

# Sustainable Development Goals – An (Alternative) Future Scenario\*

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Twenty-first century globalization is ubiquitous – global interconnectedness affects all areas of life. This development entails the need for alternative future scenarios on a global scale. The United Nations (UN) entitled the Rio+20 outcome document 'The Future We Want', which laid the foundation for a future scenario, a global declaration of planetary rights: the UN agenda 2030 / the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). In September 2015, these planetary rights were approved by all 193 nation-states and illustrate a global strategy for facing global instabilities within the realms of economic development, social inclusion, and environmental sustainability. Joe Colombano, Advisor to the UN Secretary-General, underscored the importance and the need for this bargain in calling 'this generation the first generation that can really eradicate poverty and the last one that can address the challenges of climate change' (UNSDSN 2015: The Post-2015 Agenda). This thesis will examine the SDGs within the realms of fragmentation, legal obligations, and participation. It will be shown that the selection of dimensions is inadequate, there is need for a legally binding agreement as well as for strengthening participatory approaches.

The SDGs follow on the expiring Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) which 'have underpinned the largest, longest, and most effective global poverty-reduction effort ever undertaken' (Sachs 2015: The UN at 70). The new set of goals is dedicated to ending poverty and hunger; to increasing education, gender equality and health; to improving cities, energy and water; to decreasing climate change and inequality; and to promoting a global partnership amongst peaceful societies. In a nutshell, this UN agenda 2030 is the biggest globally overarching future scenario in history.

People around the world demand a great deal of the SDGs, but the goals have three major shortcomings: First, the fragmentation into three dimensions of sustainability (economy, society, and environment) is an inadequate selection of dimensions. The causes and effects of development are far more varied. Poverty is dependent on security issues like state-building and peacekeeping. The UN agenda 2030 is lacking a humanitarian, non-military security approach like crisis prevention, peaceful conflict resolution, and peace-building. Moreover, the word stability does not exist in the SDGs. Hence, there is an unaddressed connection between those dimensions and sustainable development. The People's Republic of China demands that peace and human-rights issues 'should be excluded from the new agenda, because this would detract from genuine development goals and violate the sovereignty principle' (Jiang and Fues 2014: p. 2). Generally,

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there is a consensus regarding using the current fragmentation of the SDGs - which is based on the three dimensions of sustainability plus governance. Nevertheless, with the exception of China, the international community of states aims to strengthen peace and human rights within the SDGs.

Secondly, the SDGs only include a character of desirability, instead of a rights-based approach like a binding multilateral agreement. But there is the need for a legal framework in terms of intergovernmental negotiations because a global and democratic governance system would lead to a higher level of accountability, reliability, and compliance. There is no consensus on making the SDGs a legally binding agreement. A review-mechanism under the auspices of the 'High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development' (HLPF) embodies the greatest concession in terms of legal obligations. In this context, there is need for enhancement of global legal institutions and the formation of an adequate global partnership. Harris Gleckman, Senior Fellow at the University of Massachusetts, put it bluntly, mentioning that 'any government that believes it faces a serious external military threat can ask the UN Security Council to intervene and maintain peace and security. There is no equivalent arrangement for governments that recognize a foreign threat to their environmental, social, or economic national integrity and security' (Gleckman 2015: *New Goals, New Outcomes and Getting Out of Old Boxes*). In addition, governments, which thwart the development agenda, cannot be punished for their harming attitude. Countries like Australia and Canada are the worst performing industrial countries in terms of climate change adaptation and mitigation (cf. Germanwatch 2015: p. 6). But due to the lack of a legally binding agreement, the international community is unable to call them to account. As a result of this scarcity, both countries continue with their harming performance.

Thirdly, possibilities for participation are unequally distributed and certain actors are completely excluded from participating. Therefore, there is need for strengthening participatory approaches, for organizing fora to bring together policymakers and marginalized persons, as well as the need for recognizing the importance of indigenous populations with regard to protect their knowledge. Intellectual property rights are based on an euro-centric point of view in merely dealing with individual ownership of knowledge. But indigenous knowledge deals with community ownership of knowledge. These are two completely different paradigms of analysis. Dr. Chika Ezeanya, Professor at the University of Rwanda, demands that for African countries it is more important to get intellectual and mental independence instead of political independence (cf. Ezeanya 2014). With this notion, she pinpoints on the issue of indigenous knowledge in claiming that innovation and creativity can be founded on the basis of this form of local knowledge. Hence, there is the need for a stronger commitment to include marginalized groups, especially indigenous populations, in the implementation process of the SDGs.

Much more research has to be done in terms of the infiltration of civil rights through the private sector. The European Union is demanding 'to strengthen participatory political systems that give people, especially marginalized and vulnerable groups, a say in policy choices and decision-making' (European Commission 2014, p. 10). But to what extent does the EU guarantee this 'say in policy choices and decision-making' to its own citizens with regard to the negotiations around the 'Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership' (TTIP)? In this case, the public is excluded from the negotiations and there are no opportunities for representatives of civil society to participate in the negotiations. At large, governments must make information accessible and guarantee independent media and protect the open internet.

Beyond that, the question remains: Does the agenda illustrate an alternative future scenario prepared to face the causes of global instabilities? In order to fight poverty and hunger, the SDGs call for more economic growth. But it appears to be a contradiction to claim infinite growth on a finite planet. This can be described as a normative order that serves as a narrative to justify various actions in transnational relations. Out of this, an increase in global inequality sets to work. For instance, subsidies by the European Union 'Common Agricultural Policy' (CAP)

destroy markets in East-African countries and their local food production. Which in turn leads to a shortage in food supply and unemployment in those countries, leading subsequently to migration.

Unequal power relations remain as the biggest challenge for the UN agenda 2030. Further research has to be done on identifying and fighting structural causes of global inequalities. According to Pedro Ramos Pinto, Lecturer at the University of Cambridge, structural causes of global inequalities can be ascribed to two key points. The first key point targets societal systems that manage the allocation of resources and the conditions of access to them. The second key point encompasses valued qualities and assets, especially the value of different types of human capital (cf. Ramos Pinto 2013: p. 24). The question arises: Does the UN agenda 2030 address those structural causes efficiently? And subsequently, one can question: Do the SDGs illustrate an alternative future scenario or is it a case of old wine in new skins? Now, 70 years after the foundation of the UN, sustainable development is a highly controversial paradigm within development politics. Over the next 15 years, the SDGs have to stand the test to see if they present an alternative future or not. While the World Bank proclaims the effective end of world poverty in 2030 (cf. World Bank 2014: p.1), the OECD emphasizes an enormous increase in income inequality on a global scale (cf. OECD 2014: p.19 - 21).

To sum up, shortcomings of the Sustainable Development Goals can be found in the realms of fragmentation, legal obligations and participation. This thesis has shown that causes and effects of development are far more varied than expressed in the fragmentation. There is need for embedding the SDGs in a legal framework as well as for strengthening participatory approaches with particular focus on marginalized groups. Overall, fundamental issues can be attributed to structural causes of global inequalities. This paper highlighted various shortcomings of the SDGs in order to carve out the need for improvements in the implementation process and to encourage further research. At large, the UN agenda 2030 illustrates a future scenario on the global scale. If it can be an alternative future scenario, remains a key question with regard to the shortcomings.

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