

Towards a Framework of Universal Sustainability Goals as Part of a Post-2015 Agenda



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The debates on an agenda for international co-operation and development beyond 2015 offer the opportunity to (re-)address in a holistic manner well-being and justice in societies. Given the economic, social and ecological challenges in the world, this is urgently needed.

The present framework of international development goals centering on the MDGs and the related strategies do not provide adequate answers to the global problems, be they accelerated global warming, the growing gap between rich and poor, the financialization of the world economy or the disrespect for human rights.

Given these problems we require changes in the economic and social systems. A development agenda focusing only on poor countries and not on the rich ones is inadequate.

This does not mean such an agenda should prescribe top-down identical goals, responsibilities and political recipes following a one-size-fits-all approach. A future development agenda ought to be based on common principles providing for a differentiation of countries according to their economic performance, social needs and ecological responsibilities. Similarly, the agenda ought to contain a differentiated catalogue of political commitments. Embedded between the general principles and the political implementation measures, Universal Sustainability Goals would be an essential albeit one element of the Post-2015 Agenda.

The discussions about any Post-2015 Agenda must address the structural obstacles and political barriers that prevented the realization of the MDGs. Without an honest assessment of these obstacles and barriers any so called “new” development goals will remain a paper tiger.

I. Contours of the Post-2015 Agenda

A Post-2015 Agenda for international co-operation and sustainable development must contain the following elements:

- 1. A Political Declaration** emphasizing the core principles and the normative foundations of the Post-2015 Agenda.
- 2. A Program for Structural Transformation** defining the financial, regulatory and institutional measures to realize the sustainability goals at international level.
- 3. An integrated system of Universal Sustainability Goals** with absolute goals and provisions on their differentiated application at regional, national and local levels.
- 4. A Universal Periodic Review on Sustainability** in order to monitor and assess progress and barriers in achieving the goals.

All four elements are intertwined. A declaration of principles without the political goals derived from it would be just as ineffective as a global catalogue of goals without accountability mechanisms and a binding plan of implementation.

II. Core principles of the Post-2015 Agenda

The Post-2015 Agenda needs to be based on shared principles and values. They do not have to be invented or agreed on via tedious negotiation processes. In international treaties, declarations and political statements, above all the Rio Declaration of 1992 and the Millennium Declaration of 2000, governments have agreed on fundamental principles that are crucial to relations at national and international levels.

The following eight principles can serve as a normative basis for a future development agenda:

1. Solidarity principle. Solidarity has been a widely accepted principle in many national constitutions to govern the relationship of citizens within a country. Central to this concept is the equality of persons and their shared responsibility for a common good. In the notion of solidarity, assistance is not an act of charity, but a right of every woman, man and child. Solidarity differs radically from charity and philanthropy. In times of globalization, this concept has been transferred to the international level. In the Millennium Declaration, governments listed solidarity as one of the core values: “*Global challenges must be managed in a way that distributes the costs and burdens fairly in accordance with basic principles of equity and social justice. Those who suffer or who benefit least deserve help from those who benefit most.*”¹

2. Do-no-harm Principle. Originally a key principle of medical ethics reflected in the promise of the Hippocratic Oath ‘*to abstain from doing harm*’, this principle has become relevant to other areas. For instance, it has been included in humanitarian principles of UNICEF since 2003, and it has been adopted by major humanitarian organizations in their codes of conduct. In essence, the commitment to implement policies in a way that they do no harm to people or nature should be regarded as a guiding principle in all policy areas and at all levels.

3. Principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Already mentioned above, the Rio Declaration of 1992 states: ‘*In view of the different contributions to global environmental degradation, States have common but differentiated responsibilities. The developed countries acknowledge the responsibility that they bear in the international pursuit of sustainable development in view of the pressures their societies place on the global environment and of the technologies and financial resources they command.*’² By including the historical dimension, this principle goes beyond the principle of ‘special and differential treatment’ based on economic capabilities and needs, as contained in World Trade Organization agreements. The principle is a key element of the Kyoto Protocol, but its application must not be limited to the climate negotiations. The principle applies

at regional, sub-national and even communal level as well: those who can bear more burdens have to contribute more to the well-being of their communities – be that through progressive taxation or through practical action. The crunch question at all levels is according to what basis of allocation the responsibilities and the financial burdens they entail should be shared.

4. ‘Polluter pays’ principle. The simple message of this principle is that the costs of pollution have to be borne by those who cause it. The Rio Declaration states in Principle 16: ‘*National authorities should endeavor to promote the internalization of environmental costs and the use of economic instruments, taking into account the approach that the polluter should, in principle, bear the cost of pollution [...].*’³ While this principle is widely acknowledged in international environmental law, it should be applied in other areas as well. In the context of the recent financial crisis, many asked for the ‘polluters’ – that is, the banks and the financial industry – to bear the costs of the crisis. For instance, European Commissioner Michel Barnier said: ‘*I believe in the “polluter pays” principle. We need to build a system which ensures that the financial sector will pay the cost of banking crises in the future.*’⁴

5. Precautionary principle. In the absence of a scientific consensus on the impacts an action or policy has on people or nature, the burden of proof that it is not harmful falls on the proponents of this action or policy. This principle is also laid down in the Rio Declaration, which says in Principle 15: ‘*In order to protect the environment, the precautionary approach shall be widely applied by States according to their capabilities. Where there are threats of serious or irreversible damage, lack of full scientific certainty shall not be used as a reason for postponing cost-effective measures to prevent environmental degradation.*’ The principle is also part of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change (Article 3.3) and has been incorporated into many other international agreements, such as the Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety in the year 2000.

6. Subsidiarity principle. Political decisions must always be taken at the lowest possible administrative and political level, and hence as close to the citizens concerned as possible. This idea is a core element of federalism and one of the central principles in the treaties of the European Union. But indigenous peoples also regard this principle as an essential tool to preserve their identity, diversity

1 UN General Assembly (2000): Millennium Declaration of the United Nations. New York. (UN Doc. A/RES/55/2), para. 6.

2 UN General Assembly (1992): Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. New York (UN Doc. A/CONF.151/26 (Vol. I)), Principle 7.

3 Ibid. Principle 16.

4 Cf. http://ec.europa.eu/news/economy/100526_de.htm.

and cultures. Subsidiarity recognizes the inherent democratic right to self-determination for people, communities and nations, but only as long as its exercise does not infringe on similar rights of others. Therefore, it must not be misused as an argument against central governmental action at national or international levels, but must always be applied in combination with the other principles, in particular the solidarity principle.

7. Principle of free, prior and informed consent. According to this principle, communities have the right to give or withhold their consent to proposed projects and actions by governments or corporations that may affect their livelihood and the lands they customarily own, occupy or otherwise use.

This is a key element of the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples from 2007 and is recognized in the ILO Convention on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in Independent Countries (169/1989).

However, this principle is not limited to the rights of indigenous peoples. For example, it is also laid down in the Rotterdam Convention on the Prior Informed Consent Procedure for Certain Hazardous Chemicals and Pesticides in International Trade (PIC Convention, 1998). This convention provides, *inter alia*, for importing countries to receive information on a chemical being exported from a country that has banned or severely restricted it for health or environmental reasons.

8. Principle of peaceful dispute settlement.

This is a core element of the UN Charter, which says in Article 2:

“All Members shall settle their international disputes by peaceful means in such a manner that international peace and security, and justice, are not endangered.”

In the Manila Declaration of 1982, governments reconfirmed that the peaceful settlement of disputes should represent one of the central concerns for states and for the UN.⁵ Deriving from the most basic human right to a dignified life, this principle also applies to the relationships between states and people as well as among people themselves.

These eight principles can provide the cornerstones of a universal sustainability rights framework. They are interconnected and must not be applied in isolation. In addition to them, there are a number of fundamental values that are equally

important in international relations and societal development. In the Millennium Declaration, governments committed themselves to the following values in particular:

- » **Freedom.** Men, women and children have the right to live their lives in dignity, free from hunger and from the fear of violence, oppression or injustice. Democratic and participatory governance based on the will of the people best assures these rights. But there are also limits to freedom – namely where the freedom of our peers is touched. *‘Freedom is always the freedom of dissenters’* (Rosa Luxemburg). And freedom has its limits in the principle of ‘do no harm’.
- » **Equality.** No individual and no nation or group must be denied the opportunity to participate in and to benefit from development. Equal rights and opportunities of women and men must be assured. Equality also includes the concept of intergenerational justice – that is, the recognition that the present generation shall only meet its needs in a way that does not compromise the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.
- » **Diversity.** Human beings must respect one another, in all their diversity of belief, culture, language, looks, sexual orientation and gender. Differences within and between societies should be neither feared nor repressed, but cherished as a precious asset of humanity. A culture of peace and dialogue in mutual learning should be actively promoted.
- » **Respect for nature.** Respect must be shown in the conduct towards all living species. This also applies to the use of natural resources and the ecosystems as a whole. But respect for nature means much more than sound management of the human environment: it means that all living species have intrinsic rights. They should not be regarded as objects but as subjects whose value goes beyond use and exchange. This understanding of nature as a living system is reflected in the thinking and belief systems of indigenous peoples, for instance in the concept of *Buen Vivir*.

⁵ UN General Assembly (1982): Manila Declaration on the Peaceful Settlement of International Disputes. New York (UN Doc. A/RES/37/10).

Governments have generally given their approval to these principles and values. However, this is not enough. They need to be translated into legally enshrined rights and duties. Here, the **universal system of human rights** plays a key role. The Human Right System provides key principles such as progressive realization of Human Rights, maximum available resources, non-retrogression and extraterritorial obligations. Moreover, the United Nations Charter of Human Rights comprising the General Declaration of Human Rights, the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights and the International Covenant on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights is of particular importance. The International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women, the Convention on the Rights of the Child and the International Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Racial Discrimination are of equal importance. Recently, these key documents have been supplemented by the Convention on the Protection and Promotion of the Diversity of Forms of Cultural Expressions (2005) and the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples (2007).

A rights-based social contract also requires the Rule of Law (RoL) being more than the law by rulers or rule by law. The first-ever UN high-level meeting devoted to the RoL on 24 September 2012 adopted a *Declaration on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels (A/67/L.1)* endorsed by the 67th General Assembly. Member States reaffirmed their “*commitment to the rule of law and its fundamental importance for political dialogue and cooperation among all States and for the further development of the three main pillars upon which the United Nations is built: international peace and security, human rights and development.*”

While the standards of the international system of human rights and the Rule of Law are generally accepted and most of the world’s countries have ratified them, there is a huge implementation gap, indicating that it is not enough to merely translate the fundamental principles into internationally agreed rights and duties. The next step has to be to formulate political goals and strategies to implement these rights.

However, the development and implementation of such political goals and strategies must address the structural obstacles and political barriers that prevented the realization of many development goals so far.

III. Overcoming obstacles and barriers – towards a program of structural transformation

Despite the strong commitment to achieve the international development goals trade, investment and monetary rules and policies have all too often exacerbated poverty and inequalities. The obsession with growth, backed up by the dominant economic regime, provides the drive to exploit nature, rely on fossil fuels and deplete biodiversity, undermining the provision of essential services.

Countries compete in a race to the bottom, offering lower taxes and cheaper labor so as to attract investments. Tax havens allow for tax evasion; bilateral and regional investment and trade agreements as well as the Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) have undermined social, environmental and human rights standards and they have reduced the policy space of governments.

These policies have strengthened the power of investors and big corporations through deregulation, trade and financial liberalization, tax cuts and exemptions, and they have weakened the role of the state and its ability to promote human rights and sustainability.

Economic policies have on many occasions contradicted the commitments made to human rights and sustainability, as they and their related national and international institutions occupy the top of governance domains. They have relied too much on markets to allocate societies’ limited resources and distribute their wealth, singling out GDP growth as the ultimate measure of well-being. The results have included: unabated appropriation of land; exploitation of seas and other natural resources, particularly in the global South; increased concentration and larger market shares of a few transnational corporations, notably in the food and pharmaceutical sectors; and precarization of work.

No other sector in society has gained more rights globally and locally than ‘big business’, be it national or transnational. Except for meek attempts at voluntary self-regulation and corporate social responsibility (CSR), the concentration and exercise of corporate power play a detrimental role in many parts of our world.

For too long, economic policies have been shaped by interest groups outlining policies ‘*without alternatives*’. The Post-2015 Agenda should lead to

structural transformations instead of being led by players whose advice has taken us down paths that are unsustainable.

The necessary structural transformations have to address *inter alia* the share a country has of world-wide (over-)exploitation of natural resources and damage to the global ecosystem e.g. via the excessive emission of greenhouse gases. According to the polluter pays principle, this could provide the foundation for a **system of fair burden sharing** based on equal emissions and user rights (taking into account the historical responsibility of societies) and justifying obligatory compensation.

The realization of Universal Sustainability Goals requires more than money. It is the regulatory and institutional framework at national and international levels that counts. For example, it may accelerate or prevent processes of impoverishment, influence consumption and production patterns and promote or stifle democratization processes.

IV. An integrated system of Universal Sustainability Goals

The formulation of Universal Sustainability Goals should set out from a critical stocktaking of the strengths and weaknesses of the MDGs, and address the obstacles and barriers mentioned above. This ensures that the Universal Sustainability Goals capture an holistic development approach and reflect the scope of the Millennium Declaration; are universally valid, i.e. for all countries of the world (and not only the “developing countries”); consider regional, national and sub-national differences; do not fall short of codified human rights, including the economic, social and cultural rights; address the planetary boundaries; define desired results, necessary (financial) resources, comprehensive technology assessment systems, and formulas for burden sharing and user rights. It should be based on meaningful indicators of socioeconomic disparities using alternative ways to measure well-being and societal progress beyond GDP.

While the goals should not be formulated so vaguely that no rights, obligations or political instructions can be derived from them, they should not be so prescriptive that they restrict the democratic policy space of societies to take sovereign decisions on their development paths.

Before the official negotiations on the Post-2015 Agenda have even started, proposals on future goals should under no circumstances be limited to

what is regarded as feasible from the point of view of *realpolitik*. Rather, they ought to address the global problems we are facing.

Dimensions of Universal Sustainability Goals

In this sense, an integrated system of Universal Sustainability Goals could comprise the following six goal dimensions:

1. Dignity and human rights for all
2. Equity, equality and justice
3. Respect for nature and the planetary boundaries
4. Peace through disarmament, demilitarization and non-violent dispute settlement
5. Fair economic and financial systems
6. Democratic and participatory decision-making structures

These six dimensions must not be regarded in isolation from one another. They overlap and are partly interdependent.

Absolute goals and boundaries

The internationally codified rights and obligations and the ecological boundaries are by their very essence absolute goals, universally valid and not time-bound. They apply to all people, and not only to a section of the world population. Their achievement is premised on tackling and overcoming structural obstacles and barriers. Thus, for example, the right to food implies that everyone in the world should have enough to eat and it is not acceptable to just reduce the proportion of people suffering from hunger by a certain year or ignore the impacts of the financial sector on food prices.

Similarly, science defines that concentration of CO₂ in the Earth's atmosphere must not surpass 350 ppm (particles per million). In terms of the “peace” dimension, the elimination of all atomic, biological and chemical weapons (ABC weapons) is another absolute goal.

Differentiated targets

In the path towards reaching global absolute goals, differentiated targets should be defined in democratic decision-making processes at regional, national and local levels. Specific groups facing intersecting inequalities based on gender, age, class, ethnicity, sexual orientation, abilities etc. should be prioritized. In this manner, the different

socio-economic contexts and the specific social situation of a country are to be taken into account. Such targets should also be defined similarly for the global level with regard to global commons.

All these differentiated targets should respect the human rights principles of progressive realization and non-regression. This means that instead of fixing a date when the goals have to be achieved, the variables are the degree and speed of progress in achieving the absolute goals. Rather than defining new “2015 Goals” that would subsequently be referred to as “2030” or “2050 Goals”, governments commit themselves to continuous progress defined for a shorter period of e.g. five years. This can take place within the framework of a “pledge and review procedure” in which the individual states commit themselves at national level to achieve specified targets within a period of five years and subsequently have them independently monitored and assessed.

Any UN review process should address not only national performance but also global obstacles, e.g. those posed by the intellectual property right regime in achieving the goal of universal access to medicines.

Meaningful indicators

Experience with the MDGs has illustrated how important are the choice of meaningful indicators and the limiting or threshold values. For example, the “one dollar a day” threshold does not accurately measure a country’s true state of poverty. This also applies to the exclusive use of national average values. The selection of suitable indicators will be crucial for a system of Universal Sustainability Goals. The indicators should be chosen with a view to their universal applicability.

Indicators and public access to the data are influential in shaping policy priorities, budget allocation and holding authorities accountable; data collection and dissemination are per se an expression of political commitment to transformation.

Indicators of distribution and inequality should be designed to run like a thread through the system of goals. The Gini Coefficient and the Gender Equity Index developed by Social Watch could be possible indicators for the second goal dimension (promoting equity and justice).⁶ In addition, the indicators ought to be disaggregated according to income or wealth and gender. What is the quality of water supply for the poorest tenth of the

population in comparison to the richest tenth? What differences are there between the “ecological footprint” or CO₂ emissions of the poorest and the richest income groups? Violations of women’s rights could be identified more easily, too. What differences are there between men and women e.g. in terms of access to social security systems in a country? How is landed property distributed among men and women? How do men and women differ in terms of participation in political decision-making processes?

In using the Universal Sustainability Goals as communication and mobilization tools, it might be useful to identify aggregated coefficients or indices for the six goal dimensions. Examples to explore are the Gross National Happiness Index and the Gender Equity Index, as well as the Ecological Footprint.

V. Universal Periodic Review on Sustainability

An integrated system of Universal Sustainability Goals is not limited to targets and indicators. Its political effectiveness also includes mechanisms for the monitoring of progress or regressive developments in achieving the goals. Here, the monitoring mechanism that already exists in the form of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the human rights field could serve as a model. An extended UPR on Sustainability, complementary to the existing one, could be adopted that encompasses all dimensions of the Universal Sustainability Goals.

Its *modus operandi* could follow the IBSA (Indicators, Benchmarks, Scoping and Assessment) mechanism.⁷ The IBSA mechanism comprises four steps to check whether a country is fulfilling its obligation to comply with the realization of the economic, social and cultural rights. Firstly, the indicators for the assessment of progress are defined. In the second step, the country defines benchmarks that are to be achieved within the prescribed period. The third step comprises scoping, which is a review at UN level of whether reasonable objectives have been set or whether they have proved to be too high or too low. The final step is an assessment of the achievement of the goals. Then the cycle starts off again.

6 Cf. www.socialwatch.org/node/14365.

7 Cf. Riedel, Eibe (2006): *The IBSA Procedure as a Tool of Human Rights Monitoring*. Mannheim; and Riedel, Eibe et al. (2010): *Indicators - Benchmarks - Scoping - Assessment*. Background Paper. Berlin/Geneva: Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung.

The assessment procedure will be based on information provided by governments as well as civil society and other independent sources. A review of this kind offers a “coherence check” covering a country’s entire policies and would put to the test its compliance with the universal sustainability principles and human rights – as well as the extra-territorial obligations of the international community. The High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development set up by governments in Rio 2012 could be the appropriate body to implement the UPR and make this a meaningful body.

VI. On the way to the 2015 Summit

The proposed framework of Universal Sustainability Goals as part of a Post-2015 Agenda is comprehensive. Some have warned of a danger of overloading the Post-2015 Agenda and are calling for a limited focus on poverty eradication and social development in the countries of the South – and hence *de facto* for a continuation of the present MDG approach.

However, a reductionist approach of this kind would mean engaging in business as usual and holding out in the same patterns of dealing with problems sector by sector, which has so far prevented solutions to the global problems. This would be the wrong course to pursue and would

not do justice to the “multiple crisis” with its interdependences.

If the aim is a holistic development agenda, which is what both the UN and governments as well as civil society organizations have emphasized again and again, then this has to be reflected in the discussion and negotiation processes taking place up to 2015.

Civil society organizations should not be paralyzed by threats of intergovernmental negotiation blockages but claim what is needed in the Post-2015 Agenda and the Universal Sustainability Goals. An integrated approach is required that would lead to new interdisciplinary alliances within civil society and social movements. This applies in particular to development, ecological, social justice, peace and human rights organizations.

The process towards a future development agenda and Universal Sustainability Goals offers an opportunity to shape societal progress, respecting ecological boundaries and promoting the principles of solidarity and global responsibility based on equity.

This draft discussion paper has been prepared for the *Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives*. It’s part of a series of papers addressing key issues related to the Post-2015 Agenda.

The *Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives* was established in November 2010 by Social Watch, Third World Network, Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era (DAWN), the Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung, Global Policy Forum, terre des hommes and the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation. It provides an informal space for in-depth discussions for civil society activists and scholars from all parts of the world to explore conventional and alternative models of development and well-being.

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