

The 2030 Agenda – a new start towards global sustainability?

BY JENS MARTENS ON BEHALF OF THE REFLECTION GROUP ON THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted unanimously at the United Nations by world Heads of States and Governments in September 2015 is highly ambitious. If taken seriously it has the potential to change the prevailing development paradigm by re-emphasizing the multidimensional and interrelated nature of sustainable development and its universal applicability.

A window of opportunities

The 2030 Agenda offers the opportunity to correct the errors and omissions of the ‘MDG approach’ – an approach that has reduced the development discourse to a focus on the symptoms of extreme poverty and the provision of basic social services in poor countries. While – without doubt – these issues are extremely important, the MDG approach failed to address adequately the structural flaws of the global economic and financial systems, the imperative of ecological sustainability and the responsibilities of the global North.

The 2030 Agenda offers the opportunity to respond in an integrated manner to urgent global problems, such as accelerating global warming and growing inequalities. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) contained in the 2030 Agenda incorporate a commitment to reduce inequalities within and among countries, a clear demand for sustainable consumption and production patterns and the aspiration for peace, fair governance and justice.

The 2030 Agenda is universal, not just because the SDGs are global in scope, but also because all coun-

tries have to do something to achieve them. No country can deem itself to be sustainably developed and having already done its part to meet the SDGs. The 2030 Agenda offers the opportunity to challenge the idea that development is a phenomenon that occurs only in countries of the global South while the North is already ‘developed’.

Obstacles and contradictions remain

However, the 2030 Agenda is not free of contradictions and fails to adequately address a number of goals and targets, particularly when it comes to their means of implementation. The 2030 Agenda represents a compromise among 193 governments and is far from perfect. But for the first time in an intergovernmental document, it acknowledges the “enormous disparities of opportunity, wealth and power”¹ as immense challenges to sustainable development.

Disparities and inequalities also have detrimental human rights effects. Even the IMF recently confirmed that income inequality is, for example, highly correlated with gender inequality.² Therefore, overcoming gender inequality requires, *inter alia*, challenging economic policies and institutions that have entrenched social inequalities and undermined the capacity of states to meet their commitments to women’s rights.

¹ United Nations (2015), para. 14.

² Cf. Gonzales et al. (2015).

But there are further severe obstacles to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and overcoming them is a prerequisite for achieving the SDGs and fulfilling the commitments made to human rights and sustainability:

For too long, economic policies have been shaped by acceptance of neoliberal policies “without alternatives”. But taking the title of the 2030 Agenda, “Transforming our World”, seriously implies that its implementation should lead to structural transformations instead of being led by the interests and advice of those governments, elite class sectors, corporate interest groups and institutions which have taken us down paths that are unsustainable and continue to create global obstacles to the implementation of the agenda.

Thus, it is irritating that the International Chamber of Commerce (ICC) as coordinator of the Global Business Alliance for 2030 (an umbrella group of major global industry associations and business organizations) can claim to play a key role in implementing the 2030 Agenda, offering “comprehensive engagement with the full diversity of business expertise.”³

Corporate lobby groups such as the ICC have been advocating for exactly those trade, investment and financial rules that have destabilized the global economy and exacerbated inequalities in both the global North and the global South.

Furthermore, a plethora of bilateral investment treaties as well as a new generation of free trade agreements in conjunction with the multilateral Agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (TRIPS) have not only reduced the policy space of governments to implement sound social, environmental and developmental policies but in numerous instances seriously undermined existing social, environmental and human rights standards. These and other domestic policies in the spirit

of the dominant neoliberal paradigm have further strengthened the power of investors and big corporations and, by the same token, weakened the role of the state and its ability to promote human rights and sustainability. The 2030 Agenda does not provide an adequate response to these challenges.

In the name of “international competitiveness” countries continue to compete in a race to the bottom, offering lower taxes and cheaper labour so as to attract investments. Tax havens allow for tax evasion. The leak of the “Panama Papers” published in 2016 illustrated how wealthy individuals are using a global net of secretive offshore companies to hide financial assets, and to avoid or evade tax payments. So too did the “Luxleaks” scandal in 2014 uncovering corporate tax evasion on an “industrial scale”, as well as the Mbeki Report of 2015 on illicit financial outflows from Africa, conservatively estimated at US\$ 60 billion a year and predominantly business-related through trade mispricing or abusive transfer-pricing by multinational corporations. These practices seriously undermine the ability of states to finance and implement the 2030 Agenda.

Finally, the obsession with growth, backed up by the dominant economic regime, provides the drive to exploit nature, relies on fossil fuels and depletes biodiversity, undermining the provision of essential services.

The decision in the 2030 Agenda (SDG Target 8.4) to improve progressively global resource efficiency and to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, is a necessary, but by no means sufficient response to the transgression of the planetary boundaries. Here, as in other areas a combination of low levels of ambition, inadequate and contradictory goals, targets and indicators makes it impossible to stop or reverse the damage done to the global environment and scale down human demands on the earth’s ecosystem. This lack of a serious political agenda presents a virtually insurmountable impediment to the realization of the 2030 Agenda.

Without addressing the structural obstacles and in-built contradictions it will be difficult, if not impossible to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

3 Cf. www.sdgfund.org/getting-architecture-right-attracting-business-expertise-and-action-sustainable-development-road and www.gbafor2030.org/.

Worsened global political and economic environment

Indeed, in the first year of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda it seems that the global political and economic environment for its implementation has become even worse.

Negotiations on multilateral trade and investment agreements are well underway, with the Trans Pacific Partnership (TPP) signed on 4 February 2016 in

Auckland, New Zealand, and awaiting only ratification and the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP) between the European Union and the United States to be finalized by the end of 2016. In their current form these agreements could seriously undermine important goals and targets of the 2030 Agenda. These agreements regard social, environmental and human rights standards as potential non-tariff barriers to trade and investment, which have to be 'harmonized' or removed.

The Sustainable Development Goals

- I **Goal 1.** End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- I **Goal 2.** End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- I **Goal 3.** Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- I **Goal 4.** Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- I **Goal 5.** Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- I **Goal 6.** Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- I **Goal 7.** Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- I **Goal 8.** Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- I **Goal 9.** Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- I **Goal 10.** Reduce inequality within and among countries
- I **Goal 11.** Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- I **Goal 12.** Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- I **Goal 13.** Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts*
- I **Goal 14.** Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- I **Goal 15.** Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- I **Goal 16.** Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
- I **Goal 17.** Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

*Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.

The investor-state dispute settlement system, even if relabeled as an investment court system, gives foreign investors the power to effectively undermine regulations, such as those designed to protect public health or to reduce carbon emissions, by suing governments for lost future profits even if it goes against the rulings of domestic courts of law, or even national constitutions.

While the United States and the European Union follow a strict liberalization agenda with regard to the free flow of goods and services, many of their leading politicians have successfully pressed countries to build new border fences to keep out people, be it migrants or refugees. Governments committed in Target 10.7 of the SDGs to facilitate orderly, safe, regular, and responsible migration and mobility of people, but, so far, the European Union has failed to adopt, let alone implement well-planned and managed migration policies based on the principle of solidarity and has failed to prevent the death of thousands of refugees in the Mediterranean.

The current ‘refugee crisis’ is not a kind of natural disaster but has very concrete internal and external causes. These range from corruption, clientelism, nepotism, and policies of discrimination and exclusion in countries of origin, to the devastating external effects of climate change and the economic and agricultural policies of rich countries. If governments do not address these issues adequately in their implementation strategies for the 2030 Agenda, global inequalities will increase further, with seriously detrimental impacts on global peace and stability.

The increasing global concentration of corporate power will exacerbate all of these trends if governments continue to regard such power as inevitable. In 2015 the merger and acquisition activities of transnational corporations reached an all-time high. The merger of Heinz and Kraft formed the world’s fifth largest food and beverage company; Anheuser-Busch InBev took over SABMiller in a deal that combines the world’s two largest beer makers; US chemical giants Dow Chemical and DuPont announced plans to merge by the end of 2016; and in May 2016, the German pharma and chemical company Bayer offered

to acquire Monsanto, creating the world’s largest producer of chemicals and seeds with an estimated global market share of 30 percent.

These and many more mega-deals have been supported or even initiated by a small group of corporate ‘control-holders’, particularly transnational banks and investment funds, with no effective government opposition. The resulting concentration of economic power distorts the functioning of financial and labor markets and undermines democratic decision-making processes, threatening the ability to implement the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs and rendering some of them (such as SDG 2 on food and agriculture, SDG 3 on health and SDG 12 on sustainable consumption and production) essentially meaningless.

But there are positive signals

Despite these numerous alarming trends there are also some positive signals. In many countries discussions and consultations have started about how to use the 2030 Agenda as a reference framework for shaping national policies and adapt it to specific national realities. A total of 22 countries, from the global North as well as South, have agreed to conduct national reviews and to present their national strategies for implementing the 2030 Agenda at the UN High Level Political Forum in New York in July.⁴

Even the G20 under the Chinese presidency made the implementation of the 2030 Agenda to one of its key agenda items. In his message on the G20 presidency, Chinese President Xi Jinping suggested that all G20 members develop national plans for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, “based on which a G20 collective action plan could be collated.”⁵ However, this must not undermine the UN and its High-Level Political Forum as core institution in the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda.

Also positive is the fact that civil society organizations and networks have started to create cross-sec-

⁴ Cf. <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>.

⁵ Cf. www.g20.org/English/China2016/G202016/201512/P020151210392071823168.pdf, p. 13.

toral alliances at national and international level, bringing together a broad range of environment, development and human rights groups as well as trade unions and social justice organizations.

Even at local level, citizen groups and local authorities have started consultations on sustainability goals and strategies for their cities and communities. These discussion processes are much more than just a ‘trickle down effect’ of the SDG process at global level. Social change cannot be decreed top-down either by governments or by the UN. The critical engagement of civil society groups and the broader public will be essential for triggering the necessary change towards global sustainability.

Independent monitoring and review indispensable

The political success of the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs will depend on the adoption of appropriate strategies and policies, available resources and other means of implementation. Accountability mechanisms are important tools for strengthening political commitment and effectiveness. Thus the successful process relies a lot on the effective monitoring of progress or regressive developments in achieving the goals.

The 2030 Agenda includes a special chapter on “follow-up and review” at national, regional and global levels. Governments agreed only to the voluntary sharing of experiences and peer learning and failed to introduce an effective intergovernmental monitoring mechanism, building, for instance, on the experience of the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) in the human rights field.

It is important to ensure that the monitoring and review process, like the implementation strategies themselves, not be dominated by the rich and powerful, including both countries and multinational corporations. In this regard, it is particularly worrying that in some cases not only the implementation of certain goals and targets but also their monitoring is being outsourced to “partnerships” involving funders, corporations, foundations and civil society organizations. This self-monitoring undermines independent and objective assessment.

These developments underline the need for strong independent monitoring efforts on the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs. However, monitoring and review should not be reduced to the implementation of the SDGs and their related targets, often measured by inadequate indicators. Previous experience clearly shows that monitoring of outputs or outcomes alone is by no means sufficient. Rather, policies and policy changes (and not just outcomes) in the follow-up of the 2030 Agenda should be scrutinized. These analyses are by their very nature qualitative rather than purely quantitative.

Civil society organizations have to play a key role as independent watchdogs to monitor the (positive or negative) contributions by governments, international organizations, International Financial Institutions and Multilateral Development Banks as well as transnational corporations to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

This *Spotlight Report 2016* produced by an international alliance of CSOs and networks, intends to contribute to this objective. It analyses and assesses the extent to which policies are framed by the ambitious principles of the 2030 Agenda, particularly the human rights framework. It highlights particularly the role of the rich and powerful actors in the global system, based on their economic influence and political weight in international decision-making. However, it is impossible to undertake a comprehensive assessment of the political implementation of the 2030 Agenda less than a year after its adoption. As implementation of the 2030 Agenda gets further underway, these Spotlight reports will be issued regularly.

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