

Parliamentary Action for SDGs

Lord Jack McConnell

As I watched the United Nations General Assembly agree on the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015, I was thinking about the Philippines. The Philippines is not one of the poorest nor least stable places in the world, but gross inequalities leave many living in poverty and squalor; extreme weather events destroy homes, crops and lives all too often; and conflict - most notably in Mindanao - has left hundreds of thousands dead and many more lacking education or work.

My work in the Philippines and elsewhere had convinced me that only a comprehensive, sustained, nationally led, locally accountable approach to development would truly leave no-one behind. So when Agenda 2030 was agreed, I cheered the 17 strategies for global peacebuilding and development. These strategies, known as the Sustainable Development Goals set objectives to tackle issues as diverse as climate change and gender inequality. They were not a long list of equal priorities, they were a joined up call to action that recognised the links between people, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership.

The SDGs aimed to build on the lessons learned over the 15 year period from 2000 to 2015 when the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were the focus of poverty reduction and international development. The objectives of the MDGs were admirable but progress was stymied by slow and sporadic implementation. Inadequate consensus meant that, although the Goals were progressive in nature, they were also too prescriptive. Lack of deep commitment from global leaders at the outset meant that years into implementation, many of the structural mechanisms preventing countries from tackling poverty remained unchanged.

Like the MDGs, Agenda 2030 envisions a world where millions are lifted out of poverty and sustainable development guides politics globally. However, in order for the Agenda to be successful where the MDGs were not, early action and strategic direction setting are key. With considered implementation, we now have in our hands a set of objectives that could improve the lives of millions. However, this will only be possible if: all countries embed the Goals into national policy; there

is clear cross governmental coordination; effective monitoring of progress; and accountability at every level of governance, involving elected parliamentarians and civil society stakeholders.

Successful embedding requires making the SDGs relevant at the national level in every country. Policy makers must have clear strategies to achieve this, identifying which government departments will lead on each Goal. Existing targets, policies and indicators should be measured within the framework of the SDGs to ensure measures taken to progress development fit coherently into national planning. With a focus on implementability and applicability, budgets must reflect the agreed plans.

And, in a significant change from the MDGs and the development agenda of the past, the agreement of the SDGs followed a new agenda for sustainable finance. The Addis Ababa Action Agenda agreed in July 2015 sets out a new plan for financing sustainable development. In particular, it emphasises domestic revenues. Good and fair taxation systems, well administered, can underpin development more effectively than aid from the rich world can ever do.

The scale of Agenda 2030 cannot be met by aid alone. Globally, the priority has to be the growth of domestic revenues, and their efficient use, developing accountability locally and building successful economies. This will be as transformational as “leave no-one behind” or the universal goals. However, the Addis Agenda must not gather dust, it needs to truly lead to action. Now - not later.

Successful delivery of the SDGs requires coordination at the highest level of leadership within government. This could be carried out under an Implementation Task Force, created and chaired by a Prime Minister or President. Ministers must work to promote coherence between departments improving sustainability across all policy areas, even when faced with conflicting priorities. This is easier if every department has access to specialist advice and decent funding.

Importantly, because Agenda 2030 is a 15 year plan, it is imperative that campaigns to engender support for sustainable development target all political parties across all levels of governance, not just the current government. Also, accountability must involve all parliamentarians.

Recognition of the link between the global and the local is one of the strengths of the structure of Agenda 2030, especially when it comes to issues such as climate change and sustainable production and consumption. If the Goals are not embedded into

national policy frameworks, those implementing the Agenda will lack a common language to coordinate effectively and bring about change. By reporting and sharing plans within regions, neighbouring states can support each other deliver solutions.

Agreeing on implementation plans will not be enough to achieve long-lasting development: monitoring after this point will be as important. There will be international and regional reporting but it is at the national level that Parliamentary scrutiny will be the effective way to check progress via the Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) that will be driven and led by individual countries.

There are several requirements for effective monitoring at the national level. These include the development and use of relevant and reliable statistics for measuring progress, and mechanisms to ensure those involved in delivery of the SDGs are held accountable for progress.

To begin with, effective data collection and statistical processing is essential in order to ensure VNR's are meaningful, and if governments create development plans with clear objectives, there will be greater political will to check the progress of such plans and more financial backing to do so. To facilitate this, statistical systems must be in good condition. With this in mind, in 2016, the United Nations Statistical Commission's High-level Group for Partnership, Coordination and Capacity-Building for the 2030 Agenda (HLG-PCCB) developed a Global Action Plan for Sustainable Development Data with several guiding principles.

Firstly, it was asserted there should be a *completeness of scope*. This means any strategy to improve statistical systems must focus on overall strengthening and modernisation of the infrastructure needed to support statistical development at national and regional levels.

Next, the Global Action Plan has a focus on *accountability*. To ensure this, trust between statisticians and data providers is paramount. The plan indicates that National Statistical Offices should be the leaders of such efforts, in order to ensure adherence to the UN Fundamental Principles of Official Statistics.

Lastly, *cooperation* between both national and international organisations and stakeholders is essential to coordinate efforts at every level of governance, and make comparative statistics produce accurate and useful results.

Even with rigorous statistical systems, monitoring will only be successful if it is well

coordinated across and between government and civil society. At national level a group should be responsible for scrutinising progress in line with national strategies for development. Such a body could include members from civil society, business and academia.

With national plans, governments can provide leadership and direction. With accurate independent data, they can assess their progress against the objective - leave no-one behind. Parliamentarians must then allocate the resources and hold governments to account against those plans. Whether the priorities are education or the environment, creating gender equality or creating jobs, using this approach will build momentum and deliver results.

If we really want to take meaningful steps towards development and ensure the representation of all citizens, gender equality - especially in education - is key. Leave no-one behind cannot mean “leave no man behind.” Equality before the law - in ownership rights, in domestic violence, in marriage, in voting, and in free speech - underpins the values and targets of Agenda 2030. Equal treatment is important in principle, but it also produces stronger and more successful societies too. For example, the education of girls is linked to both reducing population growth and increasing GDP. This impacts positively on the health and prosperity of an individual family and on a nation as a whole. If we diminish the contribution of half the world’s population, development will remain unrepresentative and institutions will be less able to enact meaningful change. Sustainable development will remain out of reach for all.

The MDG’s may not have been perfect, but they did help achieve change and save lives. However, for much of the world they might as well not have even existed. No conflict affected or fragile state achieved even one MDG. These basic improvements were lost on those who most needed them. So Goal 16 in the SDGs is a victory for those living in the most miserable and hopeless conditions on the planet.

Peace and Justice are prerequisites for sustainable development. Focused on human rights, peace, stability and the rule of law, Goal 16 gives those people a chance. It promotes effective governance and institutions that serve the people, not their leaders. Ultimately, Goal 16 could be the difference between building institutions that give citizens a voice and maintaining a system where only the wealthy benefit from progress and greater prosperity.

Evidence from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) has demonstrated the importance of governance. Indeed, we now know

that good governance is one of the strongest determinants of the well-being of populations, due to its association with a low incidence of corruption as well as the capacity to meet the basic needs of citizens. Moreover, following the evidence in the 2017 *World Happiness Report*, the OECD has made a commitment to redefine how development is measured, with a focus on happiness, not just the traditional measurement of Gross Domestic Product.

Empowering individuals is key. In 2012, the United Nations report ‘The Future We Want’ collated the conclusions of the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development and made several recommendations on how national governments should approach development with regards to inclusivity. In particular, it advised member States to encourage active participation of all major groups in society in order to guarantee universality; including indigenous people, young people, farmers, workers organised in trade unions, and representatives of Non-governmental Organisations.

However, where internal conflict persists, good governance cannot, and many are politically excluded. Agenda 2030 imagines a world where no-one is “left behind.” If this is to be accomplished, we need a generation of leaders who are able to navigate their way through the issues that maintain fragility, including questions around identity and the ownership of resources. Also, the international community - possible through regional groups - should be supporting nations and leaders at all levels to find solutions that encourage development and end conflict.

Unfortunately, millions of people globally live in conditions that are unacceptable in the 21st century because institutions that should alleviate suffering do not function effectively, especially in times of crisis. Goal 16 is therefore especially important because in the face of extreme events, transparency facilitated by the stability of institutions is essential. In many countries, climate change and extreme weather events regularly destroy years of progress. The Sendai Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, agreed in 2015, is conscious of this and works to mitigate the impact of catastrophes by reconstructing with a principle of *build back better*, both in terms of infrastructure and the systems that manage that infrastructure. The Framework recommends that Parliamentarians should be responsible for this rebuilding. With effective and representative institutes of governance, populations will be able to exercise accountability.

In just 12 months last year I saw for myself the pressing issues that the SDGs can help us address. Young unemployed men and women in Kenya - targets for

recruitment into violent groups due to boredom and lack of hope – are now training in vital skills and starting businesses. School leavers in Northern Nigeria - facing a life of crime or terrorist violence – are signing up for apprenticeships with local employers and registering at the local college. Young boys and girls from Syria and elsewhere in Iraq, are struggling to continue their education in temporary camps a few miles from the fighting in Mosul, Iraq - but determined that they will survive and go home again. Then we have young Muslims in Mindanao, the Philippines, hoping that peace will bring investment and improvements in education and living conditions there.

Goal 16 may read like a structural, institutional set of solutions. But it is actually about these young people, those affected by conflict: under-educated, jobless, fearful, migrating from danger to uncertainty, open to exploitation. If they are not to be left behind, Goal 16 must live for them. Good governance, conflict prevention, justice- the fair and safe rule of law- leading to education, business development, cleaner environment and hope. Leaving no-one behind.

Finally, in terms of accountability, the role young people can play as both advocates and monitors of development should not be overlooked. UNICEF and the World Bank reported in 2016 that almost 385 million children were living in extreme poverty across the world. If we cannot empower them with a positive sense of direction, we are in danger of losing an entire generation. It must be remembered that in order to secure their futures, education is as basic a necessity as water, food and shelter. Without this, it will be impossible to build sustainable development, and instead, poverty and conflict that are holding people back will endure.

In summary, if we want to make a success of Agenda 2030, it is vital that policies at national level reflect the 17 strategies for development proposed within the framework of the Sustainable Development Goals. Action must be decisive and momentum must not be lost as we move forward. This can be achieved by ensuring that mechanisms for measuring progress use reliable statistical data and are rigorous in their assessments. Cross-departmental coordination will streamline policies and create financial savings, moreover, it will allow policy makers to collaborate effectively with their counterparts in other countries. However, accountability to citizens is the most important stipulation of Agenda 2030, and, if we want to make the SDGs work for the people they are intended to help, then we must build the capacity of institutions, and ensure everyone has the opportunity to contribute.

People, prosperity, planet, peace and partnership. Let's bring them to life.