

Post-2015: Time to Strike a Grand Bargain between Environment and Development

This is a Civil Society Position Paper for Beyond 2015 by the Schumacher Institute on behalf of a number of Bristol-based Civil Society Organisations who met to discuss on Equity Within Limits and the Sustainable Development Goals on November 30, 2012. Equity Within Limits is the goal of the EU FP7 Converge project, a consortium researching the practical and societal implications of the Contraction and Convergence criteria for structuring global CO2-emission regimes, and applying the methodology to other forms of environmental protection.

A number of overarching themes emerged from the day:

- The MDGs have achieved a great deal especially on absolute poverty, clean water, girls' and primary education; but an honest appraisal has to acknowledge its weaknesses on food security, maternal health, malaria and TB, sustainable development, biodiversity loss, sanitation and the special needs of the most vulnerable poor nations.
- Concerns about the emergence of a multi-track post-2015 process, with some groups working on the SDGs and some working more broadly on 'MDGs Part 2' (and a number of other proposals for Goals with various degrees of support.) The SDGs are not yet ready to be implemented, but this offers an opportunity to prepare them for the UN High Level Panel.
- The post-2015 process is an opportunity for public education on the inter-relationship between environment and development, as well as for broadening the field of development education generally.
- Growth is not necessarily the enemy of sustainable development; and has created the political and economic space in many developing countries to shift the debate from focusing only on poverty to ensuring that economic development is environmentally sustainable. The SDG process has established a small, but important, principle that rich nations should shoulder a greater burden than poor nations in ensuring that economic development is not derailed by environmental or resource constraints.
- Development and sustainability do not need to be in opposition just because they differ on some priorities and approaches. We would reframe the debate as the sustainable limits to development; that is the physical, natural and social boundaries that shape development. A shared concept that both environment and development communities can engage with is resilience, and this can be a starting point for joint action.
- We wish to affirm the importance of culture in achieving environmental and development goals. Religion and other cultural structures offer powerful means to transmit information on the environment and development, but are not utilised well enough.

Our delegates recognised that a medium-sized city such as Bristol has an important contribution to make. A city such as Bristol with vibrant development and sustainability sectors has a real opportunity to make a difference in the global conversation by demonstrating how these groups can come together, define the areas they agree on, and then work to expand this space.

Integrating Development and Environmental Agendas

We do not have one approach to integrating the development and environmental agendas. There are some points, even, on which we fundamentally disagree such as on how to approach social protection or growth. We recognise that development agendas and environmental agendas occupy what Claire Melamed of ODI describes as ‘different problem spaces’, although they clearly overlap. Any serious attempt to integrate our agendas will have to honestly acknowledge this intellectual challenge and offer solutions to overcoming it. We recognise, moreover, the danger of assuming that all good things go together, which means that any successor to the MDGs will have to make trade-offs between the environment and development.

We believe that any successful post-2015 framework will depend on expanding the coalition of groups that sign up to its aims, in the same manner as the network of individuals, governments and civil society groups that have been tirelessly assembled over the last decade by the UN Millennium Campaign.

Our organisations consider that the most critical international issue in coming decades will be balancing the competing demands of environmental sustainability on one hand and economic and social development on the other. We applaud the success of the Millennium Development Goals, especially given the generally poor history of global development targeting, and we are determined to see any framework that succeeds them to learn from the Goals’ successes and failures. Most importantly, the MDGs teach us that success is built on communicating simple messages effectively and that widespread support is needed from both governments and civil society. The United Nations continues to be the only body with the reach and legitimacy to lead the implementation of any successor framework.

The first task in integrating environmental sustainability and development is to honestly and critically appraise the successes and failures of both movements. The environmental movement, because it often deals with modelling dynamic systems, is more able to handle complexity and systems thinking than the development movement which often seem comfortable with institutions and structures, as these are the mechanisms that development professionals more often confront.

The development movement has achieved some political successes on aid and debt, and appears to be more comfortable with key decision-making structures such as the G8 and OECD. It also seems to coordinate its messages better through campaigns such as Jubilee 2000 and Make Poverty History (we note that there never were Millennium Environment Goals...).

Compromises will need to be made, and sacred bulls sacrificed. Both environmental and development movements still have important things to say about capitalist economic models, but donor nations are currently in an unusually weak negotiating position, and developing nations are in an unusually strong negotiating position as new development frameworks are drawn up. This represents new opportunities, and new threats.

Both the environmental and development movements need to address why environmental protection (Goal 7) was so unsuccessful in the MDGs, with only two out of ten indicators meeting or on-track to meet the targets set for them in 2001¹. This is of concern as the environmental movement has important contributions to make to development targeting, starting with systems and structures, so that the ‘sustainable’ in sustainable development doesn’t refer just to the individual staying out of poverty, but to the system in which they are embedded and on which they depend.

¹ UN Statistics Division and Others

We are encouraged by the generally warm reception to the idea of Sustainable Development Goals as successors to the Millennium Development Goals that emerged from the Rio+20 process, but we have several concerns about the actualisation of these.

First, we are concerned that none of the Targets set out in the MDGs for Goal 7, Ensuring Environmental Sustainability, are fully met and by our analysis only two out of ten sub-indicators have met or are on track to meet the targets set for them by 2015 using the UN's own data. This represents the largest quantitative and qualitative failure across the Millennium Development Goals.

Second, we are concerned that slow progress on Goal 7 may reflect a structural weakness of these development goals, rather than just an advocacy failure. While we would advocate strongly for goals that address the environmental aspects of development, failure to address the systemic issues governing the interaction of society and natural environment will mean that environmental considerations will struggle to be heard in the development debate. These issues include equitable and sustainable resource production, essential ecosystem protection, and the disproportionate effect of environmental fragility on the very poorest. A goal framed simply to undo the damage created by economic growth, without addressing the systems that support growth, would fail to make a successor to Goal 7 any more successful.

Finally, we are concerned by a growing 'two-track process' of groups advocating generally for a robust post-2015 framework, and those advocating specifically for the SDGs. We would like to see formal structures (most particularly the UN High Level Panel) adopt an explicit position as soon as possible on whether their recommendations will fully endorse the conclusions of Rio+20, or if they are seeking to renew the MDGs with changes.

The Missing Goal: Access to Information

The post-2015 process offers an opportunity to shape development thinking for the next decade and more. The MDGs generally succeeded in selecting Goals that were not only important, but that would serve as totems to shape political, social and economic agendas and advance human development generally. New goals will have to show the same intellectual verve. That development concerns should be at the top of the global agenda is now established, and while it is important to conserve progress, it is also important not to fight the battles of the past. As such, Goals that challenge the international community have to be rooted in 2015, not in 2000.

Our organisations have a modest proposal for a new development goal that recognises that global conversation has moved on from framing development as an obligation to the poor, to asking what do poor nations need to lift themselves out of poverty more than just money? In short, should we focus on the *agency* of development, rather more than the *structure*?

We have a modest proposal for a goal that would improve the agency of a post-2015 framework: Access to Information for All. The Rio+20 Outcome Document recognised the link between participation and development success, and universal freedom of information would be a totemic and manageable means of explicitly recognising the advantages of democracy and pluralism in securing sustainable development, and in holding governments to account: an essential feature of the MDGs.

To be clear, we mean Access to Information in a broad sense, and do not limit it just to freedom of information and freedom of the press (as important as they are). Information is multi-functional and access to information is a core principle of international human rights frameworks including the Universal Declaration, the Charters on Civil and Political and on Social and Cultural Rights, the European Convention, and the founding documents of the African Union and OAS. It draws its heritage from the

English Bill of Rights, the US Constitution and the Declaration of Man and Citizen. It is both emblematic of and a core competency of democracy. As Freedom House and HDI rankings consistently show, there is a significant correlation between democratic freedom and human development.

There is evidence that freedom of information plays an important role in the elite bargaining and state-making processes that are so critical to achieving successful development trajectories, factors that were largely left out of the MDG framework even though they were discussed in some detail in the Millennium Declaration. There is increasing concentration of the poorest people in 'fragile' states, with limited progress towards any of the MDGs in any of the 33 nations that feature on the Fund for Peace's Fragile States Index. Structures such as the International Aid Transparency Initiative and the Extractive Industries Transparency Initiative are building up significant evidence of the correlation between development success and how free it a country is.

In addition to this, there is the growing body of economic thought that information is a commodity in its own right (what Kenneth Arrow calls the production of knowledge), with independent economic value, and the free flow and exchange of information is not just an essential part of maintaining the system, but a significant product of it. Social choice models, influential in development economics, regard information as essential as decisions can never be made with perfect knowledge, and as such 'Pareto optimisation' (the process by which collective choices are made) is achieved by social conditioning rather than rational action alone. As such information, or knowledge as it is often referenced in the literature, determines how choices are made. At the basis of much welfare economics is the assumption that the efficient flow of information, and a fundamental economic right to access and use information equally, is essential to development. Actions such as these to promote the conditions for development will be as important in the new framework as any technical targets.

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