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The pitfalls of setting global goals

8 years on and the Sustainable Development Goals are yet to come close to scratching the surface of their aims

As poor children continue to die from starvation and diseases, and social conditions long absent in wealthier countries continue to plague and lay waste to innocent lives in poorer countries, rich and poor nations resort to tradition. In 2015, they converged at the General Assembly 'at a time of immense challenges to sustainable development.' With 'unwavering commitment', they then set a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, complete with global goals to make right such historic social inequities as extreme poverty. It's a tradition that allows wealthier countries to cleanse their consciences as they steadfastly try to legitimise geo-political and neo-liberal orders contributing to casting immense suffering in particularly poorer countries.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) they agreed on are the latest outcome in this tradition. Whether you are living in a poor or rich country, pursuits of these 17 global goals should remove such societal blights as death by starvation common in poorer countries. A fundamental aim of the SDGs is to transform our historically unsustainable world to sustainability, and thus realise equity in a world defined by profound inequities. With six years left to complete this tectonic transformation, it is time for global leaders to properly reflect on the usefulness and efficiency in setting global goals, seriously consider how this approach retards social, political and economic progress.

Failure due to contradictions

Such reflections would have not been necessary today if on returning from the General Assembly in September 2015, then US president Barack Obama, by executive order, would have created a government department to serve his citizens and support those in the developing world on implementing the SGDs. This hypothetical Department of Sustainable Development Goals would have 17 sub-departments, each with a cabinet secretary. All 17 secretaries must work coherently to reduce inequality within and among countries, end poverty and hunger, provide worldwide access to such basic services as education, healthcare,

water and sanitation, housing, assure social protection, protect the environment, and promote peaceful and inclusive societies, worldwide – all SDG goals. The reality is that governments had no such insight.

A reason for that failure is that implementing global goals with such a holistic approach would reveal contradictions and incoherences that no country fancies to address, even for the greater good of humanity. Aside from the SDGs' reputation of being ambitious, the reality is that its high aspirations are unrealistic and unfit for purpose. So, the 17 SDGs and their 169 targets and 231 indicators remain a dream today.

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Of the 25 countries said to have recently cut poverty by half, none is in Africa, while '1.1 billion remain poor.' Yet the correlation between economic growth and a decline in poverty isn't lost in the minds of the most conservative of economists and politicians. But while Cambodia, China, Congo, Honduras, India, Indonesia, Morocco, Serbia and Vietnam, halved poverty, it remains a blight in countries across Sub-Saharan Africa. Their access to funds to stimulate economic growth is based on political, economic and regulatory risks that lenders such as the World Bank use to assess capacity to repay. Economically poorer countries' commitment to implementing SDGs is not part of the 'conditions on which the Bank may guarantee or make loans.' Such incoherence between the World Bank – a leading global institution for development – and the global commitment to transition to sustainable development, stymies progress on the SDGs.

It is a contradiction that as the world is committed to ensuring 'access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all,' a greater part of it remains without access to such technologies, while economic interests of those who own such technologies are being protected by trade rules enforced by the World Trade Organisation (WTO). The world's leading trade organisation maintains firm control over intellectual property rights to renewable energy technologies, mostly owned by some of its more affluent members, themselves tirelessly waxing lyrical about commitment to the SDGs. None of the WTO reports on the organisation's 'contribution to achieving the SDGs' pertains to SDG 7 – to provide 'modern energy for all'. While African countries are endowed with more solar radiation than they need to produce enough electricity to

stimulate development, and less so with solar panels and energy storage technologies that can convert their endowment to electricity.

The problem with goal setting

A remarkable short 15 years to turn tide in human history from unsustainable development to sustainability is unrealistic and unsuitable in itself. First, by conservative estimations, the Industrial Revolution – a period that defined unsustainable development – lasted 60 years. So, the ambition now to 'transform our world' in just 15 years is a mug's game. Second, failures on the SDG, since 2015, suggest that even if the goals are realised in the next five years, it is unlikely that governments would stay on sustainable pathways. This means goal-setting is unfit for purpose as countries will likely return to norm, reversing progress, after 2030 – the deadline for implementing SDGs. Some of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDG) that preceded the SDGs in today 'remain off-track.' For example, it was a leading MDG to 'eradicate extreme poverty and hunger' between 1990 and 2015. Fifteen years later, it is still a leading SDG objective to do exactly the same, while hundreds of millions remain poor. Goal-setting creates a mindset that is fundamentally unsuitable for long-term permanent transformations necessary in all societies.

Eight years since implementing SDGs, 'more than half the world' is being left behind and 'progress on more than 50 per cent of targets of the SDGs is weak and insufficient,' in some instances, progress has 'stalled or gone into reverse,' concludes the UN. Such dismal assessments should not be surprising because contradictions, incoherence, unsuitable and unrealistic issues associated with setting global goals ought to have been known. That 'developing countries are bearing the brunt of our collective failure to invest in the SDGs' is further confirmation. Many of these countries, says UN Secretary General, António Guterres – in the latest SDG report – 'face a huge financing gap and are buried under a mountain of debt.' It is confounding that transition to sustainability – indeed to sustaining human life – is curtailed by money.

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For global sustainability to proceed beyond a pipe dream, it needs coordination of global international institutions. Pouring money into economic systems is a half-way solution.

It should be obvious that we're in dire need for new global economic and political structures all coherently aligned and focused on fostering

economic and social development practices, informed by ideas of sustainability, not neo-liberal utopian ideals. Development banks, for example, must not consider a country's ability to repay above its social and economic development. The UN needs to start such discussions in the General Assembly.

Rather than Sustainable Development Goals, a change to Social Development Agenda, may serve well in educating the general public on the scale and scope of dire and permanent societal transformations. No reasonable argument can be mounted against the need to end unnecessary deaths of children dying from hunger, provide vaccination for measles which has proven to save lives of more than half a million children and reduce the number of some 617 million children without minimum reading and maths skills. Such historic and persistent failures are incompatible with claims to human intelligence being superior and reveal fallacies of civilised beings living in civilised societies.
