

# How to bring the SDGs out of their current slumber?

A note prepared for the International IDEA-meeting  
Brussels, 22 November 2016

by  
Jan Vandemoortele, PhD.  
Formerly with UN, Co-architect of the MDGs

Some 425 days have elapsed since UN member states adopted the Sustainable Development Goals, yet tangible progress in terms of implementing the SDGs at the country level has been hard to come by. Several teams and working groups have undertaken follow-up work, but this has been mostly at global and regional levels. Practical initiatives undertaken at the country level to implement the SDGs are few and far between. There is little evidence that governments use the SDGs to reshape national priorities, budgetary allocations or policy orientations. It seems more as if the SDGs did not exist. Since signing the 2030 Development Agenda in New York, few world leaders have taken the SDGs to the country level. Observers and stakeholders are increasingly concerned about the slumber into which the SDGs seem to have fallen. To mark the first anniversary of the signing of the 2030 Development Agenda, Oxfam International and Unicef (Spain) issued a report entitled *Mucho por hacer* (A lot remains to be done). This condition exists in most countries, including in the majority of EU member states.

Whilst the issuance of a revised and new *European Consensus on Development* by the European Commissioner for International Cooperation and Development is to be welcomed, it cannot substitute for action on the ground. Moreover, this is no longer the time to restate and reaffirm principles and generalities that are already contained in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—e.g. about the five ‘Ps’ for ‘people’, ‘planet’, ‘prosperity’, ‘peace’ and ‘partnership’. There is so much to do, yet so little time is left. Therefore, the European Commission must now take practical, specific and urgent measures to encourage and support the member states to foster the implementation of the SDGs on the ground. Now is the time for action. The time for procrastination and dithering has passed. It is vital now for the Commission to play the role of strong champion or custodian of the SDGs and to shake the EU member states out of their current slumber. To do so, the Commission must offer concrete support and incentives. If not, the risk is that the slumber will continue and that the SDGs will remain a dead letter at the country level.

The Commission can support the member states in taking the following three major steps to foster SDG-implementing at the country level: (1) prioritization of targets, (2) adaptation to the specific context on the ground, and (3) involvement of all major stakeholders.

## Step 1: Prioritize targets

The SDGs represent a comprehensive agenda for development. As such, they encapsulate all major challenges that the world is facing during the immediate and foreseeable future. But not all challenges contained in the SDGs apply to all countries in a similar way; some will be more relevant or more challenging than others. None of the following targets, for example, constitute any challenge or have much relevance for EU member states:

- 1.1 *By 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than \$1.25 a day*
- 2.1 *By 2030, end hunger and ensure access by all people, in particular the poor and people in vulnerable situations, including infants, to safe, nutritious and sufficient food all year round*

- 2.2 *By 2030, end all forms of malnutrition, including achieving, by 2025, the internationally agreed targets on stunting and wasting in children under 5 years of age*
- 2.3 *By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers*
- 3.1 *By 2030, reduce the global maternal mortality ratio to less than 70 per 100,000 live births*
- 3.2 *By 2030, end preventable deaths of newborns and children under 5 years of age, with all countries aiming to reduce under-5 mortality to at least as low as 25 per 1,000 live births*
- 3.3 *By 2030, end the epidemics of AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria and neglected tropical diseases and combat hepatitis, water-borne diseases and other communicable diseases*
- 3.4 *By 2030, reduce by one third premature mortality from non-communicable diseases through prevention and treatment and promote mental health and well-being*

It is obvious that the above-mentioned targets have limited relevance for EU member states; except in terms of their international responsibility in support of developing countries that face these challenges. Even under goal 16, some of the targets do not quite pose a real challenge to EU member states—e.g. 16.9: *By 2030, provide legal identity for all, including birth registration.*

Therefore, an essential first step in implementing the SDGs is for each country to identify those targets among the 169 items that are most relevant to the national context. It is not the intention that every country should pursue all SDG-targets. That misunderstanding must be corrected. No country can pursue 169 priorities simultaneously. Neither should any country have to pursue that many targets because several of the SDGs will have limited relevance vis-à-vis the national context. The SDGs are useful as a global framework for helping UN member states to conceptualise strategic priorities at the country level.

Thus, the first step towards the practical implementation of the SDGs on the ground, is for each country to identify the targets that are most relevant and that truly constitute pressing issues and priorities. In doing so, the comprehensive SDG-agenda will be translated into a focused list of doable action at the national level.

### Step 2: Adaptation

The level of ambition set by global targets needs to be adapted to the specific realities at the country level. Adaptation is crucial to ensure their technical validity, logistical feasibility and financial affordability. It is also key to secure political commitment and broad public support for their achievement. That case for adaptation was made in the plan of action for implementing the declaration of the World Summit on Children, held in New York in 1990. In recent years, however, this wisdom has been lost. Increasingly, global targets have been interpreted as a one-size-fits-all yardstick for assessing performance at the country level. This, of course, is a misinterpretation of global targets.

Whether a country will meet a global target depends on its initial starting position, as well as on the specific challenges and obstacles that it faces. World maps that colour countries in red that are off-track vis-à-vis a global target are meaningless and misleading because they abstract away differences in initial conditions and particular circumstances. African nations, which mostly start from a low level of human development, are frequently depicted in red on world

maps. These maps convey a message of failure in the region whilst the truth is that several countries in Africa have performed respectably well, albeit that they did not necessarily reach the global target. Therefore, the interpretation of global targets as a one-size-fits-all yardstick is not only incorrect, it is also misleading and unfair, because it present good performance as a failure. Hence the quip ‘Africa did not miss the targets, you missed the point’.

Vietnam and Cambodia are two of the countries that adapted the MDGs to their specific context. The former translated them into the VDGs—Vietnam Development Goals—which were considerably more ambitious than the MDGs. Given its sustained progress in social and economic conditions over the past few decades, the global targets contained in the MDGs proved to lack real ambition for Vietnam. Hence, the VDGs placed the bar considerably higher than the MDGs. By contrast, Cambodia set the bar considerably lower for the CDGs—Cambodia Development Goals. Given the country’s initial conditions and specific challenges, the MDGs proved too ambitious. Moreover, the country added a numerical target for the removal of landmines, which made sense given its recent history.

The two examples illustrate that global targets can be—and have been—adapted to the realities at the country level. Regretfully, the global discourse about the MDGs has almost exclusively focused on global statistics and world maps, with a focus on so-called ‘off-track countries’. This has led to the systematic neglect of the need for adaptation of global targets at the country level. That mistake cannot be repeated in the make-up of the SDG-narrative.

The two examples show that, for global targets to have real meaning on the ground, they must strike a judicious balance between the level of ambition and their sense of realism. If a target sets the bar too low, it will not stir people into action. If the bar is set too high, it will undermine the people’s belief that the target can be reached. Hence, targets that do not strike a balance between ambition and realism will either fail to motivate people to act or discourage them from acting. Just as the level of ambition of global targets must be set at the global level, that of national targets should be defined at the country level. Therefore, it is quite mindless to literally transplant numerical targets from the global to the country level without taking account of the national context and the initial conditions. The 2013 ‘European Report on Development’ proposes a mixed approach to target setting. It suggests to combine global goals and national targets in the following manner: “*National targets could be aggregated in order to calculate a global target value*”. The practical feasibility of that idea, however, is not obvious; and the report does not explain how it could be put into practice.

### Step 3: Participation

The previous two steps are not only technical in nature, but also political. Therefore, they must be carried out with the full participation of all major stakeholders. However, this is not quite what the 2030 Agenda states: *Targets are defined as aspirational and global, with each government setting its own national targets guided by the global level of ambition but taking into account national circumstances*. The prioritisation of relevant targets and their adaptation are essential steps in the implementation of the SDGs but if these tasks are assigned to ‘government’ alone, the process is likely to result in cherry-picking and watering down of the global targets. It is vital, therefore, to conduct the selection and adaptation process through a participatory process; involving not only government but also the social partners, civil society, academics, community representatives and possibly citizen’s assemblies.

Participation is inextricably linked with democratic governance and human rights. The recent trend is to resist inflationary tendencies in the identification of what counts as a human right.

Yet, the right to participate in public and political life is so inherent and of such instrumental value that democratic governance cannot do without the genuine participation of all citizens. For a political system that claims to respect human rights and democracy, the right to participate is sacrosanct. Hence the vital importance of a participatory approach in the prioritization and adaptation of the SDGs to the national context. It is in this sense that participation constitutes the silent 'P' of the SDGs, besides the five 'Ps' mentioned in the 2030 Agenda, for participation goes to the core of what goal 16 aims at. Participation seems a timely remedy against growing discontent with government and distrust in elected officials and corporate leaders.

### Global level

Besides the work that is needed at the country level, the implementation of the SDGs will also need action at the global level. Here, two priorities apply.

First, the formulation of some of the targets in the 2030 Development Agenda is less than perfect. This was underscored by the scientific review of the SDGs by the International Council for Science, in collaboration with the International Social Science Council. That review concludes that less than a third of the targets are well formulated and that more than half of the SDGs need considerable reformulation to be scientifically valid. Here, the use of appropriate indicators can help remedy some of the flaws contained in the SDGs. The Palma ratio, for instance, can fix target 10.1 about inequality. The body mass index can fix target 3.6, which omits the challenge of growing obesity across the world. Statistics on misinvoiced trade can fix target 16.4. At the global level, the members of the UN Statistical Commission must show a greater readiness to adopt indicators that reflect reality instead of those that capture only the convenient aspect of reality.

Second, the formulation of the meta-narrative about the SDGs will need a radically different approach than was the case with the MDGs. With the latter, the main ingredients were global statistics and world maps with off-track countries coloured in red. The global assessment of the SDGs will need to pay due attention to how global targets make a difference at country level. Since each country will pursue different aspects of the SDGs, for which different aims and possibly different benchmarks will apply, the aggregation of country-level progress to the global level will have to consider national prioritisation and adaptation. Otherwise the global narrative will be based on a comparison of apples with oranges.

### In conclusion

It must be recalled that the relative success of the MDGs was essentially due to three 'Cs': clarity, conciseness and computability. Numerical and time-bound targets about clearly defined outcomes are useful to stir people into action. By contrast, an overloaded agenda with fuzzy targets will not mobilise actors in a similar way. When seeking consensus regarding the 2030 Development Agenda, member states were not able to embed the three 'Cs' into the formulation of the SDGs; this for obvious reasons of international realpolitik. It would be naïve, even misleading, to present the SDGs as the result of an easy coalescence of nations, in a multilateral context free of discord. However, the three 'Cs' can be restored at the country level. The fragmented international world that caused the 2030 Agenda to be woolly and convoluted does not pose the same obstacles in defining strategic national priorities, based on the SDG-framework. Therefore, the participatory selection and adaptation of the global targets to the national context constitute the only way to bring the SDGs out of their current slumber.