

MISSING OUT ON REFERENCE TO SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AGENDA (SDA) FROM THE AGREED TEXT OF PARIS UNFCCC

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[Abstract: The discussion note titled “A Critical Note on Transition from Millennium Development Goals Agenda to Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda” had stressed on the need to streamline the UN system for effective implementation of the SDA. The United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) has been specifically acknowledged in SDA Goal 13 as the primary forum which will take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts. In its Agreed Text of December 2015, the Paris Meet of UNFCCC omitted making a reference to SD Goal 13, reflecting that the UN system is yet to sensitise itself to involve respective forums for a co-ordinated approach to the implementation of the SDA.]

On 1st August 2015 world leaders gathered at the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and made a commitment to adopt an agenda for the period 2015–30 for sustainable development, thereby seeking to transform the world.¹ Over the course of years, stakeholders identified the 17 goals, 169 targets and 304 proposed indicators contained in the Agreed Text, which represent a unique global consensus. However, it is not discernible from the Agreed Text if the goals are interconnected so as to provide a coherent course.

Economic growth is included as the Eighth Goal, though with several caveats such as to make growth sustainable and inclusive with full and productive employment as well as decent work for all. In other words, economic growth during the Agenda period is visualised to be equitably shared and sustainable, both environmentally and socially. With these caveats in mind, GDP growth is set to be one of the 17 goals—a goal towards which the world community should be committed to developing broader measures of progress to complement GDP. Target

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¹ Sardana, M.M.K. (2015), “A Critical Note on Transition from Millennium Development Goals Agenda to Post 2015 Sustainable Development Goals Agenda,” ISID Discussion Note DN2015/07, September.

19 of Goal 17 explicitly aims at building on existing initiatives to develop measurements of progress on sustainable development that complement GDP and support building up of requisite statistical capacity.² Thus, single-minded emphasis on GDP growth that has dominated national policies is no longer appropriate. GDP is a measure of marketed economic activity. Such activities which bring out negativity in the form of crime, pollution and inequality need to get discounted and excluded. When these costs are accounted for through an appropriate accounting system, one will find that there has been no real growth in the global economy for decades. Real economy is much larger than market economy by GDP estimates. GDP was never conceptualized as a measure of overall societal well-being.³

In real economy, there are several natural assets and resources in the ecosystem which contribute to human well-being, but which do not figure in GDP calculations. However, these resources and assets are wantonly used and expended thoughtlessly, which result in irreversible losses. According to an estimate, since 1997, the world has lost, on an average, ecosystem services worth \$20 trillion per year.⁴

Apart from the attenuation of ecosystem services, there are direct and visible fallouts. For example, nation states are in the grip of conflicts of differing intensities occasioned by the development processes that bring about inequalities, which not only worsen social problems, but also prove to be a setback to social capital, thus degrading the overall quality of life. Owing to loss of social capital, such costs are, in effect, costs against GDP growth. In the context of deteriorating social and natural assets, most of the gains in GDP over the last several decades have gone to the top

² Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform (2015), "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs. Available at: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld>

³ Costanza, R. (2015), "'Uneconomic' Growth and an Alternative to GDP," *The Canberra Times*, October 06.

⁴ *Ibid.*

one per cent of income earners, while the remaining 99 per cent have seen stagnant real incomes.⁵

DN 2015/07⁶ has brought out that the UN should gear up to meet the twin challenge of tackling a long overdue backlog of reforms included in the MDG and of implementing the post 2015 Agenda. The adopted text of August 1 has explicitly acknowledged (in relation to Goal 13 of combating climate change and its impacts) that the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international government forum for negotiating the global response to climate change. A reference to the Agreed Text of August 2015 on SDA in the Agreed Text of 12 December 2015 (at the Paris meet of the UNFCCC) would have been in order and in the nature of re-emphasizing that various UN forums should make SDA a central theme in order to ensure a co-ordinated approach to the implementation of the Agenda. This will make the respective forums accountable to the Agenda, which, in turn, will promote compliance with agreed actions and stimulate learning on how to realise goals that are less clearly defined and/or require collective action under global framework. All stakeholders of the post 2015 Agenda will have to regularly report, review and conduct follow-up sessions with regard to the post 2015 accountability framework.

Moving forward, sector specific UN forums could build accountability for their respective sectors using the SDG accountability framework. The omission of a reference to Goal 13 of SDA in the Agreed Text at Paris UNFCCC is symptomatic of the fact that despite the demonstrated commitment of the world leaders to implement the post 2015 Agenda, the urgency has yet to strike the respective UN forums towards a co-ordinated approach for optimum outcome. The UN will have to work out a way to convey the message about the significance and necessity of the SDA to all Member Forums, much before the High-level Political Review due in late 2016.

⁵ *Op. cit.* 3

⁶ *Op. cit.* 1