

# : Global Governance Spotlight

1 | 2013

sef:

## The Post-2015-Agenda. Common Goals for Development and Sustainability

---

Jens Martens

**International development policy is at a crossroads. Over the next three years, the future of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – the roadmap for development policy since the year 2000 – will be decided. This is about much more than simply extending the lifespan of the MDGs or widening the set of goals. The United Nations is talking about the “post-2015 development agenda” – making it clear that it is about defining the fundamental priorities and strategies for development policy beyond 2015. In parallel, at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in June 2012, governments agreed to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) integrating the three dimensions (social, economic and environmental) of sustainable development and applicable to all countries. Reconciling these two processes to form one coherent agenda will be a major challenge. The reality is that against the backdrop of major environmental challenges and global economic power shifts, a development agenda which focuses solely on the poor countries and excludes the affluent nations falls a long way short of what is needed to address the problems facing the world today.**

---

### Learning from the MDGs’ weaknesses

The MDGs have dominated the development discourse since the year 2000. They have served as the frame of reference for national development strategies in numerous countries of the global South and have become the leitmotif of bilateral and multilat-

eral donors’ development policies. The MDGs are considered to have various positive features and beneficial effects: they are easy to communicate, their use helps to increase government accountability, they have improved the methodology for measuring poverty, and they have mobilised additional resources for poverty reduction. Nonetheless, the last twelve years have clearly revealed the problems that can arise from focusing the development discourse largely on combating the most extreme forms of income poverty and meeting basic needs. The MDGs have a number of weaknesses and shortcomings which relate to their underlying concept and the way in which they evolved, and also to their overall format and strategies for their implementation.

Based on an analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of the MDGs, various conclusions can be drawn which are of relevance to the post-2015 development agenda (see Box next page).

---

### Multi-track negotiations about future development goals

The debate about the post-2015 development agenda and future sustainable development goals is being conducted at various levels and in a range of international forums. At the UN level, the two main discussion processes will take place in parallel throughout 2013.

The work of the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda is crucial for the post-MDG

### Ten conclusions for the Post-2015 Development Agenda

1. Future development/sustainability goals must be formulated, on the basis of comprehensive participation processes at country and UN level.
2. The post-2015 goals should be based on a holistic concept of sustainable development in which overcoming poverty and social exclusion continues to be a key goal. The United Nations Millennium Declaration (in its entirety) could serve as a starting point here.
3. The post-2015 goals should have universal applicability; in other words, they should be relevant to all the world's countries (and not just the "developing countries").
4. Regional, national and sub-national differences should be considered when defining future goals, targets and indicators.
5. The post-2015 goals should be based on the human rights framework, especially the economic, social and cultural rights. This has implications for the formulation of targets and indicators.
6. Besides setting universal goals, it is important to recognise the planetary boundaries, which should also be included in the post-2015 agenda.
7. A future development agenda should define not only the desired results but also (financial) resources, necessary burden-sharing, user rights and structural measures (in effect, as the further development of MDG 8).
8. The poverty indicators used in the MDGs should be replaced with more comprehensive metrics, such as the Multidimensional Poverty Index, and indicators which adequately reflect the socioeconomic disparities within societies.
9. The global debates about alternative measures of wellbeing and societal progress beyond gross domestic product (GDP) should be considered in framing the post-2015 agenda and related goals.
10. The strengths of the MDGs – their limited number, measurability, clear message and resonance with the public – should be retained in a future set of goals.

discussions. The High-Level Panel is due to deliver its report to the UN Secretary-General by 1 June 2013. In parallel, Country Consultations and global Thematic Consultations are being conducted by various UN organisations and national governments. Together with the High-Level Panel's report, the results of these consultations will form the basis for a comprehensive report by the UN Secretary-General on the post-2015 development agenda, to be presented in September 2013, when a Special Event organised by the UN General Assembly in New York will focus on the MDGs and their future. At this meeting, governments will decide on the further negotiating process up to the post-MDG summit, scheduled for 2015. The SDG process experienced some teething troubles at first. The original plan was for the UN General Assembly to set up an intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) on the SDGs, comprising 30 members, in September 2012. For months, however, the five regional groups were unable to agree on the composition of the membership. They solved this problem in January 2013 and hold the first meeting of the OWG in February 2013. In line with the Rio mandate, the Open Working Group has to fully engage experts from civil society and the scientific community and submit a specific proposal for Global Sustainability Goals to the UN General Assembly at its 68th session. The deadline which the OWG is working towards is therefore 15 September 2014.

So how are the negotiating processes to be synchronised and integrated to form a coherent post-2015 development agenda? That is one of the unresolved questions which must be addressed by policy-makers and diplomats alike.

Broadly speaking, five options for a future set of development goals are conceivable as the outcome of the post-2015/SDG negotiations:

1. **Comprehensive sustainability goals:** These would comprise a comprehensive set of universally applicable goals with appropriate context-specific, nationally differentiated targets for all areas of sustainable development.
2. **SDG light:** The set of goals would cover all dimensions of sustainability but would be selective and exclude those aspects on which no political consensus was achieved.
3. **MDG+:** The post-2015 goals are, in essence, a continuation of the MDGs.
4. **SDG/MDG combination:** There are two parallel sets of goals: globally applicable SDGs, mainly for the environmental dimension, and "enhanced" MDGs for the poor countries of the global South.
5. **No goals:** Governments are unable to reach agreement on any specific set of goals by 2015.

Option 1, i.e. an integrated set of goals, is regarded by many initiatives as the optimum solution. However, the initiatives take highly divergent views on the thematic scope and nature of the goals. The question whether the future development goals should merely describe the desired outcomes (e.g. an end to extreme poverty) or also define the required resources (e.g. doubling the share of GDP spent on public health) and, if appropriate, limits (e.g. the 2 °C limit for global warming) is a particularly contentious issue.

### Contours of an integrated set of Global Sustainability Goals

A future agenda for international cooperation and sustainable development, to be agreed by governments by 2015, could consist of the following three main components: 1. a Political Declaration reaffirming the principles and normative foundation of the post-2015 agenda; 2. an integrated set of Global Sustainability Goals with universal targets and recommendations for the Goals' application at regional, national and local level, and 3. an Action Plan, to be agreed at the international level, setting out the financial, regulatory and institutional measures needed for the realisation of the Sustainability Goals.

All three dimensions are essential components of a comprehensive development agenda. A statement of principles would be meaningless without associated targets; the same applies to global goals without a binding action plan to implement them.

In advance of the official negotiations on a post-2015 agenda, which have yet to begin in earnest, proposals for a future set of Global Sustainability Goals should not be confined to what appears to be politically feasible at present, but should consider what needs to be done in order to address global problems. In that sense, an integrated set of Global Sustainability Goals could encompass six dimensions (see Box).

Within this framework, a two-tier set of goals and targets could be defined for each of the six dimensions: The first tier consists of absolute global goals and limits. They are universally applicable and, unlike the present MDGs, do not have a time target. They relate to internationally codified rights and obligations or recognised (ecological) limits. These goals apply to everyone, rather than to certain groups within society. With regard to the realisation of the right to food, for example, rather than aiming to halve the proportion of people who suffer from hunger by a given target year, the goal would be to ensure that every one of the world's people has adequate food.

The second tier consists of relative progress targets which can be decided for each of the absolute goals

via democratic decision-making processes at the regional, national and even local level, thus taking account of the diverse social and economic conditions in the country concerned. In the case of global public goods, these targets should be defined for the global level as well.

These targets should be aligned to the human rights principle of *progressive realisation*. Here too, no deadline is set for the attainment of the targets. Instead, the variables used are the extent and pace of progress towards achieving the absolute goals. Rather than defining any new "post-2015 goals" for 2030 or 2050, governments would commit to achieve steady progress over shorter time periods, such as five years. This could take place within the framework of a *pledge and review* process in which the individual countries commit, at the UN level, to achieve specific development targets within a five-year timeframe and then submit to an independent review.

The *Universal Periodic Reviews* (UPRs) – the mechanism which has existed for some years in the human rights arena – could serve as a model here. Based on this model, an enhanced *Universal Periodic Review on Sustainability* could be introduced, focusing on all the dimensions of the Global Sustainability Goals. This review would amount to a "coherence check" of a country's entire policy portfolio and its compliance with universal sustainability goals and human rights. This type of enhanced UPR could also be used to estimate the level of funding a country needed to achieve the Global Sustainability Goals. Is the country utilising its "maximum available resources" to the full? Is there a funding gap? How much external funding is required? The global sum of these figures would provide a frame of reference for identifying the demand for bilateral and multilateral financial transfers worldwide and could thus replace the supply-side approach of ODA with its 0.7 per cent reference target. In this way, the post-2015 develop-

#### Dimensions of an integrated set of Global Sustainability Goals

1. Dignity and human rights for all
2. Promote equality and justice
3. Respect for nature and the planetary boundaries
4. Building peace through disarmament and peaceful dispute settlement
5. Foster fair and resilient financial systems
6. Strengthen democratic and participatory governance

ment agenda could help to bring about a change of perspective, away from an aid-based and towards a rights-based approach to development financing.

## Towards the 2015 summit

Until 2015, international development policy will be dominated by the intense debate about the UN's future development agenda and the definition of the post-MDGs. One problem arising in this context is the discrepancy between the breadth of the thematic agenda and the limited mandate of the key actors within the UN, governments and civil society. Some people are therefore warning about the danger of overburdening the post-2015 agenda and are calling for a more limited focus on poverty reduction and social development in the countries of the global South – amounting in effect, to a continuation of the MDG approach. In line with this thinking, globally applicable sustainable development goals should be agreed in parallel, mainly focusing on the environmental dimension. However, this kind of “pragmatic” approach is likely to amount to little more than “business as usual”, based on the same old fragmented sectoral policies which have made problem-solving so difficult until now. This would be the wrong approach and would not be an adequate response to the multiple crises with all their interdependencies.

If the aim is to achieve a “holistic” development agenda, as the UN, governments and civil society organisations repeatedly claim, this must be reflected in the discussion and negotiating processes to 2015. What is needed is an integrated approach involving all the various government departments and UN institutions and also encouraging the formation of new interdisciplinary alliances within civil society. This applies especially to development, environmental, peace and human rights organisations. The process of formulating a future development agenda and Global Sustainability Goals undoubtedly offers civil society organisations the opportunity to initiate and promote a debate on a number of key questions: how societies want to live in future, bear-

ing in mind planetary boundaries, how prosperity and societal progress should be defined, and how the principles of solidarity and global responsibility can be translated into social action.

The debate about sustainability goals should certainly not be confined to the UN level, then. Sustainability goals can be discussed and agreed for every village, city, region and country. The ensuing debate within society is not just a by-product of the negotiations at global level. On the contrary, it provides a foundation for this global debate and is an essential prerequisite for ensuring that the post-2015 development agenda evolves from, and is subsequently implemented in, a genuine bottom-up process.

### Further information

This paper is based on the following more detailed publication:

**Martens, Jens (2013):** Globale Nachhaltigkeitsziele für die Post-2015-Entwicklungsagenda. Bonn/Osnabrück: Global Policy Forum Europe/terre des hommes.

The following two reports from civil society and the UN make significant contributions to the debate about the post-2015 agenda:

**Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives (2012):** No Future Without Justice. Development Dialogue No. 59. Uppsala: Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation.

**UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (2012):** Realizing the Future We Want for All. Report to the Secretary-General. New York.

### Author

**Jens Martens** | Director of the Global Policy Forum Europe and Member of the Development and Peace Foundation's Advisory Board.

## Imprint

The Development and Peace Foundation was founded in 1986 on the initiative of Willy Brandt. As a cross-party and non-profit-making organisation, the SEF provides an international high-level forum for shared thinking on urgent peace and development issues.

Global Governance Spotlight is a policy-oriented series whose purpose is to critique international negotiation processes from a global governance perspective.

**Published by**  
Development and Peace Foundation/  
Stiftung Entwicklung und Frieden (SEF)  
Dechenstr. 2 : 53115 Bonn : Germany  
Phone +49 (0)228 959 25-0 : Fax -99  
sef@sef-bonn.org : www.sef-bonn.org

**Editor**  
Sabine Gerhardt

**Translation**  
Hillary Crowe

**Design Basiskonzept**  
Pitch Black Graphic Design  
Berlin/Rotterdam

**Layout**  
Gerhard Süß-Jung

Contents do not necessarily reflect the views of the publisher.