

Sustainable Development Goals – a useful outcome from Rio+20?

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Recent months have seen increasing interest in the idea that Rio+20 could be the launch pad for a new set of ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDGs). But what would SDGs cover, what would a process to define and then implement them look like, and what would some of the key political challenges be? This short briefing sets out a short summary of current thinking the issue, followed by thoughts about the way forward.

Background: what we currently know about SDGs

- ***The idea of SDGs has considerable political momentum.*** Energetic advocacy by the Colombian government – who first mooted the idea of SDGs – has created widespread awareness of the idea among member states, and the idea features prominently in the zero draft outcome document for the Rio+20 conference. The idea will gain a further push if the report of the UN High-level Panel on Global Sustainability, due to be published in late January, makes a strong recommendation in favour of SDGs (as its co-chair, President Halonen of Finland, has hinted). However, some key players at Rio 2012 are reserving judgement for now. The United States, emerging economies including China, and donors including the World Bank all fall into this category; India has gone further and indicated that it is actively opposed to quantitative SDGs. Goals that did not enjoy the support of these actors would struggle to gain traction.
- ***There is little clarity on what SDGs should cover.*** The Colombian proposal for SDGs suggested objectives on issue ‘clusters’ including atmosphere, climate resilience, land degradation, sustainable agriculture, biotechnology and waste. This approach would reaffirm existing multilateral commitments, such as those in the 1992 Rio Declaration and Agenda 21, but could also go further and call for more ambitious action in these areas. But this proposal leaves open the question of how SDGs would related to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
- ***One option would be for SDGs to address key sustainability ‘gaps’ in the MDGs, between now and 2015.*** The MDGs’ handling of sustainable development has often been criticised, with everything bundled into MDG 7, which was simply to “ensure environmental sustainability”. One suggestion for SDGs, then, is that they could add specificity to the MDGs by defining new Goals or sub-Goals on concrete areas missed out in the MDGs – for example, access to energy. Such Goals would run over the same timescale as the MDGs, to 2015, and then be folded in to the discussion on what happens after that date with no assumptions built in about SDGs beyond 2015.

- Alternatively, SDGs could become the successor framework to the MDGs.** Discussion of what should follow the MDGs after 2015 is now underway, with a post-2015 contact group chaired by Mexico and Japan up and running and a UN Task Force on the issue already in place. A High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on post-2015 is also planned, for launch after Rio+20.ⁱⁱ Some commentators have wondered whether SDGs might become the overall umbrella concept for post-2015 Goals, encompassing and replacing the MDGs after that date. The UN Secretary-General has backed this approach, saying in his opening to the General Assembly in 2011 “let us develop a new generation of sustainable development goals to pick up where the MDGs leave off”. Such an approach, say proponents, could allow the MDGs’ focus on poverty reduction to be matched by complementary targets on environment – whether on issue ‘clusters’, as in the Colombian proposal, or new analytical frameworks such as the nine ‘planetary boundaries’ proposed by the Stockholm Resilience Centre.ⁱⁱⁱ
- The idea of SDGs as the successor to the MDGs remains contentious.** Suggestions that SDGs could be the main ‘brand’ for a post-2015 set of development objectives have been met with significant push-back from some decision-makers in developing countries and international donors – many of whom expressed concern about the risk of dilution of the MDGs’ poverty focus, and the perceived risk that environment ministers end up “in charge” of what should follow the MDGs. These concerns reflect a long-standing wariness between the environment and development policy communities.^{iv} The idea of SDGs replacing the MDGs also appears to provide little room for a concentration on fragile states – despite new work by the World Bank showing that the majority of poor people now live in states or sub-regions affected by conflict.^v
- SDGs would probably be universal in their coverage.** Where the MDGs were focused solely on developing countries, discussions to date about SDGs strongly tend towards the idea that they would be universal – i.e. applicable to developing and developed countries alike. However, this still leaves a major question mark over whether SDGs would apply only to global issues, leaving them open to the charge of being largely rhetorical, or specifically to the policies of all 192 member states of the United Nations – which would significantly raise the political stakes (see below).
- SDGs could be one of relatively few concrete outcomes from Rio+20.** Six months away from the summit, the Rio+20 agenda – focused on the two areas of ‘green economy’ and ‘institutional framework for sustainable development’ – looks thin, with little consensus on what the summit could or should achieve. Against this backdrop, many governments and advocacy groups are likely to regard SDGs as a relatively achievable and tangible ‘win’.
- The zero draft outcome document for Rio+20 fudges the key design questions on SDGs.** At present, the draft does little to dispel the lack of clarity over the status and content of SDGs. The draft refers to SDGs that would be defined “by 2015”, rather than at Rio, and says they would “reflect an integrated and balanced treatment of the three dimensions of sustainable development” [i.e. social, economic and environmental]. But while this formulation appears to position SDGs as the successor to the MDGs, the draft goes on to say that SDGs “should complement and strengthen the MDGs in the development agenda for the post-2015 period”.

- ***The political context for multilateralism on sustainable development is difficult.*** The UNFCCC climate process has so far failed to make a major breakthrough on reducing global emissions. The 2011 G20 made limited progress on tackling food security and resource scarcity, despite French ambitions. The 2011 Commission on Sustainable Development broke up without an outcome despite a largely uncontentious agenda. These difficulties reflect a larger trend in multilateralism, with many politicians struggling to find the political space to rise above narrow national interests – in contexts from the Doha trade round to sovereign debt in the Eurozone. Continuing strong global economic headwinds would make these trends likely to continue and perhaps intensify.

Analysis and recommendations

As the brief analysis above sets out, there is considerable uncertainty about the politics, content and wider context of any set of Sustainable Development Goals. So how should policymakers proceed? Set out below are some tentative guiding principles and recommendations for how they could approach SDGs.

- ***A more integrated approach is long overdue.*** While the 1992 Rio Earth Summit promised to bring social, economic and environmental issues together into a coherent overall approach, this did not happen – an omission that became clear in the MDGs, which left out key issues in both the economic sphere (e.g. growth, jobs, private sector, inequality) and the environmental (e.g. climate change, water, biodiversity). More thought is also needed about how to connect the dots *between* social, environmental and economic goals – for example, ensuring equitable access to resources at a time when global consumption patterns are approaching (and in some cases exceeding) planetary boundaries in areas such as land use, climate stability, biodiversity loss and fresh water. In principle, a more integrated approach after 2015 would be a welcome step forward.
- ***But the politics are likely to be extremely challenging.*** While the policy arguments for a more ambitious and comprehensive set of Goals after 2015 may be compelling, the politics look much tougher than they were when the MDGs were defined. There have been few – if any – landmark multilateral outcomes on sustainable development in the last five years. And with the global economy still in the doldrums, the political context may be becoming harder rather than easier – especially in 2012, given US elections, a highly introspective EU, and economic slowdowns in emerging economies.
- ***The question of which countries would be covered by SDGs is a minefield.*** With any set of SDGs likely to be universal rather than applicable only to developing countries, major political challenges would arise. The MDGs demanded relatively little of OECD governments: all that was asked of them was aid, and relatively small amounts of it at that. A more comprehensive set of post-2015 Goals, on the other hand, would need to look “beyond aid” – entailing changes to domestic policies in sensitive areas like migration, trade, intellectual property, or energy policy. The vexed issue of “common but differentiated responsibilities” would certainly arise along the way – perhaps bedevilling post-2015 discussions as it already has the Doha round and the UNFCCC climate process (though an optimist might argue that a universal approach could help debate to move past the rigid and outdated typology of ‘developed’ and ‘developing’ countries).

- **Take a gradual approach and don't try to do everything at once in Rio.** If policymakers do decide at Rio that they want SDGs to become a more ambitious and comprehensive set of Goals from 2015 onwards, then the draft Rio+20 outcome document is surely right to suggest that these should be agreed by 2015 – *not* at Rio itself. The question of what follows the MDGs after 2015 is complex, politically sensitive, and involves multiple constituencies with diverse interests. It is essential that enough time is taken to build shared awareness between these constituencies and secure buy-in to the emerging post-2015 agenda – not just among the development and environment policy communities, but also among publics, media, the private sector, heads of government and other players in the broader political context (most of whom remain largely disengaged from, or even unaware of, the post-2015 discussion). Any set of post-2015 Goals that fails to secure enough support among these actors will be stillborn.
- **Be careful of setting precedents with unintended consequences.** Some governments are enthusiastic about the idea that governments could use Rio+20 to agree one or two SDGs, for example on energy (where the Secretary-General's 'Sustainable Energy for All' initiative has acquired considerable momentum). This idea may seem innocuous, especially if the Goals would only run to 2015. But it would also create a precedent, of global development Goals being negotiated inter-governmentally. This was *not* the approach taken with the MDGs, where governments instead set the political context (in the Millennium Declaration), but left the work of concrete goal-setting to an expert group. If this precedent were abandoned, two risks would arise. One would be that the post-2015 development framework could become a "Christmas tree", with so many Goals that any sense of priorities is lost. The other is that some key elements of the MDGs – for instance gender equality and access to reproductive health services – might be lost, given that by no means all governments support these objectives.
- **No SDGs should be agreed unless backed up by a clear delivery plan.** The architects of the MDGs recognised that the Goals would be seen as mere rhetoric unless their agreement was swiftly followed by a robust delivery plan, with clarity on who was accountable for what. Any set of SDGs should be based on the same foundation. Yet it is not yet clear that advocates of a comprehensive set of SDGs even know yet what would need to be included in such a delivery plan. If agreed SDGs came to be seen as no more than warm words, this could actively undermine the achievability of future multilateral progress on sustainable development.
- **Above all, be careful not to risk losing the MDGs' poverty focus.** While policy arguments for a more broad and comprehensive set of development Goals may be compelling, there are also clear risks that such an ambitious approach might not succeed. If that does happen, it is essential that progress to date on the MDGs is not imperilled, and that a clear policy framework is still put in place for tackling the poverty that will, in 2015, still afflict over 800 million people. This would still leave the option of scaling up ambition again dramatically if more political space opened up – but would also ensure that the existing strong international focus on poverty reduction, and the very real progress that has been made since 2000, is protected.

Conclusion

Many policymakers involved in the run-up to Rio+20 appear to regard Sustainable Development Goals as an “easy win”, amid a generally difficult political context for the conference and a dearth of concrete ideas for outcomes.

This briefing suggests a need for real caution about such a view, however. While there are good reasons to explore a more comprehensive and integrated set of Goals beyond 2015, policymakers should use Rio+20 to focus on broad principles and on raising the level of ambition – not on attempting to rush into specifics without adequate preparation. This is a time to play a long game, not to go for quick wins that could all too easily backfire.

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ⁱⁱ The UN Task Force on the post-2015 agenda is chaired by Olav Kjørven (UNDP) and Jomo Sundaram (DESA).

ⁱⁱⁱ See <http://www.nature.com/news/specials/planetaryboundaries/index.html>. The nine planetary boundaries covered by the framework are stratospheric ozone layer; biodiversity; chemicals dispersion; climate change; ocean acidification; freshwater; land system change; the nitrogen and phosphorus cycles; and atmospheric aerosols.

^{iv} Available at http://www.cic.nyu.edu/scarcity/docs/evans_steven_rio.pdf

^v World Bank, *World Development Report 2011: Conflict, Security and Development*. Washington, DC: 2011.