# A CRITICAL NOTE ON TRANSITION FROM MILLENNIUM DEVELOPMENT GOALS AGENDA TO POST 2015 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AGENDA

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*[**Abstract:** World leaders are meeting in New York from September 25–27 to adopt the post 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda for the period 2015–30 as contained in the Acceptance Document finalised by the UN on August 01, 2015. This Agenda is the sequel to the Millennium Development Goals Agenda which was adopted by the world leaders in the year 2000 for the period ending December 31, 2015. This Discussion Note is a critical commentary on the proposed Agenda.]*

The Millennium Development Goals Report 2015 (MDG) and the finalised text for adoption of the 2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) have appeared in quick succession in July and August 2015.

The MDG Report notes that the global mobilisation behind the goals has produced the most successful antipoverty movement during the period 2000–2015. In the year 2000, the world community had resolved to 'spare no effort to free our fellow men, women and children from the abject and dehumanizing conditions of extreme poverty'. Accordingly, eight specific goals and wide ranging programmes to improve their lives and future prospects were created. With the deadline for goal achievement fast approaching (December 31, 2015), it is being assumed that more than one billion people have been lifted out of extreme poverty, inroads have been made against hunger, more girls are attending school than ever before, and, there is a felt need for protecting the planet. The MDG Report attributes the success of effective goal-setting to the galvanised public opinion that resulted in innovative partnerships and display of the immense value of setting ambitious goals. The governments of developed as well as developing countries in their planning process gave precedence to the immediate needs of their people in order to influence their

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decision-making. The MDG Report acknowledges that despite achievements, inequalities persist and progress has been uneven. Of nearly a billion extremely poor people across the world, about 60 per cent remain overwhelmingly concentrated in just five countries, namely India, Nigeria, China, Bangladesh and Congo and in that order. Too many women continue to die from causes related to pregnancy like child birth related complications, etc. Progress tends to bypass women, especially those at the lowest rung of the economic ladder and/or those in a disadvantageous position because of age, disability or ethnicity. Disparities between urban and rural areas remain pronounced. The MDG Report, however, does not analyse the reasons for substantial shortfall in such achievements of stated goals but pins hope on Sustainable Development Agenda (SDA) 2015 which will be finalised by the Heads of State at the meeting to be held in September. Drawing on the experience gained by the world community in the MDG achievement efforts, the SDA will crave for political will and collective long-term effort to tackle root causes and integrate the economic and social dimensions of sustainable development.[1]

On the eve of approving the Agenda for the post MDG era in the form of SDA, a pertinent feature has to be taken into account. Employment growth has not kept pace with the labour force growth rate. The global employment to population ratio has fallen from 62 per cent in 1991 to 60 per cent in 2015. According to International Labour Organisation (ILO), more than 204 million people are still unemployed in 2015—which is 34 million more than the economic crisis of 2008–09 and 53 million more than in 1991. Employment opportunities have declined in both the developed and developing regions. In the developing region, the employment to population ratio has fallen by 3.3 per cent, and in the developed region it has fallen by 1 per cent. The largest declines are in Eastern Asia and Southern Asia, which have experienced drops in the ratio of 6.7 per cent and 4.6 per cent respectively. Youth, especially young women, continue to be disproportionately affected by limited employment opportunities and unemployment. Only four out of every ten young women in the age group of 15–24 are employed in 2015 as compared to five out of every ten in 1991. Seventy four million people are in search of a job in 2015. Almost

[1] The Million Development Goals Report 2015, United Nations, New York.

half of the world's employed people are working in vulnerable conditions, that is, they contribute to family employment rather than having their own work. Since 2008, vulnerable employment has increased by 25 million because of the increase in labour force and the limited opportunities for paid employment. Currently, there are 1.45 billion workers in the vulnerable employment category worldwide[2].

Poverty eradication is at the core of all development processes. Poverty persists despite the decade and a half long focussed programmes seeking to achieve the MDGs, which is the root cause of hunger and other development shortfalls. A period of a decade and a half spans a generation. Efforts along similar lines are underway in the post 2015 SDA as per the finalised text for adoption (August 01) for yet another decade and a half, i.e. over the next generation. Besides, the MDGs that remain to be achieved will be carried forward along with new policy directions under SDA post 2015. Pertinently a thought comes to mind as to whether a fundamental shift is being worked out to fight poverty to the finish in the next decade and a half. Also, whether a new narrative is being worked out to recalibrate the mindset regarding how poverty and unemployment issues are addressed, which shall form the basis of other reform measures.

The finalised text for adoption (August 1, 2015) which awaits the approval of the Heads of Governments contains 17 goals, including the goal of eliminating extreme poverty and hunger by 2030.[3] The new goals cover a wide range of political and socio-economic issues, including inequality, poverty, hunger, gender equality, industrialisation, sustainable development, full employment, human rights, quality education, climate change and sustainable energy for all. The Agenda is being termed as unique, unprecedented in scope and significance, will be applicable to and acceptable by all countries, and, at the same time, respecting national realities, policies and priorities. Irrespective of differing national goals and responsibilities, these will be universally applicable to all countries in the world, including the rich

[2] *Ibid.*

[3] "Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development," Sustainable Development. Available at: https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/transformingourworld

and powerful. The Agenda addresses the rising inequalities within and among countries and the enormous disparities in opportunities, wealth and power.

The stated goals (17) and targets (169 in all) project a supremely ambitious and transformational vision, like the first goal to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere". However, when it comes to implementation, it is far less ambitious. For example, the ending of poverty in all its dimensions by 2030 is a very ambitious goal. This is reflected in target 1.2, which contradicts the goal of "reduce at least by half" the proportion of those living in poverty in all its dimensions. Some of the goals overlap with other goals and the targets worked out for meeting the goals do not necessarily move towards the broad goal itself. Again, goal no. 1.2, i.e. removal of poverty in all its dimensions, will span over to SDGs 2, 3, 4, 5, etc., as well. Besides, targets 1.2 and 1.3 refer to vulnerability, which is not specifically included in the goal of eliminating poverty.

The implementation of the SDG's will require fundamental changes in fiscal policy, regulation and global governance. The Agenda is at best vague and does not trigger the proclaimed transformational change. Goals without sufficient means are difficult to be met. SDGs are significantly more ambitious than MDGs but that much of the resources are to come from two key resources. One, private money through the multi stakeholder partnerships as per SDG goal 17 as well through other initiatives such as Sustainable Energy for All or the Global Financing Facility. And two, from domestic money straight from developing countries coffers as no new international money is being committed.[4]

Glaring absence of an international process or model of governance over these increasingly growing multi-stakeholder partnerships renders them void of accountability and transparency, much less vigorous due diligence practices such as ex-ante and independent assessments, monitoring and oversight and third party evaluation processes. Such provisions and principles are even integrated into World Bank Group's architecture. The Ombudsman and even the Independent Evaluation

[4] Deen, T. (2015), "U.N. Targets Trillions of Dollars to Implement Sustainable Development Agenda," Global Policy Forum, August 03.

Office (IEO) in the IMF serve as monitoring agencies. As demonstrated, the decision with regard to a fund like the Global Financing Facility are made behind closed doors, by a small group of elite financial investors and private sector investors who contribute to the facility.

On the face of it, the new global goals have been landmarked to end extreme poverty. However, setting up of goals alone will not end poverty. It is going to take significant hard work to turn the aspirations contained in the goals into reality. It will require taking national blueprints for delivery that will transform the lives of the poorest people and the poorest nations. The monitoring of the goals will need a sharp focus on accountability, backed by investments in data collection and use so that the citizens have the necessary information to ensure that leaders keep their promises[5].

As for the institutional framework to address the challenges of sustainable development, the UN should take the lead in making itself fit for the purpose since it will play an essential role in implementing the new sustainable development agenda. The Secretary-General's synthesis report rightly states that the international community at large needs to be made "fit for purpose". At this juncture the UN faces a double challenge of tackling a long-overdue backlog of reforms and getting into shape for overseeing and assisting in the implementation of post 2015 Agenda. The UN will have to take a relook at its system and the way it governs and builds it capacity for the desired impact. However, despite a mention being made about the need for it in the synthesis report, the working groups giving a shape to the SDA and SDGs do not directly address the issues, though some UN agencies have been selected as custodians for monitoring the progress in implementing the SDGs.

It is felt that the outcome document should contain a clear mandate with regard to strengthening the UN and making it fit for the purpose of implementing the new generation of SDGs. This will necessarily call for a strong accountability framework for the post 2015 Agenda. Accountability will be understood as the obligation of a person, a group or an institution to justify decisions or actions taken.

[5] *Ibid*.

In the context of a post 2015 framework, this obligation refers to efforts towards achieving the SDGs, including fulfilling commitments made under the SDGs. Accountability promotes compliance with agreed actions and stimulates learning on how to realise those goals that are less clearly defined and/or require collective action under imperfect global frameworks. This balance will be different for each component of the Agenda as "solutions" for certain goals may be predetermined, whereas others will require "learning by doing". All stakeholders of the post 2015 Agenda will be required to regularly report, review and conduct follow-up sessions with regard to the post 2015 accountability framework.

The MDG accountability framework has been characterised by shortcomings in both the monitoring and review processes. Monitoring is done by the national statistics offices in co-operation with individual UN agencies and then aggregated at central levels at the UN Secretariat. As a result, the set-up is prone to duplication, incoherence and poor delineation of responsibilities. Also, the system is fragmented and lacking in quality and ownership. Studies show that numerous developing-country statistical offices are unable to collect, analyse and disseminate data for MDG reporting since MDG statistics are based on donor-funded surveys or modelling exercises. Resultantly, MDG accountability framework continues to be inadequate in terms of promoting compliance for development commitments agreed to by all state parties.[6]

Going forward, the post 2015 accountability framework should build on these experiences and design a monitoring system with clear lines of reporting among UN agencies and other stakeholders. Calls for data revolution and disaggregated statistics need to become rooted in discussions on how accountability to the Agenda will be realised. UN member states have already determined the key elements of a post-2015 accountability framework. The High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) will play the central role—it has been mandated to conduct regular reviews, starting in 2016 on the follow up and implement sustainable

[6] Loewe, M. and N. Rippin (Eds.) (2015), The Sustainable Development Goals of the Post-2015 Agenda: Comments on the OWG and SDSN Proposals, German Development Institute, Revised Version, February 26.

development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post 2015 Agenda. Despite this concrete mandate, it is not clear how the reviews will be organised, how they will relate to other UN processes, what role key stakeholders other than governments will play and what level of initiative the members states will take.[7]

The UN system—including all individual entities—provides additional opportunities for creating accountability that have to be linked to the overall accountability framework. Existing UN organs such as General Assembly or the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) as well as thematic fora already perform accountability functions. Similarly, broader society and actors not participating currently should also be engaged.

Besides, interlinkages will have to be established in various forms, including joint meetings, reports and evaluation; harmonised operating cycle; joint governance structures; and, shared thematic sessions. Broadly, there will be three types of linkages within the multilayered accountability framework: between actors, i.e. the UN system, governments and society; between levels of governance, i.e. national, regional, and international; and, between post 2015 accountability framework to reach out to external actors.

In linking different actors, a coherent engagement of the UN system is critical. The post 2015 Agenda and accountability framework should set priorities for weak areas of the system and individual UN entities. Each UN entity needs to be included through it governance structure. For example, governments play a crucial role on the Executive Boards of the UN funds, programmes and specialised agencies. Sector specific UN forums could organise accountability for their respective sectors. Non-governmental actors need to be brought into the accountability network by way of invitations to participate at the national, regional and international levels. Various multi stakeholder partnerships and voluntary initiatives (e.g., Sustainable Energy for All and Every Woman Every Child initiatives) and their accountability arrangements should also be integrated with the accountability framework of SDGs.

[7] *Ibid*.

Linking of different levels of governance—international to national—will require balancing goals to foster global collective action and nationally set targets and indicators that reflect differentiated development priorities. There will be different types of accountability at different levels of governance.

Given the ambitious Agenda, the challenge will be to involve organisations and groups such as G-20, OECD, BRICS countries, WTO and development banks and also to engage sector specific institutions like Global Partnership for Effective Development Co-operation in achieving support for SDGs. Besides, systemic issues of global governances such as global trade and finance inevitably need to be addressed.[8]

Looking at the enormity of the tasks listed above for building an effective accountability framework, concrete capacity building tasks can be initiated only if and if the UN system and state parties make themselves fit for the tasks outlined. The outcome document has to call for initiation of action in this direction without delay. In the absence of a strong accountability framework, the task of achieving goals would be an uphill one for the world community.

Working Draft of the technical report by the Bureau of the United Nations Statistical Commission (UNSC) on the process of the development of an indicator framework for goals and targets of the post 2015 Development Agenda provides their summary results as follows.[9]

> "Out of the 304 proposed provisional indicators, 50 (16%) were evaluated as feasible, suitable and very relevant; 39 (13%) indicators were considered only feasible with strong effort, but suitable and very relevant……."

Thus so far, the indicators worked out for measuring the outputs regarding 169 targets aiming at the 17 goals being adopted are still under discussion. These

[8] *Ibid*.
[9] 6754 Technical Report of the UNSC Bureau

results are indicative of the fact that though goals set are unexceptionable, they are not subject to quantitative measurements.

Before concluding, it needs to be mentioned that the 17 goals sought to be accomplished through post 2015 Agenda do not include removal of corruption in all its manifestations in public and private sectors. It has been estimated that developing countries lose $1 trillion every year because of corruption and poor governance. Such an omission is glaring, particularly when there is specific convention adopted by the UN on elimination of corruption. This omission has occurred despite the fact that this goal was one of the twelve goals proposed by the High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post 2015 Development Agenda.[10]

SDGs should provide an opportunity to atone for various deficiencies attributed to MDGs which had set up unreasonable expectations, lacking governance goals, ignoring the role of human rights (especially civil and political rights), and being identical across countries, despite vastly different starting points. SDGs should have corrected the MDGs aim to deliver "quick impact" by treating systems of underdevelopment, rather than "addressing complex social systems" to provide individuals and communities with a means to hold governments accountable.[11]

[10] Joshi, D.K., B.B. Hughes and T.D. Sisk (2015), "Improving Governance for the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals: Scenario Forecasting the Next 50 Years," *World Development*, Vol. 70, Pp. 286–302.

[11] *Ibid*.