

Putting a human rights perspective on the post-2015 agenda

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By September 2015 the member states of the UN have to agree on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to combat poverty. The process started with various reports of different stakeholders, in which recommendations for a follow-up framework were gathered.

In this preparation phase the private sector was given a prominent role to develop ideas and recommendations,¹ for example through a White Paper by its Global Compact network. One widely discussed report was that of a panel of eminent persons from civil society, private sector and government, under the co-chair among other of David Cameron, the so-called “High Level Panel” report. In December 2014, the UN Secretary General presented his synthesis report on a sustainable development agenda, which aggregated and valued the different reports in preparation for sustainable development goals. Though the report offers a synthesis of the various reports, it is mainly based on the work of the intergovernmental 30-member “Open Working Group” of the General Assembly of the UN.

The report of this working group, as well as the synthesis report, have been positively received by civil society, because unlike previous MDGs, the defined goals introduce a human rights perspective and refer to human rights standards. In previous reports, like the High Level Panel report of eminent persons of 2013, this perspective was not taken into account in any depth. The proposed goals were not based on human rights standards,

which in the field of HIV/AIDS for example, led to recommendations, and therefore used standards, below the agreed-upon UN standards in this area.

Since the Goals have to be agreed upon in September 2015, the states actually entered into a crucial phase of negotiations and, in February 2015, the second round of discussions of the member states started on the SDGs. The main discussion in this round focused on a declaration heading the SDGs and which will introduce the vision that inspires them.

The role of human rights in the process

From a human rights perspective, one precondition to end poverty and achieve sustainable development is to focus on overcoming inequalities, relying on existing human rights standards. The reason for this is that the standards have been agreed upon through a long process of negotiations and in many cases are universally applicable. The other reason lies in the nature of human rights, which define rights holders and duty bearers: It is a system that makes the resources that have to be allocated and the individual rights that have to be fulfilled very clear and predictable. Furthermore, with regard to a strong right to non-discrimination, this is an important tool to overcome inequalities because resources cannot be allocated in a discriminatory manner.

Since poverty in the last phase of the fulfilment of the MDGs has been reduced in some areas, the disparities in the allocation of resources and goods and, therefore, inequalities among rich and poor have increased. This phenomenon can be seen globally, but is also the case in fast-growing economies. This has an influence not only on the way the economic, social and cultural rights of all people are respected, for example when it comes to the supply of basic services by the state, like water and other infrastructure, but also greatly influences respect for and protection of political and civil rights. Through a lack of cohesion, for example, conflicts increase. In many countries, for those who oppose a system of exclusion and inequality, the possibility to protest and to organise counter activities has been restricted as result too.

Rooting the goals in human rights standards (which is supported by many civil society organizations) will make sure that the right to food, to clean water and to meaningful education are met. It will be of the utmost importance that the Sustainable Development Goals be a binding instrument, so that governments cannot implement them in a “pick and choose” fashion, but only by looking at the goals as a unit.

The synthesis report of the UN General Secretary

The synthesis report “The Road to Dignity 2013” is mainly structured around the report of the Open Working Group of member states. It addresses the fact that combating poverty can only be dealt with in a coherent manner by taking into account the causes of poverty. These include climate change, conflict and instability, the lack of rule of law, and a global economic system which benefits a minority at the expense of the majority. As Oxfam notes in its 2014 report “Working for the Few”, the 85 richest people in the world own as much wealth as the 50% poorest of the world population.

It was significant in the previous negotiating process in the “Open Working” Group that states realised that the SDGs will be an instrument to overcome injustice and poverty in all countries both in the Global South and in the North. This means that the goals will have to be met in all countries, regardless of whether they are high or low income. This understanding will lead to greater ownership of the process in the future.



The report places strong emphasis on the protection of dignity for all. In connection with this, CSOs welcomed the fact that the protection of dignity of all in the work place has to be a core element to fulfil Goal 8. It will be important to keep that commitment in the final report in order to overcome very worrying working situations in many areas. These areas include the garment industry, the mining industry and the agricultural industry, for example in the use of pesticides which cause disease for farm workers.

It is remarkable, and shows a coherent approach to development, that the synthesis report of the General Secretary has a strong focus on peace as an important factor for development. Under the heading “Justice: To Promote Safe and Peaceful Societies and Strong Institutions” the report emphasises the need to rebuild and reintegrate societies after conflict and the fact that fragility has to be assessed. Since, in many countries, violent conflict around resources like land are major factors hampering development, it is crucial that states see this relation and focus on civil conflict resolution. This also means that a future set of SDGs will have to address the question of arms deals which fuel further conflicts and which are, therefore, a great obstacle to sustainable development.

The next stage of the negotiating process, as the General Secretary sees it, will be through negotiations in the Open Working Group. At the end of February, the group decided on a declaration which set the vision and the tone of the SDGs. The report has been received with good will by CSOs. However, NGOs in Germany made it clear that the

report is the bottom line and reflects minimum standards, which should not be lowered in the following negotiation process, but should be aimed higher.

Expectations of civil society

Even if the synthesis report can be seen as a good start for a further negotiation phase, the call from civil society organisations is to address the structural reasons which produce inequality and poverty. This report, and previous reports preparing the process, have all very much relied on an economic growth paradigm. In the preparation period for the negotiations on the SDGs, as mentioned above, the private sector had a big role in the preparations for the drafting of the SDGs. Various preparatory reports, like the Global Compact, were drafted by members of the business community and by eminent members of the High Level Panel. These reports fell short of a human rights guided perspective and did not refer to universally accepted human rights standards.

Taking planetary boundaries into consideration, this cannot be a model for sustainable development, simply because of the limits which we have and which we have already reached in many areas. But recent years have also shown that a belief in a possible “trickle down effect” of economic growth to all people to combat inequalities, instability and poverty has not worked. A post 2015 framework will therefore only create sustainable development, if it implements a socio-ecological transformation and doesn't support a model for “green growth” in a capitalist world economy.

A future SDG framework to overcome poverty has to make sure that all measures take into account what impact they will have on marginalised groups and ensure that no one is left out. Under the heading “leave no one behind”, a group of 282 NGOs from all over the world have, therefore, signed a common statement calling on states to put this aspect at the core of the framework.

A key element to secure development is creating an enabling environment for civil society to participate in development. This asks for the rule of law in a country, but means also taking the right to participate very seriously, allowing meaningful

participation and not seeing civil society as mere “input” givers in local and small issues, but also in bigger development projects and to allow protest and criticism as well. Those whom development should serve should be at the centre of any development projects. Strong institutions – which are frequently mentioned as an important factor for development – cannot alone guarantee the protection of human rights standards.

What is also needed is a document that defines sustainable development goals in a coherent manner, taking into account socio-economic, ecological and peace aspects and combining them meaningfully. Furthermore, meaningful change can only be achieved through a new development agenda, if a strong monitoring mechanism is implemented as well as clear financial commitments by the member states. Otherwise, there will be the danger that the report remains a mere statement of goodwill.

The path the SDGs will take is not yet set and remains open. It gives hope though, that the discussion paper for a declaration of the new framework will recognise the need to integrate poverty, inequality, climate change and conflict. It also carefully asks a post-2015 framework to be in line with UN values. For a final document this can only be the bottom line: that sustainable development goals are based on existing human rights standards, the implementation of the goals are well monitored, and accountability mechanisms are put in place to ensure that we take a great step towards a better life in dignity for all. ■

Note

1. Global Policy Forum, Brot für die Welt, Misereor: Corporate Influence in the Post-2015 Process, January 2014.

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