elements-Dignity, People, Planet, Partnership, justice and Prosperity. Many quipped, that the report does not reflect all the goals, and undermines a state led process. Confusion was also over whether this report would form the basis of further negotiation or the proposal coming out of the OWG. Though the report itself has reiterated that basis for further negotiation will be the proposal put forward by the OWG, however, in that event, many bewildered the utility of the report of the Secretary General.

What Happens Next

Many events are scheduled between January to June 2015 when the outcome document go under negotiation by the member states. A stocktaking was held in January, in February a declaration was discussed, in March SDGs will be discussed, while in April MOI and May Follow up and Review will form major discussions. The SDGs will be finalized in the Annual session of the UNGA in September 2015, and members will commit their political will in a Secretary Generals' Special Event on the SDGs. The goals will not be opened for further negotiation, and the discussion will be limited to indicators to be aligned with goals and targets. The member states will have a major role in the intergovernmental negotiations, with very little scope for other actors including NGOs.

What is Expected from India?

India has strongly put forward its arguments on poverty, inequality, SCP, MOI etc, which has helped the cause of developing countries. We expect India to continue doing this for further improvement in MOI. There are possibility of buy-outs from developed countries and specially the USA to remove the deadlock. However, we expect that India will stand in solidarity with developing countries providing them leadership and deflecting any such political traps.

India has also shown discomfort at certain issues like sexual and reproductive rights and climate change. While India's arguments are well taken, India will have to convince citizens that it will take serious look at these positions in its domestic policy space .India's legitimacy to leadership of developing countries will increase manifold when India leads by example in taking these issues forward at domestic and regional level. Till now the discussion on SDGs has been New York centric and limited to United Nations. We are yet to hear such discussions resonate at national level. For a country like India, its important that issues of such long term implications and wide sweep are debated nationally with the objective of arriving at national consensus. In this context, discussions at national and state levels will be desirable. India should also declare how it plans to adapt these goals based on national priorities. Equally important is taking along regional countries on these issues and discussing it regionally on bilateral and multilateral fora. It has been observed that India fell in isolation in many recent international negotiations in climate change, WTO etc. having a regional approach towards SDGs will gain political goodwill and support at international fora.

Last but not the least, issues like Sustainable development or climate change are hardly ever discussed in the Parliament, and are understood to be a privilege of the cabinet. However, informing the Parliament occasionally on position of the government of India and attempting a consensus will be a good beginning for transparency and improved understanding of peoples representatives on these contemporary challenges and efforts towards solutions.

