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Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

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From the Millennium Development Goals to the Sustainable Development Goals: shifts in purpose, concept, and politics of global goal setting for development

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr

ABSTRACT

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) differ from the MDGs in purpose, concept, and politics. This article focuses on the gender agenda in the SDGs as a reflection on the shifts from the MDGs to the SDGs. It argues that the SDGs address several of the key shortcomings of the MDGs and incorporate a broader and more transformative agenda that more adequately reflects the complex challenges of the 21st century, and the need for structural reforms in the global economy. The SDGs also reverse the MDG approach to global goal setting and the misplaced belief in the virtues of simplicity, concreteness, and quantification. While the SDGs promise the potential for a more transformative agenda, implementation will depend on continued advocacy on each of the targets to hold authorities to account.

Los ods difieren de los ODM en términos de su propósito, su concepto y sus políticas. El presente artículo se centra en la agenda de género de los ods, ya que constituye un reflejo de los cambios que se produjeron entre la enunciación de los ODM y la de los ods. Al respecto, sostiene que los ods abordan algunas de las principales deficiencias presentes en los ODM, incorporando una agenda más amplia y transformadora, que da cuenta de los complejos retos del siglo XXI y de la necesidad de realizar reformas estructurales en la economía mundial de manera más adecuada. Asimismo, los ods se apartan radicalmente del enfoque utilizado en la enunciación de los ODM para establecer objetivos a nivel mundial, así como de la noción equivocada en torno a la virtud de la sencillez, la concreción y la cuantificación. Si bien los ods encierran el potencial de lograr una agenda más transformadora, su implementación dependerá de que se sigan impulsando actividades de incidencia vinculadas a cada uno de los objetivos, a fin de exigir cuentas a las autoridades.

Les ODD diffèrent des OMD sur le plan de la finalité, du concept et des dimensions politiques. Cet article porte sur l'ordre du jour en matière de genre dans les ODD en réfléchissant aux changements entre les OMD et les ODD. Il soutient que les ODD remédient à plusieurs des défauts clés des OMD et incorporent un ordre du jour plus large et plus transformateur qui traduit de manière plus adéquate les défis complexes du XXI^e siècle et la nécessité de réformes structurelles dans l'économie mondiale. Les ODD inversent par ailleurs l'approche des OMD en matière d'établissement d'objectifs mondiaux et la croyance déplacée dans les vertus de la simplicité, de la concrétude et de la quantification. Si les OMD promettent la possibilité d'un ordre du jour plus transformateur, la

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Global goals; MDGs; SDGs; gender in international development agendas

mise en œuvre dépendra de la continuation d'un plaidoyer sur chacune des cibles pour demander des comptes aux autorités.

Introduction

The launch of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in September 2015 at the United Nations (UN) General Assembly was met with two contrasting reactions. Perceptions that they are bloated and lacking in coherence led commentators to suggest alternative readings of the acronym 'SDGs'. *The Economist's* leader on 28 March 2015 suggested 'Stupid Development Goals' (see www.economist.com/news/leaders/21647286-proposed-sustainable-development-goals-would-be-worse-useless-169-commandments, last checked by the author 7 January 2016). The US development economist, William Easterly, dubbed them 'Senseless, Dreamy, Garbled' (at <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/09/28/the-sdgs-are-utopian-and-worthless-mdgs-development-rise-of-the-rest/>, last checked by the author 7 January 2016).

Yet for those who had been engaged in the three-year-long negotiations – or rather battles – that led to the 17 goals and 169 targets, there was a measure of satisfaction with the wide scope and depth of these goals. In large part, this is because the SDGs have addressed many of the key shortcomings of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). For example, the Center for Economic and Social Rights, which lobbied hard for an agenda that would reflect the core principles of human rights, has cautiously opined: 'We can declare partial success in every category – which is more than we might have dared hope for in 2010 under the "reign" of the deeply inadequate MDGs' (Donald 2015).

SDGs differ from the MDGs in purpose, concept, and politics

The SDGs are a major departure from the MDGs. They differ not just in the number of goals and targets, but in their very purpose, conception, and the political process that drove their elaboration.

First, the MDGs were a North–South aid agenda. The goals and targets – such as universal primary education – were mostly relevant for developing countries only, and were sometimes labelled 'Minimum Development Goals' (Harcourt 2005, 1). Moreover, as I have explained in an earlier paper with David Hulme (Fukuda-Parr and Hulme 2011), they were driven by development ministers and heads of development agencies seeking a new rationale for aid in the context of post-Cold War geopolitics and neoliberal globalisation. The MDGs were particularly helpful in communicating a clear purpose of development aid to mobilise public support. In contrast, the SDGs are a global agenda for sustainable development. They are universal goals that set targets for all – not just poor – countries, and are as relevant for the USA as for Liberia. They emerged from the 2012 Rio+20 Conference, driven by the environment ministers, from countries in both the global North and South, and especially from middle-income countries such as Brazil and Colombia. As the debates about successors to the MDGs opened in July 2012, the UN Secretary-General structured a debate for setting the 'Post-2015 agenda', creating a High Level

Task Force of Eminent Persons chaired by the Prime Minister of the UK and Presidents of Liberia and Indonesia, created a UN Task Team, and appointed an Assistant Secretary-General in charge of the process. In parallel, the Rio+20 Conference process adopted an agenda that included an initiative to elaborate and set the SDGs, to be managed by an inter-governmental group, an ‘Open Working Group’ of the General Assembly. These two processes proceeded in parallel, and combined over time to elaborate the declaration to be adopted at the 2015 General Assembly, encompassing both the agenda and the goals.

Second, the MDGs focused on poverty – understood as meeting basic needs – and its alleviation. This was a new and a narrow conception of development. For decades, development had focused on enlarging the productive capacity of economies to make possible improved living standards of people. The eight MDGs and 21 targets were limited to ending extreme poverty, thus reconceptualising development. In contrast, the SDGs are about sustainable development. This incorporates ending poverty as a core objective, but the 17 goals and 169 targets set out a broader agenda that includes environmental, social, and economic sustainability.

Third, MDGs were drafted by technocrats who undertook limited consultations with other sources of knowledge and expertise, a process widely acknowledged as a major weakness (UN Task Team on the Post 2015 Agenda 2012). In substance, this meant that the formulation of the MDGs was not tethered as it should have been to the ongoing debates about development priorities, and failed to connect to and build on the international agendas for action negotiated at the milestone UN-led development conferences of the 1990s, such as the Cairo Conference on Population and Development, and the Beijing Conference on Women. The Millennium Declaration was largely drafted by the office of the UN Secretary-General, and a handful of UN staff crafted the MDGs in a closed room.

Shortcomings of the MDGs

Although the MDGs have been widely touted as a ‘success’, they have also been widely criticised. From the beginning, there was lukewarm reception by governments which suspected that they would become another source of aid conditionality. Civil society groups protested the omission of inequality, weak goals on global ‘partnership’ that lacked quantitative targets, the lack of ambition in the targets, and many omissions such as women’s reproductive health issues, governance, conflicts, economic growth and employment, and many other important objectives. Human rights scholars and practitioners – including the UN Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) – have consistently criticised the MDGs as not adequately aligned with human rights standards and principles, especially equality, participation, non-discrimination, and transparency (OHCHR 2008). OHCHR (2008) has also criticised them for overly technocratic implementation, based on an assumption that resources and technology are the answer to poverty. In fact, the MDGs appeared to take back poverty analyses of the 1990s that concluded the source of persistent poverty was not just economic variables but could be traced to the poor lacking political power (see e.g. World Bank 2000). The MDGs presented a simplistic vision of meeting

basic needs for all without recognising the root causes of poverty embedded in power relations and exacerbated by current economic models of neoliberal globalisation that prioritise corporate profit over human rights.

As a process, many pointed out that they undercut ongoing policy debates with targets that were under-ambitious or irrelevant to current challenges, such as universal primary education in countries where it had been largely achieved. Feminist activist Peggy Antrobus (2006) dismissed the MDGs as a ‘major distracting gimmick’ that has served to undermine local agendas and political dynamics. UN agencies which had been pursuing agendas adopted at the 1990s UN conferences found the imperative to follow the MDGs confusing, particularly as the MDGs were sometimes inconsistent with the conference goals. For example, the hunger goal in the 1996 World Food Summit was to cut the number of people undernourished but the MDG target revised this to reducing the proportion of the population undernourished. Heterodox economists argued that the MDGs were misdirected, and did not challenge the neoliberal economic model that was failing to produce enough decent work and exacerbating inequalities, and ignored the key issues of systemic reforms in the global economy.

The MDG agenda was extraordinarily narrow, reflecting a top-down process of elaboration that was untethered from the consultative and reflective process that set UN development agendas over the 1990s and was monitoring their implementation. For example, the entire 13-point agenda for action adopted at Beijing was reduced to MDG Goal 3; gender equality and women’s empowerment were addressed via a single target, to achieve male/female parity in primary and secondary education. The MDGs were goals, not an agenda, and picked out only the numeric goals in the conference agendas of the 1990s. No one would disagree with the importance of what was in the MDG list of eight goals and 21 targets, but what was critical was what was not there. As suggested above, some of the most pressing contemporary challenges were left out: inequality, unemployment and stagnant wages, climate change, financial market volatility, migration, the ineffectiveness of global institutions to manage globalisation, to name a few.

In sum, stakeholders with a wide range of perspectives were deeply frustrated by the MDGs that came to dominate international development discourses. The targets were not ‘in synch’ with their agendas and vision, and disconnected from current national and global policy debates. They were concerned by the narrow breadth that was insufficiently ‘transformative’ to meet the challenges of development in the 21st century – that required a change, of course, not just continuation of business as usual, but shifts in institutions and economic models. The negotiations for the post-2015 agenda thus unleashed massive mobilisation to correct the shortcomings of the MDGs. In the next section I focus on the ways in which the SDGs represent a significant shift, as regards both the process followed to develop them, and the outcome.

A broader and more transformative agenda

In stark contrast to the technocratic process of elaborating the MDGs discussed in the last section, the formulation of the SDGs was consciously set up as a process of political

negotiations amongst states. Though the UN Secretary-General initially appointed a High Level Task Force of Eminent Persons to make proposals, it was the inter-governmental body – the Open Working Group of the UN General Assembly – that formulated the SDGs, through a process of intense diplomatic negotiations and open multi-stakeholder debates. This process took place over three years, and was structured to facilitate debates focused on specific issues. The process also structured dialogue with nine so-called ‘major groups’, convened to represent the interests of specific social groups, amongst which was women (see <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/majorgroups>, accessed 8 January 2016). As a process for elaborating international development priorities, it involved an unprecedented level of participation by governments, civil society groups, academics, business groups, and UN agencies, in intense debates in meetings around the world and over the internet (Norton and Stuart 2015).

A March 2015 vision statement by the Post 2015 Women’s Coalition (2015a) characterises the views of many civil society groups and their analysis of poverty and inequality as rooted in the structures of power in the economy, society, and politics, and furthered by neo-liberal economic models that turn a blind eye to human rights. Women’s groups advocate systemic reforms in current approaches that are exacerbating poverty and inequality through environmental, financial, political, and social crises. They emphasise the obligation of governments to give priority to human rights over economic interests, including women’s rights – such as the more ‘political’ issues of sexual and reproductive rights and women’s unpaid care as a barrier to realisation of their human rights – to women’s empowerment (and sustainable development). Their March 2015 press release of this statement states:

The Coalition also demands to see dramatic changes in the state of macroeconomic policies and calls for a new framework that prioritizes people over profit, actively combats feminized poverty, and redistributes unpaid care and non-care work borne disproportionately by women ... The coalition is deeply disturbed that as discussions at the UN on the Post-2015 Development Agenda and the CSW [Commission on the Status of Women] unfold, sexual and reproductive health and rights are being erased and have been excluded from the conference’s Political Declaration.

(Post 2015 Women’s Coalition 2015b, 1)

Drawing attention to those aspects of gender power relations which are perceived variously as too private, too sensitive, or irrelevant to the concerns of development is critical and, since the 1990s, gains made on a range of these issues at Cairo and Beijing in particular have been defended, but not extended, from roll-backs instigated by conservative interest groups including religious groups. The Executive Director of ARROW (the Asian-Pacific Recourse and Research Centre for Women), Sivananthi Thanenthiran, said:

Some special interest groups can enjoy the luxury of dismissing the complex realities of women’s lives by making it increasingly difficult for member states to discuss and agree on human rights issues, especially sexual and reproductive health and rights. But we do not have this luxury; without autonomy over bodies, we cannot achieve autonomy over our lives. (Post 2015 Women’s Coalition 2015b, 1)

Compared to the MDGs, the agenda of the SDGs is broader – with respect to gender as well as overall – and potentially more transformative. The SDGs do address many more

aspects of these complex realities of women's lives, and therefore represent a considerable advance on the MDGs, reflecting the participative and broader consultation process that led to them.

The specific goal focusing on women and gender concerns, Goal 5, reflects gender equality and women's empowerment as a multi-dimensional process, going beyond straightforward outcomes, and incorporates targets related to gender-based violence, harmful practices, unpaid care work, voice, sexual and reproductive health and rights, economic resources, technology, and legislative change. Critically, gender issues are not confined to Goal 5 but are also reflected in other goals, such as those related to education and health. In the field of health they include targets for important policy choices: Target 3b on Research and Development in vaccines and medicines, access to essential medicines, and affirming the flexibilities in applying patent restrictions in accessing medicines and health-care technologies imposed by the World Trade Organization's trade rule on intellectual property ("TRIPS flexibilities"); Target 3c on health financing; Target 2c to stabilise food commodity markets; Target 1b on pro-poor and gender-sensitive development strategies; and Target 6b on local community participation in water management.

The goals and their targets address and incorporate many issues that civil society groups or the developing countries advocated for that address power structures that produce and reproduce poverty and inequality, including shifts in economic models. The SDGs also include 'means of implementation' as a goal of its own (Goal 17) and as targets for each goal, recognising the need to change policies and institutions if transformative change is to take place. Inequality, likewise, has a goal of its own (Goal 10), and there is emphasis on the inclusion of marginalised social groups through the other goals. They include goals for governance (Goal 16). The SDGs also incorporate economic dimensions – on which the MDGs were silent; they include a goal for growth that is sustainable and inclusive (Goal 8).

The adoption of a stand-alone goal on inequality (Goal 10) that addresses disparities within and between countries is a significant departure from the MDGs; they explicitly excluded this politically sensitive issue. It was a contentious issue throughout the negotiations, which was resisted particularly by developed countries, but advocated by civil society groups and developing countries (G77). It was not included in the initial list proposed by the High Level Panel appointed by the UN Secretary-General, and led by Prime Ministers and Presidents of the UK, Liberia and Indonesia. Goal 10 requires a reversal rather than acceleration of current trends in many countries, and it is relevant to all countries, regardless of the level of income. As such, it draws international attention to the need for wealthy, ostensibly 'developed' countries to address issues which draw the model they have followed into question. Goal 16, on governance and human rights, was another contentious one, and its inclusion was mostly resisted by African and Arab states over issues of LGBT rights, but was ultimately included if with a weaker language (Donald 2015). This speaks not only to institutions of national governance but also global governance, including an explicit reference to 'strengthening the participation of developing countries in institutions of global governance' (Target 16.8).

Reversing the MDG approach to global goal setting

The broader agenda of the SDGs reflects not only a shift in priorities but a reversal of the MDG approach to goal setting. Departing from the principle that global goals should be short and memorable, the SDGs include 17 goals and 169 targets. Moreover, they are not tangible and measurable outcomes – such as all children in school – that are easy to understand and difficult to disagree with. Some SDG goals and targets are focused on complex concepts and the quality development processes such as ‘sustainability’ and ‘inclusion’, rather than tangible and measurable outcomes.

Andrew Norton and Elizabeth Stuart have expressed a widely held view on the merits of the MDGs and the weakness of the SDGs:

One of the great successes of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) was that they were brief. They fit on the back of a business card – one that could be slipped as readily into a pocket of a US aid official as that of an Indian farmer ... If we stick with the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) currently agreed, this is clearly not going to be the case after 2015. Even if you can remember all 17, there are still too many for civil society groups and other stakeholders to rally around all of them. (Norton and Stuart 2014)

However, these ‘strengths’ of the MDGs acclaimed by their defenders – simplicity, measurability, and consensuality – are also their weakness (Fukuda-Parr 2013). Simplicity allowed simplification of development as a concept. A short list of goals could not adequately encompass the multiplicity of development challenges, while numeric goals – based on purely tangible and quantifiable outcomes – are inherently reductionist if used to articulate a vision of development. Goals use the power of numbers to communicate a development agenda with a sense of scientific certitude and serious intent with potential for accountability. But in reality, quantification reduces complex and intangible visions – such as development that is inclusive – into concrete measurable objectives such as all children in school. Recent literature in the sociology of knowledge theorises the distorting effects of quantitative indicators used in global governance on concepts and action by setting standards for behaviour (see e.g. Merry 2011). So global goals can lead to distorting effects, redefining the meaning of development, and shaping policy by creating incentives to over-focus on target achievement and neglect other important objectives (Fukuda-Parr 2014). An empirical study of 11 MDG goals and targets under the Power of Numbers research project found that MDGs had numerous effects on shaping development discourse that favoured target-driven strategies, and in most cases undermined human rights and capabilities approaches that emphasised empowerment of people and addressing the root causes of poverty and unequal development (Fukuda-Parr *et al.* 2014).

The MDGs communicated a simplified concept of development as meeting basic needs, stripped of the challenges of inclusions and sustainability, and remained silent on the need to reform institutions. They framed development discourses and debates in this narrow vision. Framing sets the boundaries of analysis for policy choices. Framing is a process that determines how problems are defined, causes are explained, and policy responses and priorities are justified. Framing shapes narratives that can have a powerful effect in shaping policy choices with respect to priorities for allocation of resources, policy reforms,

and in mobilising support for implementation of policies. According to Morten Bøås and Desmond McNeill (2003), framing creates a hegemony of ideas about problems and solutions, keeping out radical ideas that are seemingly unthinkable.

The SDGs also reverse another MDG approach, to set a global goal that is also to be achieved by all countries, neglecting national contexts, and against which governments would be held accountable. Ignoring the starting point, they were a biased metric, unfair to countries farthest behind with the largest challenges to meet the 2015 targets. SDGs, on the other hand, are to be achieved globally, making room for national adaptation.

Potential pitfalls in implementation: selectivity, simplification, and national adaptation

While the SDGs offer a broader agenda that has potential for course correction than the MDGs, will they make a difference? There is a risk that the most transformative goals and targets would be neglected in implementation through selectivity, simplification, and national adaptation.

With 17 goals and 169 targets, which handful will receive policy attention, and mobilise effort and resources? *Selectivity* could lead to neglect of goals and targets that would address structural issues. It is widely believed that the MDGs mobilised action, yet not all goals and targets were the same. Some such as employment and hunger were poor cousins until the 2008 financial crisis and recession hit. Will SDG 10, to reduce inequality within and between countries, or Target 5.a, to ensure legal right of women to land ownership, receive attention?

The carefully negotiated language of the 17-goal agenda, emphasising intangible qualitative objectives of equitable and sustainable development, has led to a complex language. The temptation would be to simplify this language, and strip away the important qualifiers. Already, a private initiative to publicise the SDGs – Global Goals – has simplified them, shortening the titles and reinterpreting them in the process. Barbara Adams (2015) points out in her recent Global Policy Watch blog, ‘the concept of “sustainable development” is completely lost’ as words like ‘just’, ‘inclusive’, ‘sustainable’ are removed and replaced by ‘responsible’ and ‘strong’ (‘Public SDGs or Private GGs?’, available at www.globalpolicywatch.org/blog/2015/09/25/public-sdgs-or-private-ggs/, last checked 9 January 2016).

Another risk is the process of national adaptation. This reduces the political pressure on national governments to address the political causes of poverty and inequality. It can then be an invitation to water down the ambition of the SDGs. Implementation of the inequality goal is particularly challenging, as it is one of the few goals that requires a major change in course from the trends of the last decade (Nicolai *et al.* 2015). As suggested earlier, challenging inequality involves questioning and shifting the economic model that has been promoted over the last decade. This goal will prove as problematic and challenging as Goal 5: this, too, involves profoundly questioning power and the current economic model.

For these goals to be a ‘course correction’ to development in reality, the challenge will be to ensure that the hard-won gains on politically contentious issues are not lost in

implementation. The SDGs are a politically negotiated consensus that has no enforcement mechanism built in. The onus falls on civil society groups to leverage the SDGs as course correction by putting pressure on governments and other powerful actors to account for the commitments made.

The MDGs had surprising effects. They were more effective than anyone expected in gaining traction as a dominant discourse of development. Their effects were not all benign. The SDGs have reversed the misplaced trust in simplicity as a virtue of global goal setting. It is hard to predict what consequences they will have.

Notes on contributor

Sakiko Fukuda-Parr is Professor of International Affairs at The New School. She has written widely on human development and human rights, including on global goals. She serves on the UN Committee on Development Policy, the Board of IAFFE and other global policy initiatives. Postal address: The New School, 66 West 12th Street, New York, NY 10011, USA. Email address: fukudaps@newschool.edu

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