

# The Sustainable Development Goals: No More Business As Usual

*Pio Smith*

*“The adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development... is an important sign of hope. Solemn commitments, however, are not enough... Our world demands of all government leaders a will which is effective, practical and constant, concrete steps and immediate measures for preserving and improving the natural environment and thus putting an end as quickly as possible to the phenomenon of social and economic exclusion.”*

With these words, Pope Francis – in his address to the United Nations General Assembly on 25 September 2015 – set the tone and level of ambition for the world leaders who had convened in New York to agree on a new global agenda for development. Royalty, Presidents, and Prime Ministers echoed the same sentiments throughout a landmark three-day Sustainable Development Summit which followed.

A total of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets were adopted, covering all three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic, and environment. The overarching objective is to leave no-one behind and, together, they represent the world’s first universal agenda for sustainable development in which all nations – developed and developing – are called upon to take action in their own countries.

So why now? What is different from previous commitments made by world leaders on sustainable development? And how can such a bucket list be achieved, if at all possible?

## Building on the MDGs

The new sustainable development agenda builds on the successes of a set of anti-poverty objectives – the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – with a 15 year time frame, between 2000 and 2015. The MDGs generated enormous progress and represented the first attempt to translate human development into a concise, focused, simple and measurable set of goals and targets, with an emphasis on the poor. Across the globe extreme poverty was reduced by half, targeted investments in fighting malaria, HIV & AIDS, and tuberculosis saved the lives of millions, access

to improved water sources became a reality for more than two billion people, child deaths dropped dramatically, disparities in primary school enrolment between boys and girls were being eliminated in all developing regions, the political participation of women continued to increase, development assistance rebounded, the trading system stayed favourable for developing countries, and their debt burden remained low.

However, while the MDGs represented the greatest and most successful anti-poverty movement in history, they were not without their failures and critics. Among these was the lack of consultations held at their conception which led to a lack of ownership in their implementation, and allowed the perception of a donor-centric agenda to fester. The MDGs excluded some important issues outlined in the UN Millennium Declaration, example - peace, governance, and human rights. And, with a focus limited to developing countries and aid, the MDGs were not universal and provided no real emphasis on the underlying structural causes of poverty and the enablers of development. Other weaknesses included the fact that the MDGs did not recognise differences in the initial conditions of countries, policies and programmes did not consider the synergies between achieving the different goals and targets, and indicators and data lacked disaggregation by gender, geography, income, disability, and other categories.

All that being said, the MDGs showed us that target setting works as well as how much can be achieved when the international community and governments work together in true partnership on a common agenda.

The MDGs had a real impact on people's lives and there can be no doubt that the legitimacy of the new sustainable development agenda rests with the momentum and experience the MDGs have given us. The SDGs call for a paradigm shift to now take place, building on the MDGs and continuing their aims so as to arrive at the realisation of sustainable development in its three core dimensions: economic development; social inclusion; and environmental sustainability.

### **The Journey to 2015**

As the UN celebrated 70 years of existence, the year 2015 also offered a unique opportunity for global leaders and people to set the world on a path to a universal, transformative and integrated sustainable development agenda. And while the world had changed markedly since the inception of the UN, its three inter-connected pillars of development, peace, and human rights, continued – and continue – to form

the foundation for which to respond to the ongoing, emerging and new challenges – particularly for fragile states. In 2015, there was widespread recognition that the time for global action had come, presenting this generation with a unique opportunity to eradicate poverty, address the root causes of conflict, and tackle climate change within its lifetime.

Over three years, dedicated consultations and complex intergovernmental negotiations to develop the new sustainable development agenda were conducted through an unprecedented, open, and inclusive process involving governments, civil society, the private sector, academia, research institutions, and the voices of more than 1.7 million people from over 190 countries. Politicians and bureaucrats across the globe were compelled, reluctantly or willingly, to engage with all sections of their societies to consider how best to prioritise such an ambitious new agenda.

### Unveiling of Agenda 2030

Encompassing wide-ranging and ambitious social, economic and environmental priorities, the SDGs focus on Poverty, Hunger and Food Security, Health, Education, Gender Equality and Women’s Empowerment, Water and Sanitation, Energy, Economic Growth, Infrastructure and Industrialization, Inequality, Cities, Sustainable Consumption and Production, Climate Change, Oceans, Biodiversity and Forests and Desertification . The SDGs also include a dedicated goal on pursuing peace, justice and strong institutions, considered essential for retaining the gains of development and avoiding reversals in the future. And the final SDG focuses on ‘means of implementation’ and calls for a revitalised global partnership urging governments, the private sector, and civil society to collectively commit, invest, implement and deliver. Each goal is buttressed by a dedicated set of targets and indicators which take into account varying national realities, capacities, and levels of development.

The SDGs are intended to be action-oriented and global while, at the same time, national and local in nature. The then UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, heralded the agreement on the SDGs as a turning point for the world: *“This is the People’s Agenda, a plan of action for ending poverty in all its dimensions, irreversibly, everywhere, and leaving no one behind. It seeks to ensure peace and prosperity, and forge partnerships with people and planet at the core. The integrated, interlinked and indivisible 17 SDGs are the people’s goals and demonstrate the scale, universality and ambition of this new Agenda.”*

It's quite a list of priorities to remember. All 17 goals can, however, be summarised in what has been dubbed as the five 'P's: People, Planet, Prosperity, Peace and Partnership.

Their hallmark is threefold in that they are universal, integrated and transformative. First, *universal* in that they are universally applicable to every nation – rich, poor, and middle-income – and to every facet of society. All countries have adopted them and are called upon to focus national planning efforts over 15 years in achieving the SDGs. Second, *integrated* in that it is recognised that the Goals are all interconnected and we cannot aim to achieve just one Goal. All countries are called upon not to “cherry-pick” but rather to implement all 17 SDGs, recognising that ending poverty must go hand-in-hand with strategies that build economic growth and address social needs such as education, health, social protection and job opportunities, while tackling migration, climate change, and environmental protection. And third, *transformative* in that it is widely recognised that achieving these Goals involves making very fundamental changes in how we live on Earth. All partners are called upon to radically change and improve their *modus operandi* in how they mobilise, invest and implement the new sustainable development agenda at both the global and national levels.

#### *What's new?*

It is quite a list of priorities to implement and quite a daunting task for most countries, not only those who had difficulty in achieving all eight of the MDGs. The promising aspect of the new agenda, however, is the emphasis and prominence it attaches to certain aspects and partners in an effort to help demonstrate the role of each in contributing towards full and proper implementation.

*Private sector* – The private sector was not involved enough, nor considered adequately as a major player in the MDG agenda. Now, in the SDG era, the private sector has been actively involved and consulted and there is unprecedented leadership and willingness to contribute, which will hopefully prove to be one of the most important drivers for change over the next decades. Governments must now seize this opportunity to harness such transformation in a unique and re-energised manner.

As the world's main source of economic activity, business is at the heart of virtually any widespread improvements in living standards. Importantly, there is a growing awareness among the private sector of the need to integrate sustainability into their business model.

This is not just a social and environmental agenda or a question of corporate reputation. This is a business opportunity for growth and innovation. New products and new business models can equate to new markets and new customers. Sustainability is a route to competitive advantage. Thankfully, more and more companies (small, medium and large) are shifting from CSR towards the much more holistic approach of Corporate Sustainability. This entails the alignment of business corporate objectives with global and national development goals and the inclusion of their social and environmental results into performance evaluations. The pitch to business is that addressing the unmet needs of sustainable development in the economic, social and environmental spheres is both the “right thing to do” and a way to venture into new markets and create new business opportunities. In pursuing sustainable development, a values-based approach to corporate management, strategy and culture now represents a fundamental driver of change therein.

However, for companies to become active contributors to poverty eradication and sustainable development, adequate and credible accountability and transparency mechanisms are essential. For the private sector to succeed, governments need to set an enabling environment which is favourable to business and enterprise. This will require not only providing a vision, but articulating a pathway towards achieving good governance, stable macro-economic policies, modern infrastructure (both physical and digital), investments in education, training and human capital of all kinds, facilitating open markets, and championing procurement policies as a model of best practice. Utilising a multi-stakeholder partnership approach will be an effective way to galvanise broad-based joint action and serve as a mutual accountability framework, as called for in the new sustainable development agenda.

*Parliamentarians* – Sustainable development is not a technocratic exercise. The adoption of the 17 SDGs represents a historical process of political agreement amongst 193 countries, responding to an equally unprecedented global participation and mobilisation process.

Given the legislative and representative role of parliamentarians, their budgetary and oversight functions, as well as the corresponding responsibility to attend to national issues of measurement, data collection and policies that reflect open and transparent monitoring, national parliaments are – and should be – viewed as powerful agents of change for the SDGs.

The active role of Parliaments across the world will be critical in ensuring the new sustainable development agenda becomes a reality on the ground. Through the

‘power of the purse’, parliaments are key determinants of how public expenditure is mobilised and allocated towards sustainable development priorities. It is important that the SDGs be viewed as pipelines of investments that will accelerate progress towards the world’s development objectives. Through their oversight responsibilities, parliaments are empowered – and called upon – to hold governments to account in ensuring that the overarching objective of the SDGs, i.e. to leave no one behind, is not just a mantra but an objective which must be achieved by all governments. Through their role as representatives of the people, parliamentarians should serve as indispensable channels by which we can continue to give voice to the most voiceless members of society.

*Accountability* – While the SDGs are not legally binding, governments are expected to take ownership and establish national frameworks for their achievement. Accountability is integral to the achievement of the SDGs and countries have the primary responsibility to review progress in implementation. Regional review will be based on national-level analyses and contribute to follow-up and review at the global level. National review will be of critical importance to the overall review process, and governments are asked to offer the necessary civic space and legislative oversight to ensure inclusive progress toward sustainability.

*Data revolution* – To monitor and review progress on the SDGs, we will need appropriate, meaningful and reliable indicators. Data will be the lifeblood of decision-making and the raw material for accountability. Accountability is founded on good information. Information promotes social equality. Ensuring strong and transparent institutions, relevant technologies, innovation and capacities across the spectrum, particularly at the national level will be critical in implementing the SDGs. Without a fundamental change in the data landscape in many countries, neither localised SDGs nor strategically formulated national action plans will meet with any real or lasting success. A flow of high-quality, timely, authoritative, disaggregated and sustainable data is, therefore, needed to monitor progress towards national SDGs and target investments. To generate this flow, a data revolution – a sustained, transformative effort to improving how data is produced and used - will be critical. What is needed now, across the board, is action and investment.

The global political momentum, around data and their relevance to the sustainable development agenda has grown steadily and there is an accepted recognition of the need for a multi-stakeholder investment in and leadership approach to a “data revolution”. Governments can use this “SDG opportunity” to capitalise on this existing and growing momentum by engaging with a broad variety of stakeholders

and investors to ensure a transformative set of bold, phased actions help the data revolution come alive in a real and tangible manner.

Such a data revolution will be critical for pursuing equality and inclusion and for ensuring that everyone is counted through disaggregated data. Data disaggregation makes the invisible visible. The data revolution also demands leveraging new, non-traditional data taking advantage of big data. For example, using new technology, crowd-sourcing, and improved connectivity to complement traditional official statistics to meet the information needs of the SDGs and to empower people with information on the progress towards national development planning goals, mindful of the need for quality and sustainability of information and the privacy rights of citizens.

*Financing* – The SDGs are ambitious and their financing needs are enormous. The level of ambition and inclusivity aspired for requires an unprecedented shift in the scale and transparency of budgets and national budget processes. Financing is considered the linchpin for the success of a nationally-owned sustainable development agenda.

In July 2015, a financing conference was held in Addis Ababa to assess these aspects of the SDGs. The outcome document – the Addis Ababa Action Agenda – contained more than 100 concrete measures and addressed all sources of finance, as well as covering cooperation on a range of issues including technology, science, innovation, trade and capacity-building. Its key headline message was that national financing strategies will play a key decisive role in implementing the SDGs. Enhanced domestic resource mobilisation is considered central to carrying the agenda at the national level, and the outcome document includes an array of measures, agreed to by Member States, aimed at widening the revenue base, improving tax collection, and combating tax evasion and illicit financial flows. The outcome document underscored the importance of blended finance, aligning private investment with sustainable development, along with public policies and regulatory frameworks to set the right incentives. It proposed a new mechanism that will facilitate financing for new technologies for developing countries. The Addis outcome also pointed to measures to fund infrastructure for energy, transport, and water and sanitation, and to promote affordable and stable access to credit for smaller enterprises.

The ‘how’ is clear; the ‘will’, less so. Moving forward, a paradigm shift on financing sustainable development is still required to unlock the resources needed to achieve the SDGs. It is no longer about charity; rather, it is an opportunity for smart and targeted (and moral) investments.



Whether those investments will be put on the table remains to be seen. There are many competing priorities for public and private resources. Recently, issues such as national security and handling an influx of refugees have tightened the purses of many countries driving development financing. As of yet, the UN and many Member States are not sufficiently fluent in the language of the private sector, from where much SDG funding would ideally be generated. However, we also need to demonetise our understanding of what money will be required: whether in healthcare, infrastructure, or energy – doing things differently through smarter investment might be as, or more, important and sustainable as additional financing. And until a significant mindshift takes place in this direction – one that matches the ambition of the SDGs – the road ahead may be quite muddled for the time being.

### A Feasible Agenda?

For this ambitious development blueprint to unfold, a business-as-usual approach will simply not work. Agenda 2030 is an opportunity for Governments to create a transformational shift in how sustainable development can move beyond words to real implementation with lasting impact. To do so, the SDGs need to be taken seriously as time-bound, quantitative objectives, and supported by holistic strategies which deploy every innovative technique at hand. National ownership will be key, and a greater scale of transformation will require strong political leadership. National governments, North and South, will need to put in place country-specific, integrated and inclusive policies and institutions. National efforts will need to be closely in sync with sub-national and local authorities to ensure coherence and synergies across policy actions.

The process of integration (also referred to as ‘localisation’) of the SDGs into each national setting will determine the level of success each country will achieve. Integrating an international framework into national planning frameworks can yield real change. One year on however, as many practitioners are realising, there is no silver bullet for SDG integration; rather, this is about national leadership, multi-stakeholder engagement supporting wide-ranging and smart, phased investments, and a dedicated focus to addressing root causes and adapting the SDGs for individual, national policy space and needs.

When addressing the UN SDG Summit in 2015, Bhutan’s Prime Minister, Tshering Tobgay, rightly stated that “*to transform our world, we must first transform ourselves*”. Agenda 2030 calls on us all to embrace a culture of shared responsibility, based on agreed universal norms, global commitments, shared rules and evidence, collective



action, and benchmarking for progress. It requires an international community that is “fit for purpose” to support countries in their SDGs implementation. All stakeholders, including governments, must therefore take an introspective look into how they implement their new development strategies.

Implementing the SDGs is not just about providing a future of prosperity and dignity. It is more profound. It is a moment for each country to consider what connects it as a nation, what drives and defines it as a people. The SDGs provide nations with an opportunity to define their own sustainable pathway which transcends political cycles and leaves no-one behind. The SDGs coming to life within each nation represents a legacy moment; it is now for individual governments and societies to own the SDGs, without further delay, and to define that moment. No more business as usual.