

# Core Principles, Universal Goals

The debates on a post-2015 development agenda offer the opportunity to (re)address well-being and justice in societies in a holistic way. Given the economic, social and ecological challenges in the world, this is urgently needed.

The present framework centering on the MDGs and the related strategies does 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 disrespect for human rights.

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.

The Post-2015 Agenda needs to be based on shared principles and values. The following eight principles can serve as a normative basis for a future development agenda:

**1. Solidarity principle.** Solidarity is a widely accepted principle 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.

**2. Do-no-harm Principle.** Originally a key principle of medical ethics, this principle 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.** By acknowledging the responsibility developed countries bear in view of the pressures they place on the global

## Reflection Group

The Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives is an alliance of civil society groups, networks and foundations, including Third World Network, DAWN, the Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation, Global Policy Forum, terre des hommes, the Dag Hammarskjöld Foundation and Social Watch.

The Group aims to assess conventional and alternative models of development and well-being, reconsider

development goals and indicators, draw conclusions for future development strategies and provide specific policy recommendations to support a holistic, right-based approach of global development and well-being. The six Universal Sustainability Goals described here have been proposed by the Group, based on its analysis of the core common principles and values already approved by the international community. ■

environment, this principle goes beyond the principle of ‘special and differential treatment’ based on economic capabilities and needs. It applies at regional, subnational and even communal levels: those who can bear more burdens have to contribute more to the well-being of their communities – either through progressive taxation or practical action.

**4. ‘Polluter pays’ principle.** 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 –including European Commissioner Michel Barnier—asked for the ‘polluters’ – that is, the banks and the financial industry – to bear the costs.

**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 its proponents. policy. This principle is also laid down in the Rio Declaration, which says: *“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 costeffective measures to*

*prevent environmental degradation,”* and is part of the UN Framework Convention on Climate Change.

**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. It 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.

**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.*” 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.

In the Millennium Declaration, governments committed themselves to the following values:

- **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.
- **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.

Governments have generally given their approval to these principles and values.

However, they need to be translated into legally enshrined rights and duties. Here, the universal system of human rights plays a key role, providing key principles such as progressive realization of human rights, maximum available resources, nonretrogression and extraterritorial obligations.

A rights-based social contract also requires the Rule of Law being more than the law by rulers or rule *by* law. In the 2012 *Declaration on the Rule of Law at the National and International Levels*, 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.*”

Despite the commitment to achieve the international development goals, trade, investment and monetary rules and policies have 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; global, bilateral and regional investment and trade agreements have undermined social, environmental and human rights standards and 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.

No other sector in society has gained more rights globally and locally than ‘big business,’ be it national or transnational. 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 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.

## An Integrated System of Universal Sustainability Goals

The formulation of Universal Sustainability Goals should set out from a critical stock-taking of the strengths and weaknesses of the MDGs, and address the problems mentioned above. This ensures that the Universal Sustainability Goals capture an holistic development approach and reflect the scope of the Millennium Declaration; are valid for all countries of the world, not only the “developing countries”; consider regional, national and subnational 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. They should be based on meaningful indicators of socioeconomic disparities using alternative ways to measure well-being and societal progress beyond GDP.

An integrated system of Universal Sustainability Goals could comprise six dimensions, which overlap and are partly interdependent:

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 nonviolent dispute settlement
5. Fair economic and financial systems
6. Democratic and participatory decision-making structures

## 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, not only to a section of the world population. Their achievement is premised on tackling and overcoming structural barriers. Thus 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.

## 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, and so on should be prioritized. In this manner, the different socioeconomic 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.

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 Goals” or “2050 Goals,” governments commit themselves to continuous progress defined for a shorter period of, say, five years. This can take place within the framework of a “pledge and review procedure” in which the individual states commit themselves to achieve specified targets at national level 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, for example, 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 and 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). 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 CO<sub>2</sub> 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 in terms of eligibility for 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.

## 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 regression 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, which comprises four steps to check whether a country is fulfilling its obligation to comply with the realization of the economic, social and cultural

rights: 1) the indicators for the assessment of progress are defined; 2) the country defines benchmarks that are to be achieved within the prescribed period; a review at UN level of whether reasonable objectives have been set; and 4) an assessment of the achievement of the goals. Then the cycle starts again.

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 universal sustainability principles and human rights as well as the extraterritorial obligations of the international community. The High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development could be the appropriate body to implement the UPR and make this a meaningful body.

## 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. ■