

Views on Development

No 2, 17 September 2015

The 2030 Agenda – An Opportunity For Strengthening International Cooperation

Prof. Dr. Dirk Messner and Dr. Imme Scholz

Prof. Dr. Dirk Messner and Dr. Imme Scholz are directors of the German Development Institute in Bonn. Prof. Messner is also Co-Chair of the German Advisory Council on Global Change and Member of the Knowledge Advisory Commission of the World Bank. Dr. Imme Scholz is also Member of the Board of Trustees of the German Development and Peace Foundation and Member of the Council for Sustainable Development



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In September 2015, the United Nations will adopt a new agenda for sustainable development, which is to be implemented by 2030 (the "2030 Agenda"). At its core are 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs). What makes this Agenda unique is the fact that it directly links steps to overcome poverty and to improve human well-being with environmental protection, and that these goals are to be binding on all countries rather than, as before, merely seeking to show the poor countries the way to a better future. At the same time, it is the result of an eighteen-month negotiation process in New York, in which around 70 government representatives participated.

As we see it, this new 2030 Agenda for sustainable development provides an opportunity for ensuring that prosperity for all is achieved without compromising the natural foundations of human life. The Agenda reflects the insight that exerting too much strain on the natural eco-system through resource and emission-intensive growth endangers the existence of the poorest and jeopardises the bases of life of future generations. The 2030 Agenda can only succeed if it is accompanied by a high degree of international cooperation. At the same time, it provides an opportunity for creating a more favourable climate for international cooperation.

What are the origins of the 2030 Agenda?

The trigger for the SDGs came from the 2012

UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro ("Rio+20"), during which an appeal was made to formulate common goals and include these goals in the new global development agenda from 2015. In this way, the Rio+20 Conference is carrying on from the success which the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) achieved in certain areas. The MDGs sought to implement improvements in income poverty, health, education and water supplies in the countries of the south and defined quantifiable targets which were to be achieved by 2015. In particular, the north was expected to provide development policy support. Indeed, it was possible to mobilise additional funds with the MDGs and to coordinate the joint activities of the donors and partners. After 15 years, considerable progress was made, particularly in education and health. The strong economic growth prior to the outbreak of the financial market crisis particularly in China as well as elsewhere helped to reduce extreme poverty. On the other hand, ecological aspects systematically took a back seat in the implementation of the MDGs, as can be seen in the track record of the past 15 years. Rather than declining, global emissions of green-house gases have risen enormously, while the pressure on ecosystems is growing so much, that scientists are now warning of an impending tipping point in the earth's natural systems (German Advisory Council on Global Change 2014). Although more people have access to clean drinking water, there is no

evidence of any general improvement in the management of water resources.

The Rio+20 Conference had set itself the goal of adopting measures to combat this. The concept of sustainable development, which had played virtually no role in the MDGs, was to be revisited. The aim was to define SDGs which factor in the realisation that human development is built on sand if climate protection is ignored and that unabated climatic change and the loss of biodiversity will undermine human prosperity and render it impossible. However, a conventional north-south cooperation agenda is not sufficient to achieve this as the rich countries, which consume the greatest volume of natural resources, must particularly embrace the fundamental changes in the relationship between nature and society. With their rising prosperity, the large dynamic emerging markets such as China, India, Brazil and Indonesia are also reaching critical consumption levels impacting the environment. This is particularly evident in China's green-house gas emissions. At the same time, the established industrialised nations are also again facing the question of imbalances in the distribution of income, while additional challenges such as demographic change and the digitalisation of the economy are posing challenges for rich and poor societies alike. In the interests of sustainable development, it therefore makes little sense to define goals solely for developing countries. What is required is a universal approach which the countries must implement in their domestic policies as well as in their foreign relations. This is because the industrialised nations continue to play a crucial role as development partners: they hold the lion's share of the global knowledge, research and innovation capacities that allow the environmental impact of production and consumption patterns to be reduced. Developing countries are dependent on these capacities if they want to play a role in this transformation process.

Global power shifts

In our view, the fact that the SDGs were formulated in intergovernmental negotiations and are primarily to be implemented in the form of national strategies and policies re-

flects the shifts in economic and political power of the past decade. The MDGs had been defined by development policy experts without any influence on the part of developing countries.

However, there have been changes in the economic conditions of many developing countries since 2000. Most of them (namely 105) are now classified as (low or high) middle income countries by the World Bank. Developing countries account for half of the world's gross domestic product (GDP). According to the IMF, in 2014, the GDP of Brazil, China, India, Indonesia, Mexico, Russia and Turkey exceeded the combined G7 total (measured in purchasing power parities). New global middle classes are arising in the south, allowing developing and emerging countries to exert greater political influence. Consequently, the old industrialised nations have lost their position of power, which had allowed them to have their own experts define development goals for the developing countries even as recently as 2000.

During the negotiation process itself, these global shifts in power had ambivalent effects: on the one hand, the developing countries exhibited very pronounced self-confidence. On the other, however, the large emerging countries still attached great importance to being viewed as developing countries and refused to accept industrialised nations' demands that they should expressly assume greater responsibility for global common interests.

Accordingly, the 17 goals and 169 targets which have been defined reflect the political compromise which is possible among the international community of nations in 2014/15. Importantly, the SDGs currently embody the only multilateral agenda based on a global consensus with a positive conceptual approach that addresses the main aspects of human prosperity, namely the social, ecological, economic and political dimension. The fact that this is still possible in an international community characterised by a substantial shift in influence, growing inequality and violent conflicts is remarkable and a value in itself.

What does the 2030 Agenda comprise?

The preamble of the Agenda sets out the main goals in concise language: the well-being of all people (people), protection of the earth's ecosystems (planet), securing peace (peace) and improving international cooperation (partnership). It manages to stress the

interdependence of these four aspects precisely and succinctly, thus making an important contribution to integrated thinking and approaches.

The 17 SDGs can be divided into three main clusters: firstly, goals 1 to 5 (poverty, hunger, health, education, gender) and 7 to 10 (energy, growth and employment, infrastructure, industrialisation, innovation, inequality) can be assigned to the "people" category as they address direct and indirect human needs (if it is assumed that economic activity serves human well-being). Secondly, four goals cover a combination of "people and the planet": goals 6 (water) and 11 (cities), which are formulated on an integrated basis, and goals 16 (peaceful and inclusive societies) and 17 (global partnership), which address institutions and systemic requirements necessary for sustainable management of (global) public goods. Goal 2 also covers the ecological dimension and agricultural resilience and thus also belongs to this cluster.

Thirdly, four goals primarily concern the well-being of the planet and the protection of its ecosystems: goal 12 (consumption and production patterns), 13 (climate change), 14 (the oceans) and 15 (terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity).

Many of the problems, which must be solved to ensure the well-being of people (as well as of plants and animals) and also future generations, cannot be assigned to only one of the three dimensions of sustainable development but require integrated approaches, which focus attention on the interdependencies of the goals and fields of political activity and recognise and address the existence of conflicting goals. Accordingly, it is not sufficient merely to count the problems in terms of the dimensions addressed to determine whether the 2030 Agenda takes an appropriate view of the problem.

A more detailed analysis of the goals and targets thus reveals contradictions within and between the various clusters. One example is goal 8 "economic growth, full and productive employment, decent work for all": although its targets reflect these aspects, they do not state whether economic growth as such should be ecologically sustainable and inclusive (quite apart from the fundamental question as to whether continued growth reaches physical limits in many sectors at a certain stage). Moreover, the wording of the targets aimed at severing the link between economic growth

and the consumption of resources is not ambitious and tends to be rather vague.

The importance of international cooperation is not only mentioned in terms of the funding required to implement it. Goals 17 and 9 stress that cooperation must be urgently reinforced in research and in the development and distribution of technology. As it is, this is necessary for a conventional modernisation strategy and even more so for the sustainable modification of production and consumption patterns. Knowledge and innovation-heavy economies and societies are ideally positioned for this, as Germany and Korea, to give two examples, show. Both countries have developed these capabilities in a process of successful industrialisation and enormous growth of economic output. Many countries with low or medium incomes therefore see this process as a prerequisite for ecological modernisation or for transforming their situation. This approach is reflected in the Agenda.

Accordingly, international cooperation must focus far more keenly than before on allowing developing countries to gain access to the "knowledge society" with the aim of achieving greater prosperity for everyone within the boundaries of the earth's ecosystems.

What is missing from the 2030 Agenda?

Two key aspects are missing: the "decarbonisation" of production and consumption, i.e. the gradual phasing-out of fossil-based energies, as already embodied in the G7's Elmau declaration, and the "planetary boundaries" (Brandt / Messner 2015).

Frequently, the Agenda also fails to state and address the causes underlying the problems which it seeks to solve. Thus, goal 15 ("terrestrial ecosystems") does not mention the factors driving the loss of forests and biodiversity (such as settlement structures, extensive farming, the use of chemicals, nutritional patterns of the top 50 % of the world's population) and also fails to take account of the fact that the availability of greater funding is not sufficient on its own to ensure the successful protection of biodiversity.

Risks arising from the implementation of the Agenda

With the large number of goals and targets defined by the Agenda, there is a risk of countries cherry-picking those goals they want to include in their national policies, thus fragmenting its implementation. In the German context, the 2030 Agenda is perhaps most

readily comparable with a coalition agreement, which generally also sets out a large number of goals as it addresses all political areas (normally, however, without quantifying any targets or providing an idea of the timing).

A further risk arises from the vague wording of a number of goals and targets and, resulting from this, the difficulty of defining unambiguous indicators for measuring success. The enormous gaps in the collection of statistical data will make it more difficult to measure national and global changes. What is more, some goals cannot be measured by means of quantitative indicators; instead, it will be necessary to document qualitative assessments of changes.

However, experience suggests that even quantified indicators are no guarantee that the goals which are subject to dispute within a society can be achieved more quickly. One example of this is MDG 5, which sought to reduce the maternal mortality ratio by three quarters, a goal which has not been reached. The low social status of women and the legal disadvantages which they experience in many developing countries constitute a major obstacle.

One example from Germany is the goal of preserving biodiversity and protecting natural habitats, which forms an element of the German sustainability strategy. An index of 100 was to be achieved by 2015, i.e. the targets which could be reached if all European and national natural preservation rules as well as the sustainable development guidelines are implemented. However, this figure has consistently dropped since 2001 particularly as a result of the substantial deterioration in conditions for biodiversity in farming land and in coastal and marine regions.

One risk in many industrialised nations will be that the 2030 Agenda will be perceived mainly as an element of international environmental-policy and development cooperation. This was also the case in Germany for a long time. In actual fact, however, the SDGs aim not only

to usher in a new era of development cooperation but also to set a common target horizon (2030) for all members of the United Nations. According to the UN working party, this calls for decisive action at the national level as well as closer global cooperation.

What should be done in Germany?

By international standards, Germany is advanced in implementing the 2030 Agenda. The German federal government has already made two cabinet decisions providing for responsibility for the SDGs to be shared amongst all the ministries. The committee of state secretaries has declared that the German sustainability strategy forms a material framework for implementing the SDGs. A series of five consultations by the federal chancellery in cooperation with the German states will start at the end of October, to determine which goals and indicators are to apply in the future and how the SDGs are to be included. The new sustainability strategy is to be adopted in autumn 2016.

In the light of the 2030 Agenda, the German sustainability strategy should likewise set a time frame until at least 2030. It should provide for reports to be prepared on all goals and targets. At the same time, it should adopt its own clear approaches permitting transformative policies which are aimed at achieving improved and ecologically sustainable prosperity for the people in Germany and the rest of Europe, mitigating the negative effects of German policies in the world (or heightening their positive effects) and supporting joint international efforts and the actions of developing countries.

In previous negotiations, Germany has always been a proponent of ambitious, integrated goals and a comprehensive catalogue of goals. The country should retain this commitment in its own sustainability strategy. It is important for it to develop and apply innovative indicators. It should call on all ministries to define joint target-achievement responsibilities in the interests of advancing integrated cross-

ministry action - not everyone at the same time but two to three key ministries for individual goals; e.g. the environment and agriculture ministries could be assigned responsibility for sustainable food production and the protection of biodiversity.

Finally, the ministries should define in the new sustainability strategy as well as in their goals and indicators the measures and initiatives they are planning in order to reach these goals. This would enhance political clarity and credibility and offer added value over the hitherto solely ex post reporting approach.

A platform for non-government bodies to contribute their initiatives and to report on their progress would also be helpful. In this way, it would become clear that social and private-sector activities are necessary and appreciated.

Finally, it is important for Germany to be willing to figure amongst the first countries to submit a report on plans for and the status of implementation, under the follow-up and review mechanism to be established by the UN, and to accept comments and recommendations from other governments. Germany is very well positioned not only to achieve strong progress but also to provide other countries with examples on what steps can be taken to improve human well-being within the boundaries of the earth's ecosystems. ■

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