

SPAIN

Goals for 2030... and obstacles to achieving them

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Is the 2030 Agenda compatible with the neoliberal project? What happens in Spain in the current political context is a practical laboratory on how institutions, political parties and citizens are thinking about that question. Any serious strategy and initiatives to adapt and implement the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in Spain would have to incorporate several fundamental issues. Not so long ago, Spain's commitment to the recognition of freedoms and rights in terms of equality were recognized; and its geographical and climatic conditions and technological development are sufficient to manage an energy transition towards models based on renewable resources. Its challenge in terms of employment however, suggests the need to explore productive transformation policies. There is room to expand fiscal policy given its low tax revenue in relation to neighbouring countries, and domestic rates of poverty and inequality require prioritizing specific policies in order to reduce them.

1. Spain in and before the 2030 Agenda

Spain lived a dramatic paradox during the three years of the process of development of the 2030 Agenda: on the one hand the Government reaffirmed its commitment to the new Agenda, while on the other it dismantled its ability to implement this commitment, in terms of budget and discourse.¹

The political framework of dismantling was the policy of control of the public deficit by cuts in the budget and provision of services and rights in social policies such as education, health, dependency and pensions. Regulations on debt repayment were prioritized to such an extent

that even the Constitution was amended to stipulate repayment of the debt over any other spending, deregulating the right to jobs and making it easier to dismiss workers. In the fiscal area, a regressive increase through indirect taxes was also decided, to increase the relative weight of taxation of labour income over capital income. Certainly, expenditure control did not serve as an argument for everything: deficits of the private banks were endorsed and rescued with millionaire amounts and budgets for security and defense policy increased year after year.

In the area of civil liberties, the Government passed a new Security Act criminalizing protests known as the "Gag Rule" and tried to amend the Law on Voluntary Interruption of Pregnancy. The results were predictable: an unemployment rate that is always around 20 percent of the active population (about 50% of the youth labour force)²; a spectacular growth of the population living below the national poverty line, dramatically increased income inequality, putting Spain at the top among the countries of the European Union (EU), and for the first time after more than a century, an external debt that exceeds 100 percent of the Spanish GDP. The budget for Official Development Assistance (ODA) hit rock bottom by returning to the same percentage as in the late eighties. In mid-2015 the Government tried to cover up the guidelines and the effects of policies implemented by slightly lower taxes

² Despite the "siren song" of economic recovery, the truth is that over the long term, the hours worked in Spain have fallen by 7%, the wage bill has fallen by 3% and the income of 14.8% of working people does not exceed the national poverty line. See http://www.eldiario.es/zonacritica/todavia-esperanzas-cambio_6_520457967.html

¹ We have analysed this in depth at <http://2015ymas.org/centro-de-documentacion/publicaciones/2014/1576/#.V1V5vsdPf4p>

and issued a speech focused on economic recovery. To this end, international institutions (IMF, OECD, EU) released macroeconomic projections of growth of the Spanish economy that tried to legitimize the set of policy decisions made, called "structural reforms", and to induce the feeling that the worst was over.

Therefore, somewhat paradoxically, in the case of Spain it was presented as perfectly compatible to support a 2030 Agenda aimed at transformation, equality and transition towards more just and sustainable policies while encouraging policies of control of expenditure and cuts of rights that deepened a model that generates inequality and unsustainability. In fact, the support and commitment to the 2030 Agenda went hardly beyond the reduced and dismantled field of development cooperation policy, since no government department made statements or undertook actions related to the appeals contained in this Agenda. The political priorities of the Government in Spain were different: being able to restore public support to continue the neoliberal project.

2. The longest electoral cycle of democracy: some breaks

The date set to begin implementation of the 2030 Agenda was 1 January, 2016. On that date Spain began what would become the shortest electoral term since the restoration of democracy in 1978. Since the elections of 20 December, 2015, Spain has been governed by an appointed executive and the situation remains unchanged since the elections of June 26, although many are now speaking of a third election in December.

In this context, the global responsibilities of the Spanish state, endorsed in the 2030 Agenda, have little political and media space. This was never a priority in its task of government: the matrix of current Spanish foreign policy focuses on promoting the exports of the most important and influential companies in the country, for which the main strategy of foreign policy under the name of "Brand Spain" is placed at their service.³ This view of politics as a strategy of corporate brand recognition understands

nothing of global public goods, global justice or shared challenges in terms of environmental sustainability or human rights.

However, an interpretation that can be made of the 2030 Agenda in Spain is precisely its relevance. The main change in the Spanish political context is the so-called end of bipartisanship expressed with the forceful emergence of a new political party, Podemos, both in the state legislatures and in some important municipalities like Barcelona and Madrid. Although its inspiration, origin and ideological trajectory leave no room for doubt about its leftism, there are numerous sociological readings about its emergence. On the one hand, the breakdown of the middle class, much of it now facing a horizon of uncertainty about their income, their jobs and guarantees of social services and benefits. On the other hand, a break marked by a growing awareness of inequality between a very small percentage of large fortunes favoured by the crisis compared to the rest of the population that feels a growing threat of the disappearance of the welfare state as a model of society. And finally, a loss of gender equality, where women suffer more deeply widespread unemployment and cuts in social protection and dependency.

Thus, an agenda that aims at a feminist interpretation of the social model, that explicitly assumes goals to combat internal inequality and, at the same time, looks for transition paths towards a model of environmental sustainability and jobs with rights, is not only a timely agenda, but the most relevant in the present circumstances.

3. News of systemic issues: the Spanish laboratory and European impositions

That said, it would be naïve to assume that the 2030 Agenda is a feminist one, clearly contrary to the dynamics of reproduction of inequalities and transitional towards development models based on rights and environmental sustainability. The 2030 Agenda shows, from the processes that have built it, that beyond being a consensual agreement on the models needed and the policies and mechanisms to achieve them, it is an aggregate of interests and

³ Natalia Millán analyses this in depth at <http://2015ymas.org/centro-de-documentacion/publicaciones/2013/1551/marca-espana-que-implicaciones-tiene-para-el-desarrollo-humano/#.V1V7HMDPf4o>

perspectives often difficult to reconcile. Indeed, the transformative nature intended by the 2030 Agenda is postponed and without guarantees by the blatant contradictions that it reflects, its inability to address fundamental systemic issues, such as those concerning financing, or those specific to environmental sustainability.⁴

The main question here would be: Is the 2030 Agenda compatible with the neoliberal project? What happens in Spain in the current political context of rupture and electoral uncertainty is precisely a practical laboratory on how institutions, political parties and citizens ultimately are considering that question.

Any serious strategy and initiatives to adapt the 2030 Agenda to the Spanish reality would have to incorporate several fundamental issues. Not so long ago, Spain was recognized as an exemplary country for its commitment to the recognition of freedoms and rights in terms of equality. It also has sufficient geographical and climatic conditions and technological development to manage an energy transition towards models based on renewable resources. On the other hand, its challenge with regard to employment is such that it must explore productive transformation policies and mechanisms, based on research, development and innovation. In addition, there is room to expand fiscal policy given its low tax revenue in relation to neighbouring countries, and domestic rates of poverty and inequality require prioritizing specific policies in order to reduce them and reverse the trend of recent years.

The political culture in societies like the Spanish one has turned more towards a culture of media spectacle than towards the calm debate of ideas and policies. So, on the one hand, the long-term centre-right Government, mainly concerned about gaining electoral support to further deepen the project of structural adjustment and austerity and, on the other hand, the dynamics of electoral dispute and the media simplicity associated

with it, do not facilitate reflections and commitments to the citizenship for a significant transformation that requires and promotes the best of the 2030 Agenda.

However, the term "change" is probably the most cited one -and the most disputed- by the rest of the electoral parties. Its most common meanings have to do with the fight against corruption that is already so widespread that almost constitutes a form of government, and with different ways of coping with taxation and structural impositions from the Troika: the IMF, the European Commission and the European Investment Bank.

Only the Socialist Party, PSOE, and the emergence of Podemos clearly set out the need to renegotiate the conditions of structural adjustment (lower wages, reduced public budgets, debt repayments, etc.) in a different way and with a different scope. Beyond a negotiation, the 2030 Agenda might suggest a comprehensive strategy for political influence within the European framework, from different assumptions other than those who have ruled the region in recent years. This will demand opening new partnerships, not only with the countries of southern Europe (Portugal, Italy, Greece, etc.) but with different social and political actors throughout Europe that are mobilized, scandalized by the influence of private, commercial and financial interests that virtually nullify the exercise of national sovereignty by imposing the so-called Europe of the euro. Even more when the consequences of the war in Syria result in a humanitarian crisis with millions of refugees at the gates of Europe, the terrible indicator of a crisis of values and policies that was at the origin and meaning of the European project.

Spain, with its ongoing electoral statement, intends that the implementation of the 2030 Agenda involves little more than a statement and a set of purposes for a dismantled policy of cooperation or, were the current electoral configuration to change in a more progressive direction, a primary reference consistently covering and integrating deep transformations of policies and its involvement and presence in the European project.

⁴ Our more detailed analysis on the contradictions, strengths and weaknesses of the 2030 Agenda is available at http://www.ehu.es/ojs/index.php/Lan_Harremanak/article/view/16094/14378