

SDGs – a Course Correction?

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**Symposium: Ministry of Environment : Project on Sustainability
Transformation beyond 2015**

Tokyo, 16 January 2016

Comments on the SDGs on their release, September 2015

- “Worse than useless” (*The Economist*)
- “The SDGs should stand for Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled” (*Bill Easterly*)
- “We can declare partial success in every category – which is more than we might have dared hope for in 2010 under the ‘reign’ of the deeply inadequate MDGs.” (*Center for Economic and Social Rights*)

From MDGs to the SDGs - a major shift in 'development' as an international project

- Universal – not a North-South aid agenda
- Sustainable Development (environmental, social, economic) – not ending abject poverty
- Process led by governments (notably middle income countries e.g. Colombia, Brazil) with broad civil society participation over 2 years – not a technocratic list created by SG's office

**SDGS DEPART FROM SOME KEY
SHORTCOMINGS OF MDGS AND PROMISE A
MORE TRANSFORMATIVE AGENDA**

1. **Simplicity – or - simplification and reductionism vs. complex structure**

- Reduced 'development' to delivering basic needs. Neglect of structural causes e.g. social determinants of health, political determinants of health inequalities....
- Off the table priorities in the MDGs: shifting power structures and social relations, inequality, sexual and reproductive rights, literacy, employment, climate change.....
- Quantification: inherently reductionist, creates narrative of target driven agendas favoring short termism and techno-fixes.

2. Neglecting national contexts - Unfair metric of accountability vs. national adaptation

Goals and targets to be achieved globally and nationally:

- Single set of priorities regardless of unique national challenges.
- One size fits all targets neglecting starting points.

SDGs set *global* goals. National goals to be adapted taking account of national contexts.

3. Outcome focus vs outcomes & means of implementation

- MDGs focused targets on outcomes. Target driven strategies aimed at short term gains, obscuring need to make systemic changes and long term institutional and structural changes.
- SDGs include *means of implementation* as a goal (goal 17) and within each goal. e.g. Health goal includes:
 - target 3.8: achieve universal health coverage
 - target 3.b: R&D in vaccines and medicines for diseases of the poor.

Implementation pitfalls

Broader agenda, less reductionist but risk of transformative goals/targets being neglected through:

- Selectivity – which of the 17 goals and 169 targets will be championed and mobilize attention? Will transformative goals/targets be neglected?
- Simplification and reductionism – SDGs communicated as ‘Global Goals’, shortened by removing ‘sustainable’, ‘just’, ‘inclusive’.
- Governance gaps – champions that fought hard for targets in negotiations may not advocate implementation.