Lost in Transformation? The Politics of the Sustainable Development Goals

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On September 25, 2015, the world's leaders adopted a new suite of development goals—the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)—that are to guide policymakers for the next decade and a half. On first inspection, the declaration is breathtaking in its scope and ambition. Constituted by a list of 17 goals and 169 targets, it is arguably the most comprehensive global agenda adopted since the UN Charter in 1945. Its thematic repertoire ranges from poverty, health, education, and inequality, to energy, infrastructure, climate change, marine resources, peace, security, and good governance. The UN Secretary-General welcomed the SDGs by praising their "universal, transformative, and integrated agenda" that heralded a "historic turning point for our world."[1]

The most striking aspect of the new agenda is its universalist conception of sustainable development. Only half of the targets are modeled in the traditional and reciprocal vein of the MDGs. In that paradigm, less developed countries were tasked with halving or eliminating various indices of underdevelopment, while developed states made promises to boost aid, provide debt relief, and engage in trade reforms and technology transfers. In the new agenda we still find this standard approach. For example, there are targets to eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere by 2030 and end all forms of malnutrition by 2025. However, many commitments in the SDGs now apply to states regardless of their level of

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development and extend across the agenda's "three big buckets" of tackling poverty, protecting the planet, and ensuring prosperity for all. Naturally, some of these universal targets concern the environment, given its inherently global nature. The SDGs commit all governments to tackle climate change, protect water-related ecosystems, halve per capita food waste, double energy efficiency, and so on. Yet many of the universal targets focus on issues that have traditionally been considered "domestic" or outside the domain of sustainable development. The reduction of income inequality and death rates, the elimination of discriminatory laws and domestic violence, the management of urbanization, and the facilitation of "orderly, safe, regular, and responsible" migration are cast as challenges for all states to address. The pertinence of these targets is underlined by the daily headlines on the refugee crisis, police violence, and discrimination in many highly developed states.

Despite the praise that this new agenda has received, this latest iteration of target-driven global policymaking faces two principal critiques. The first and most common relates to the sheer number of commitments. The danger is that states have created the proverbial "Christmas tree"—an agenda that is more decorative than communicative and operational. The second is that behind the facade of proclamations lurk various political compromises that could undermine the discursive and institutional strength of the agreement. The agenda may be big, but is it truly transformative? This essay takes up both concerns and offers some reflections on the SDG's potential impact.

Competing Design Logics

When discussions on the successor to the MDGs began in mid-2009, the breadth of the final agenda was far from anticipated. Leading MDG enthusiasts such as Jeffrey Sachs proposed a mere extension of the deadline for ten years, to 2025. One of the MDG architects, Jan Vandemoortele, called for simple and subtle tweaks in order to better address issues of equity.[2] My modest proposal at the time—to expand the number of goals from eight to ten—was decried by Vandemoortele as excessive.[3] Yet, as more formally worked-through proposals materialized in nongovernmental and intergovernmental forums in early 2012, the average number soon drifted upward to twelve or more. By late 2012 the UN Secretary-General had listed an even larger set of themes, many of which

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were transformed by mid-2014 into draft goals and targets by the UN General Assembly's Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals.

The reaction in many quarters to the draft agenda, stuffed with 17 goals and 169 targets, was one of astonishment. In the 2012 Rio Declaration, states had committed themselves to fashioning a concise and communicable agenda. Instead, as Charles Kenny lamented during the process, "The overwrought and obese drafts proposed by negotiating committees so far almost ensure that the post-2015 goals will have comparatively limited value and impact."[4] Communicating close to two hundred targets to any audience is a public relations challenge that would test the most accomplished politician, technocrat, intellectual, or activist.

Moreover, communicative power is only one benefit of simplicity. As I have argued elsewhere, the conciseness of the MDGs permitted the international community to engage in a form of policymaking that might be called "boosting."[5] By drawing up a short thematic list, certain long-neglected issues were given prominence. The limited evidence on the impact of the MDGs suggests that this agenda was most effective in accelerating progress in traditionally marginalized policy areas such as sanitation and maternal mortality.[6] However, adopting a pragmatic, evidence-based approach to the design of the SDGs proved a bridge too far. The UN High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda set the tone for the debate in 2012, failing to articulate any clear evidence-based criteria for choosing between various proposed goals and targets. Moreover, donors missed a window of opportunity to support systematic and actionable research on the impact of the MDGs.

The desire for communicability or pragmatism may be wishful thinking. In retrospect, the final bloated outcome of the SDG negotiations should not come as a surprise. The first reason is that the SDGs clearly express and embody the long frustration with the reductionism of the MDGs. While the simplicity of the MDGs, with their concise time-bound and outcome-based targets, was initially hailed for its "catalytic effect" and "real-time accountability,"[7] it also generated its fair share of detractors.[8] The complaints were numerous: the largely unambitious targets were met easily by middle-income states; the international commitments for developed states were devoid of any numerical bite; the limited indicators set for the various targets created perverse incentives for implementation; the narrow thematic focus distracted attention from previous state commitments; and the minimalistic message entrenched rather than denaturalized the structural determinants of poverty and environmental harm. Ashwani Saith

decried the MDGs as a systematic "betrayal" of the universal values and rights embodied in the Millennium Declaration,[9] and the Caribbean gender activist Peggy Antrobus relabeled the MDGs as the "Most Distracting Gimmick."[10]

This reaction is nothing new in the history of global target-setting. If we examine the *longue durée* of target-setting in the international water sector, for example, the seesawing between minimalism and maximalism is the only constant.[11] In the 1980s all states set a simple goal of substantially reducing the number of people without access to a basic water supply and sanitation. This was followed in the 1990s by an expanded and strengthened set of water targets that sought to eliminate structural inequities in access and to address a host of environmental water and waste management issues. In the following decade, the aspirations were radically downsized to the simple MDG target of halving the basic access gap. And finally, in 2015 the SDGs announced a new goal with six wide-reaching targets that strikingly resemble the forgotten targets of the 1990s. Policy design seems stuck in a perpetual pendulum swing. Dissatisfaction with the prior regime disproportionately shapes the formulation of the new one.

The second reason the SDGs became so expansive is that the process of drafting them was highly participatory. Early calls for an expert-like global commission that would balance ambition and thrift were not heeded.[12] The UN High-Level Panel resembled a commission of sorts, but the groundswell of demand for a more participatory process could not be (reasonably) ignored. One of the recurring criticisms of the MDGs was the closeted nature of their genesis. Based on the Millennium Declaration (loosely at times) and developed by a number of UN insiders, the MDGs were endorsed by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan with no public discussion. This fast-track process irked not only civil society but also member states. It took the General Assembly a full four years before it formally endorsed the MDGs as a legitimate product of the Millennium Declaration. With the SDGs, however, the process was highly open. Throughout 2012 and 2013, the United Nations facilitated what seemed like the first exercise in global participatory democracy, organizing fifty-plus country consultations, multiple global thematic consultations, and a worldwide online citizen survey—all of which were accompanied by numerous parallel NGO, expert, and state initiatives. Likewise, the General Assembly took seriously its deliberative task. Despite the formal limitation of the working group to fifty states, almost the entire community of states was engaged in the process in the first half of 2014.

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The open nature of the process also permitted civil society organizations, UN agencies, and private corporations to engage at multiple points and stages in the drafting. A staggering range of diverse interests were promoted and defended by these actors. To take one example, the human rights community not only mobilized globally but employed permanent staff in New York to engage in lobbying. This strategy represented a marked change from the cold shoulder that the human rights community had given to the MDGs when they were adopted. The ultimate prominence of the MDGs, however, caused a deep rethink. Leading human rights figures such as Philip Alston chastised human rights advocates for not recognizing the opportunities in the MDGs, calling on the community to "engage more effectively" and "prioritize" concrete development concerns rather than overly "prescriptive" norms.[13] By the middle of the decade, leading organizations and scholars began to promote rights-based approaches in implementing MDG targets and the framing of the post-2015 agenda. These groups were also better placed to overcome one of the key arguments that had been used earlier to block demands for the inclusion of human rights in a global development agenda: lack of data.[14] Over the last decade there has been a growth in quantitative human rights measurement and broad calls by the UN Secretary-General and the High-Level Panel for a "data revolution." In the lead-up to the SDGs, the former created an advisory panel to advise him on ways to improve data for achieving and monitoring sustainable development.[15]

The third reason for the broad scope of the SDGs was the introduction of international state politics into the agenda design, which created the conditions for "progressive" deadlock. One way of advancing a more ambitious post-2015 agenda was for states to ratchet up (rather than down) trade-offs over desired targets.[16] A similar phenomenon produced, for instance, the comprehensive and transformative Convention on the Rights of the Child in 1989. The Western and Eastern blocs prioritized *inclusion* of their preferred rights rather than *exclusion* of the other side's proposals. Precisely the same process occurred with the SDGs. A glance at the goal on inequality reveals an abundance of diverse progressive interests among different states. Western states prioritized political inclusiveness and the removal of discrimination at the *domestic level*; the G-77, led by China, prioritized equality for developing countries at the *international* level (for example, representation in international financial institutions and fairer trade rules). When the deal was done in mid-2014 almost all states decried the number of goals and targets, yet none expressed willingness to trade off its own favored goals and targets.

It was a stalemate. Only minor linguistic adjustments were made to the final list despite repeated (but vague) exhortations by some states to slim down the agenda.[17]

Finally, the normative premise for the MDGS was no longer tenable. The MDGs were predicated on the unidirectional transfer of resources from developed countries to developing ones. It was a model of development grounded in ideas of benevolent charity, humanitarian cosmopolitanism, and/or historical injustice. However, the universal strains of the SDGs represent an acknowledgment that progress on sustainable development must draw on a deeper theoretical base.

The new goals represent instead a form of *institutional cosmopolitanism*.[18] Developed states and their citizens recognize their own contributions to global harm: for example, excessive consumption, secretive financial regimes, and harsh migration policies. Yet the approach they take is preventative rather than remedial. The root causes are identified in global structures and are to be tackled at the source. Some universal targets are also grounded instrumentally in the idea of *global public goods*.[19] Global action to preserve and promote certain goods— such as the environment, health, economic growth, safe and secure migration— will benefit the citizens of all states. Theories of poverty that focus on *domestic politics* have also found a place.[20] The rise of middle-income states and the persistence of poverty within them blunts some arguments about the potential effectiveness of international aid.[21] The proportional value of any foreign monetary aid to these countries is comparatively low while their expanded economic base reveals their capacity to generate internally resources for sustainable development and to address inequalities.[22] The SDGs thus recognize explicitly that progress on development will require internal and domestic institutional reform. By way of example, the target on enhanced foreign aid in Goal 17 is now preceded by a target on improved domestic tax and revenue collection.[23] *Legally*, the human rights movement has demanded greater coherence between development policy and human rights treaties. This was acknowledged by states in the 2012 Rio Declaration, which set out the framework for drafting the agenda. The upshot is that international human rights law emerged as an important source of inspiration for new targets. Many human rights and feminist NGO groups defend the breadth of the agenda for this reason, noting how the expansion of themes has ushered in the sensitive topic of sexual and reproductive rights and some civil and political rights,[24] and a greater sensitivity to equality and nondiscrimination.

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Ultimately, the most important question for the SDGs is one of effectiveness. Does the agenda, and the theory of change embedded in the SDGs, hold promise? Or are its transformational elements mere chimeras that occlude a more conservative and reductionist agenda, as some have claimed?[25] Unfortunately, there are good reasons to be skeptical. A closer look at the agenda shows that the strides made in incorporating human rights and other progressive causes are, in fact, moderate. The goals are weak on global partnership and the corresponding targets are rarely quantified, again. Moreover, the universal targets across the SDGs are often vague. Take, for example, Target 10.1, on reducing income inequality. States are given time to start reducing income equality, but there is no quantitative target as to the rate of reduction.[26] Certain language choices similarly constrain the reach of the agenda. For example, China was quite successful in ensuring there was no mention of "democracy" in the draft. The related commitments in Goal 16 ("Promote just, peaceful, and inclusive societies") are moderate and open to different interpretations.

Moreover, the new institutional framework for monitoring progress is not a radical improvement on its predecessor. The document promises a "robust, effective, inclusive, and transparent" follow-up and review framework, but what follows is a rather wan reflection of these benchmarks. The review framework is purely one of periodic monitoring, and it is voluntary.[27] It does not set out the rights to civil society participation in the process, and fails to mention or legitimate broader forms of political, judicial, administrative, media, and economic accountability that would help ensure the goals are actually met.

Given this monitoring framework and the multitude of targets, the central feature of the review process will be the indicators. Try and imagine the process. Diplomats, UN agencies, various experts, and civil society organizations from 190-plus states will descend on New York in regular intervals to slog through 169 targets. It is hard to envision anything other than data-heavy PowerPoint slides, replete with graphics. This is acceptable if the indicators are well-chosen, valid, and reliable. But that assumption is shaky, at best. The problem is that states failed to set any criteria for indicator selection or give any guidelines to the UN technocrats and national statisticians tasked with selecting the indicators. Close followers of this process will recall that the selection of indicators for the MDGs was marked by bureaucratic politics, with notable

divisions between and within international agencies and national statistical agencies.[28]

The difficulties in measuring progress became evident in the first UN proposal for 100 indicators—69 fewer than the final number of targets. The second proposal from the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on SDG Indicators raised the number to 159. However, 48 targets were still excluded, as some targets were allocated two indicators each.[29] Moreover, even when a target was covered, not all of its elements were measured. As in 2001, the criterion of affordability has been dropped from the measurement of access to water in Goal 6, despite considerable advances in such measurement. Some promising indicators, such as the Inclusive Wealth Index, were also dropped in the third and final proposal of February 2016.[30]

That said, there may be some reasons for cautious optimism regarding the effectiveness of the SDGs. The first is that the new agenda provides an institutional framework for global *sectoral planning*. Multiple epistemic communities have now secured "their" goal. The targets within each goal provide a meta-template for legitimating certain objectives and prioritizing donor and possibly country resources. The clearest end-users of the document are the sectorial web of UN agencies, national departments, NGOs, and private sector actors focused on singular themes.

The second is that some indicator proposals have improved during the consultation process. For example, in Goal 16 one of two indicators to measure the target of "responsive, inclusive, participatory, and representative decision-making at all levels" was the important but seemingly irrelevant indicator of proportion of countries addressing young people's "multisectoral needs."[31] In the second round of consultations in December 2015, three other alternatives were considered. Surprisingly, one was the proportion of voter participation in elections. Such an approach fails to take account of countries with compulsory voting or one-party systems, or of various theories as to levels of voter participation. In the end, despite being pushed by the African bloc with the support of a number of UN agencies, the proposal was not accepted. Instead, the more sensible indicator of the "proportion of population who believe decision-making is inclusive and responsive" was included. Moreover, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group stated that "It is envisaged that further methodological work will be conducted with a view to continuously improving the indicators and the availability of data."[32] This creates an important political and expert space for indicator development.

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Notably, it covers the so-called Tier III indicators, for which an internationally agreed methodology has not yet been agreed.

The third reason for optimism is that this integrated and broader *normative consensus* on development is backed by an array of civil society actors that possess a particular interest in the norms for which they have fought. As Beth Simmons has argued in relation to international human rights treaties, it is the uptake by domestic social actors that is pivotal for compliance with international commitments.[33] Likewise, Varun Gauri has argued that when international development targets are made "psychologically salient" they have the opportunity to shift public opinion, and thus formal politics.[34] The normative gains within the SDGs provide, therefore, a political resource for selectively defending and promoting targets that require greater attention or legitimation.

NOTES

[1] *Consensus Reached on New Sustainable Development Agenda to Be Adopted by World Leaders in September*, UN Department of Public Information, August 2, 2015.
[2] Jan Vandemoortele, "If Not the MDGs, Then What?" *Third World Quarterly* 32, no. 1 (2011), pp. 9–25.
[3] Jan Vandemoortele's comment was in response to my presentation in Brussels in June 2009, which was later published as "A Poverty of Rights: Six Ways to Fix the MDGs," *IDS Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (2010), pp. 83–91.
[4] Charles Kenny, "MDGs to SDGs: Have We Lost the Plot?" *Politica Exterior*, No. 163 (2015), www.cgdev.org/publication/mdgs-sdgs-have-we-lost-plot.
[5] See my discussion in *The Art of the Impossible: Measurement Choices and the Post-2015 Development Agenda*, OHCHR/UNDP Expert Consultation, New York, November 13–14, 2012, papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=2208314.
[6] Ibid. Notably, it is difficult to find any causal evidence that the MDGs contributed to progress in areas that were already highly visible, such as extreme poverty or HIV/AIDS. See the argument on the improvements in extreme poverty in Shaohua Chen and Martin Ravallion, *The Developing World Is Poorer than We Thought but No Less Successful in the Fight against Poverty*, Policy Research Working Paper 4703 (Washington, D.C.: World Bank, 2008).
[7] Mark Malloch Brown, "Foreword," in Richard Black and Howard White, eds., *Targeting Development: Critical Perspectives on the Millennium Development Goals* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. xviii–xix, at p. xviii.
[8] See, e.g., Thomas Pogge, "The First United Nations Millennium Development Goal: A Cause for Celebration?" *Journal of Human Development* 5, no. 5 (2004), pp. 377–97; Barbara Crossette, "Reproductive Health and the Millennium Development Goals: The Missing Link," *Family Planning* 36, no. 1 (2005), pp. 71–79; Amnesty International, *From Promises to Delivery: Putting Human Rights at the Heart of the Millennium Development Goals* (London: Amnesty International, 2010). See also Fredman, Kuosmanen, and Campbell in this issue.
[9] Ashwani Saith, "From Universal Values to Millennium Development Goals: Lost in Translation," *Development and Change* 37, no. 6 (2006), pp. 1167–199.
[10] Peggy Antrobus, "MDGs—The Most Distracting Gimmick," in Women's International Coalition for Economic Justice, *Seeking Accountability on Women's Human Rights: Women Debate the Millennium Development Goals* (New York: WICEJ, 2004), pp. 14–16, at p. 14.
[11] See Malcolm Langford and Inga Winkler, "Muddying the Water? Assessing Target-Based Approaches in Development Cooperation for Water and Sanitation," *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* 15, no. 2–3 (2014), pp. 247–60.
[12] Jan Vandemoortele and Enrique Delamonica, "Taking the MDGs Beyond 2015: Hasten Slowly," *IDS Bulletin* 41, no. 1 (2010), pp. 60–69.

[13] Philip Alston, "Ships Passing in the Night: The Current State of the Human Rights and Development Debate Seen through the Lens of the Millennium Development Goals," *Human Rights Quarterly* 27, no. 3 (2005), pp. 755–829, at p. 755.

[14] Jan Vandemoortele, "The MDG Story: Intention Denied," *Development and Change* 42, no. 1 (2011), pp. 1–21, at p. 4.

[15] See *A World That Counts: Mobilising The Data Revolution for Sustainable Development*, Report prepared at the request of the UN Secretary-General, by the Independent Expert Advisory Group on a Data Revolution for Sustainable Development, November 2014.

[16] I suggested this approach in Langford, 'Poverty of Rights', note 3 above

[17] In the June 2015 session, a mostly Northern grouping argued that there should be flexibility to revise the goals and targets (Japan, Norway, Iceland, U.S., Mexico, Canada, Latvia, EU, New Zealand, Australia, U.K., and Turkey). But the opposite view was expressed by a Southern grouping with two European states (Group of 77 and China, Egypt, Turkey, Timor-Leste, Saudi Arabia, Uruguay, South Africa, Brazil, Peru, the Russian Federation, Switzerland, Arab States, Ecuador, Colombia, Korea, Greece, Argentina, and Israel).

[18] Thomas Pogge, "Cosmopolitanism and Sovereignty," *Ethics* 103, no. 1 (1992), pp. 48–75, at p. 49.

[19] Inga Kaul, Pedro Conceição, Katell Le Goulven, and Ronald Mendoza, eds., *Providing Global Public Goods: Managing Globalization* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[20] John Rawls, *The Law of Peoples* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001).

[21] Andy Sumner, "Where Do the Poor Live?" *World Development* 40, no. 5 (2012), pp. 865–77.

[22] See our discussion in Malcolm Langford, Alicia Yamin, and Andy Sumner, "Back to the Future: Reconciling Paradigms or Development as Usual?" in Langford, Yamin, and Sumner, eds., *The Millennium Development Goals and Human Rights: Past, Present and Future* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2013), pp. 539–58.

[23] Target 17.1.

[24] Although the draft only refers to sexual health. Nonetheless, it does refer to reproductive rights.

[25] See, e.g., Sakiko Fukuda-Parr, "The 2030 Agenda and SDGs—A Course Correction?" *African Agenda* 18, no. 4 (2015), pp. 5–6. At a minimum, an apologist might claim that the SDGs do not regress on most existing commitments, unlike the MDGs. However, it is hard to imagine that so much was invested in a new agenda in order to simply hold the ideational line.

[26] See also Ed Anderson in this issue.

[27] See further comments on this by Way and Donald in this issue.

[28] Mark Orkin, "Goal 9: Democratic Governance and Accountable Institutions for Realising Human Rights," in W. Lim, ed., *One World Goals: Post-2015 Development Agenda* (Seoul: Korea Development Institute, 2014).

[29] See discussion in Social Watch, "SDG Indicators: Counting the Trees, Hiding the Forest," November 11, 2015, www.socialwatch.org/node/17100.

[30] See discussion in Barbara Adams and Karen Judd, *2030 Agenda and the SDGs: indicator framework, monitoring and reporting,* Global Policy Watch Briefing #10, 18 March 2016.

[31] "Open Consultation on Grey Indicators, Compilation of Inputs by the Observers of IAEG-SDGs and Other Stakeholders, December 9–15, 2015."

[32] *Report of the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goal Indicators*, UN doc. E/CN.3/2016/2/Rev.1, 19 February 2016, para. 31.

[33] Beth Simmons, *Mobilizing for Human Rights: International Law in Domestic Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[34] Varun Gauri, *MDGs That Nudge: The Millennium Development Goals, Popular Mobilization and the Post-2015 Development Framework*, World Bank Policy Research Working Paper No. 6282, presented at the OHCHR/UNDP Expert Consultation, New York, November 13–14, 2012.

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