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UNIVERSAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS A CHALLENGE FOR THE RICH COUNTRIES AS WELL AS THE POOR

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1. Introduction

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are global goals, challenging both developing and developed countries to find new pathways to a more sustainable future.

“This is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all, taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed and developing countries alike. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development.”¹

For developing countries the SDGs are intended to be successors to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). They set out aims and objectives for those countries on their pathway to a more complete and more sustainable development in the future, and for other countries and the international development community to help them forward on that path in a new partnership.

At the same time the SDGs challenge developed countries to transform their own societies and economies to be sustainable.

The new Agenda thus embodies a pact between developed and developing countries that all will take appropriate and relevant domestic action to contribute in different ways to achieving global sustainability. Both sides of this pact are equally important.

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¹ Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UN. September 2015.

A simple or old-fashioned concept of development sees it as the progression from poverty in least-developed countries to the “more advanced” state found in more prosperous developed countries. The development agenda is “simply” about how to help the least developed and the still developing countries to accelerate their transition towards the supposedly happier state of the developed countries.

But what if the way of life and the economies of the developed countries as they are evolving at present do not constitute a desirable or sustainable model? What if those advanced economies are the very ones that are already placing the most excessive burdens on the natural resources and ecosystems of the planet and causing the worst pollution? Burdens that already threaten to undermine the environmental and political stability of the planet, and which would be exacerbated if the developing countries’ economies simply “caught up” with the developed world.

What if attempts merely to replicate the present lifestyles and economies of the already developed countries in the less developed parts of the world are actually foredoomed to failure by accelerating the pressures on the planet’s limited resources and carrying capacity to the point of catastrophe and collapse? What if the basic economic model underpinning the “advanced” economies of the world is itself unsustainable in that it equates progress with never-ending growth of GDP and of material production and consumption?

The basic idea of sustainable development and the new SDGs is to avoid these unhappy dilemmas by shifting the objective - the goals towards which all countries should direct their ambitions. Instead of aiming at the current unsustainable lifestyles and economies of the developed world, let all countries (rich and poor) aim at a different more sustainable future. A future in which scarce and finite resources are used prudently as well as being reused and recycled wherever possible. A world in which carbon emissions are reduced to levels that do not threaten catastrophic climate change. A world in which food and other basic resources are distributed and consumed fairly instead of the present pattern of over-consumption and waste in some places co-existing with hunger and shortage in others. A world in which poverty can truly be eradicated everywhere rather than merely shifted from one place to another.

2. What is needed to get to this different future?

Change. Radical change. Transformational change. Change everywhere.

We need new economic and social paradigms; new approaches to protecting the planet and its natural systems that support all life; a new industrial revolution to create the technologies of the future that can provide the goods and services that people need in a much less resource-intensive and polluting way.

Change is of course most urgently needed in the poorest countries. Those that are still struggling to eradicate poverty and make progress on the early stages of the development pathway.

But change is equally needed in the most developed and middle income countries whose wasteful and polluting economies are the ones most conspicuously damaging the planet and its natural support systems at present.

This urgent need for change everywhere is embodied in the new SDGs and in the clear message that has been built into them from the outset that these are universal goals. They are goals for all countries, large and small, rich and poor. They require major transformation everywhere and by everyone. They need the engagement and support of all sectors of society.

The SDGs are intended to be universal in the sense of embodying a universally-shared common global vision of progress towards a safe, just and sustainable operating space for all human beings to thrive on the planet. They reflect the moral principles that no one and no country should be left behind, and that everyone and every country should be regarded as having a



common responsibility for playing their part in delivering the global vision. In general terms, all of the goals have therefore been conceived as applying both as ambitions and as challenges to all countries. All of the goals and targets contain important messages and challenges for developed and developing countries alike.

But even while the SDGs recognise this universality message in principle, the old development thinking and paradigms keep creeping back in between the lines and into the details of many of the targets. The international negotiators and the international development community have remained strongly focused on the eradication of poverty as the primary goal; on economic growth in the traditional sense as the basic means to that end; and on the responsibilities of the international community to support this over-riding development goal as the prime example of common but differentiated responsibilities.

The discussions of financial ways and means of implementation (MOI) focus predominantly on this effort of international cooperation. SDG 17 focuses exclusively on this issue. The implementation agencies gear up for action primarily around this theme and the need for a new international partnership.

All of that is indeed important. But it is only half of what is needed to secure a sustainable future for the world. As well as helping the developing countries, the developed countries need to undertake vigorous programmes of change in their own countries to meet the SDGs and the underpinning targets. Transformation of the socioeconomic systems of the developed world and middle income countries is therefore equally important.

This transformation of the developed world is also important for the developing countries so that they can focus their efforts on steering towards a more sustainable pathway for the future. They need to leapfrog traditional but unsustainable development pathways and paradigms, rather than trying to replicate the unsustainable models which today's developed countries represent.

3. Analysing the SDG challenge to the developed countries

Several recent studies have examined the challenges to the developed world that are embodied in the SDGs.

In March 2015 the Civil Society Reflection Group focused on the responsibilities of the rich countries.² They broadly distinguished three types of goals and targets: those that are of particular relevance to the internal affairs of all, including rich countries, and that require changes to their domestic policies («domestic sustainability targets»); those that address the need to change domestic policies in order to reduce negative external effects beyond a country's borders («do-no-harm targets»); and those that focus on their international duties and responsibilities («international responsibility targets»).

They suggested that three specific "goals for the rich" are particularly important for sustainable development worldwide:

- The goal to reduce inequality within and among countries (Goal 10);
- The goal to ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (Goal 12);
- The goal to strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for development (Goal 17).

They urged that the 2030 Agenda will only succeed if these goals include specific and time-bound targets and commitments for the rich that trigger the necessary regulatory and fiscal policy changes.

² 'Goals for the Rich.' Indispensable for a Universal Post-2015 Agenda Discussion Paper. Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development perspectives. March 2015 <http://library.fes.de/pdf-files/iez/11253.pdf>



A recent study undertaken for the Bertelsmann Stiftung³ examines the situation of each of the OECD countries in relation to each of the SDGs in more detail. The study uses a set of key sustainability indicators to analyse the present sustainability status of each developed country and to show how much they still have to do to achieve each of the 17 SDGs. It shows that there are at present wide variations among the developed countries in their progress towards sustainability. It finds that although some of these countries are further ahead than others towards achieving the goals, all of them still face significant challenges in achieving the full set of goals over the next 15 years, and some have a long way to go.

The study's statistical analysis confirms the Reflection Group's conclusion that some of the main transformational challenges facing the entire set of OECD countries in terms of the SDGs, as far as their own societies are concerned, are fostering an inclusive economic model (SDGs 8 and 10) and sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12) as well as climate change and energy.

In another recent report⁴ the Stakeholder Forum developed a methodology to allow countries, or interested groups within countries, to carry out their own assessments of the significance and different levels of transformational challenge implied by the different SDGs and targets to their own countries. This methodology was designed to offer a non-biased, objective approach to understanding, country by country, where attention is most needed to advance sustainable development both locally and globally. This could particularly help developed countries to create focused and effective implementation strategies and plans for achieving the SDGs within their own domestic context.

The method uses a number of assessors to assign their own independent scores of the significance of each of the proposed targets in the implementation context in question, according to three separate criteria. The three criteria proposed are: applicability, implementability, and the transformational impact (both in the country concerned and for the world as a whole). The assessors' scores are then aggregated and averaged to give an overall score for each target, and then combined to give an average score for each goal. The general effect is to give the highest scores to those targets and goals which are both clearly applicable and implementable in the country in question, and which represent the biggest transformational challenge. Conversely, lower scores are given to targets and goals which are less applicable or implementable in a particular country, perhaps because they are already substantially achieved or because they are expressed in ways that are less relevant in that country; or to goals that will not require such a transformation of the economy or behaviour patterns, or will not have such a transformational effect on the impact or footprint which that country makes on the rest of the world.

This kind of analysis could be used to help identify where the emphasis for action and delivery should lie between the different SDGs and targets in their implementation and planning, in many different contexts and settings. Thus, in a national context the methodology might be a useful tool to illuminate a national conversation or consultation with stakeholders about the relative applicability of the different goals and targets in that country, so as to focus implementation strategies and action plans around the highest priority elements. In addition, similar exercises can be conducted at local or regional levels to identify local and regional actions that might contribute significantly to the global objectives.

Using the UK as a proxy for developed countries, the SF study conducted a trial run of the methodology using three UK-based assessors. The consolidated markings achieved in that trial assessment are shown in the following table:

3 Sustainable Development Goals: Are the Rich Countries Ready?

4 Sustainable Development Goals, Challenges for Developed Countries. Stakeholder Forum. May 2015 http://www.stakeholderforum.org/images/stories/SF_-_SDG_Universality_Report_-_May_2015.pdf



Table 1: Ranking of SDGs by level of transformational challenge in developed countries

Goal	Overall mark for goal (average of target scores)
Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts	7.1
Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all	6.4
Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns	6.3
Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development	4.4
Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries	3.6
Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all	2.7
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	2.7
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	2.7
Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable	2.6
Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all	2.5
Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all	2.5
Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture	2.3
Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls	2.2
Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation	2.1
Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere	1.8
Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages	1.5

This marking identifies the goals of sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), sustainable energy (SDG 7) and combating climate change (SDG 13) as the three most transformational challenges facing developed countries. Other goals involving significant



transformational change in developed countries include the need to achieve more sustainable economies and growth pathways (SDG 8), the goal of greater equality between and within countries (SDG 10), and the goals to achieve better protection of the oceans and of terrestrial ecosystems (SDG 14).

Social problems of poverty, health, education and gender issues are, of course, still present in developed countries as well as in developing countries (though to differing degrees) as are all the other issues covered by the SDGs. The universal applicability of the SDGs stresses the need to continue to confront all of these issues comprehensively, in all countries. No country can simply pick and choose which SDGs they wish to work on to the exclusion of other SDGs. But further progress on these issues in the developed world cannot be expected to have such a large, transformational, effect either within those countries themselves or in their impact on the rest of the world.

Of course different assessors might have assigned different marks to the individual targets resulting in a different overall ranking of the goals. However, it is interesting that both the Civil Society Reflection Group and the Bertelsmann Stiftung study of the statistical indicators point in a similar direction.

The report suggests that the method of analysis it employs should now be used more widely in order to explore more deeply the major transformational challenges which the SDGs present to developed countries, as they begin to plan their SDG implementation strategies. It could also be applied to help other countries, or groups of countries, to identify the major transformational challenges which the SDGs imply for them.

4. Implementing the SDGs

As countries now turn towards implementation of the SDGs, it will be important to focus efforts and priorities. All of the SDGs are important and all deserve attention by society as a whole and by those groups especially concerned with each of them individually.

For developed countries it will be particularly important to focus strongly on the most transformational challenges, and particularly those associated with re-orienting the economy and achieving more sustainable patterns of consumption and production, sustainable energy and low carbon economies.

Action is needed on several fronts. At the conceptual and strategic level the long-running debates about creating measures of national well-being need to be brought to a conclusion, so that they can be operationalized and used to define overall societal and economic goals as a complement and eventual replacement for GDP.

At the policy level, effective measures need to be developed to promote the circular economy and sustainable consumption and production. Efficient use of all material and natural resources (particularly those whose supply is finite or limited) needs to be incentivised. In addition, long-life products, reuse and recycling need to be encouraged.

In the field of energy and climate change, effective programmes will be needed to implement both the SDGs relating to this area and the decisions emerging from the crucial meeting of the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) in Paris in December 2015.

To coordinate national progress across the whole range of the SDGs, we need national sustainable development strategies to be created or revived, and supported by more detailed action plans for key areas.

We need extensive national conversations and outreach to the public and stakeholders of all kinds so as to spread more widely the understanding of what needs to change, and to secure widespread support and consent.



We need partnerships with businesses and consumers to identify and encourage the emergence of the sustainable new technologies of the future and to phase out the unsustainable practices of the past.

We need tax structures that incentivise more sustainable production and consumption, discourage unsustainable practices, and which promote investment in sustainable sectors and away from unsustainable sectors.

We need institutional structures that support forward thinking and analysis of sustainability issues, including research programmes. Policy forums such as National Sustainable Development Councils (NCSDs), champions of the future such as Ombudsmen or Commissioners for Future Generations can have a vital role to play. We need regular and transparent reporting of progress, strong scrutiny and oversight arrangements in Parliaments, and audit offices to maintain the pressure for the changes needed.

Each country will need to explore the implications of these changes for themselves, and it is hoped that they will also remain high on the collective agenda of the United Nations (UN) and its agencies, the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD), the World Bank and regional groupings such as the European Union (EU), the African Union (AU) and similar bodies. Adopting a common approach and shared thinking, policy development and practical experience allows for a greater chance of ensuring successful achievement of the SDGs and their challenging transformational agenda than thinking and acting in separate boxes.

We need cooperation and collaboration among countries and international bodies to establish norms and standards, and to exchange information and knowledge about best practices. We also need monitoring of relevant indicators to track progress during transformation and to stimulate new action where progress is at risk of falling behind the goals and targets.

These are big and difficult challenges which will involve much debate and much controversy. However, they are exciting and stimulating challenges that should provide plenty of opportunities for national and international bodies, business and society to participate in their delivery in both the developed and developing countries of the world as the SDGs move into their implementation stage.

As the world leaders affirmed in New York in September:

“We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty; just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet. The world will be a better place in 2030 if we succeed in our objectives. What we are announcing today – an Agenda for global action for the next fifteen years – is a charter for people and planet in the twenty-first century.”⁵

Let us all resolve to bring on the debate. Bring on the struggle. We have nothing to lose but the unsustainable practices of the past.

5 Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. UN. September 2015.



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Farooq is currently a Director of the Board and the senior public face of the organisation. He joined Stakeholder Forum as Head of Policy and Advocacy in September 2011 after spending nearly five years with the UK Sustainable Development Commission (SDC). During that time Farooq worked on strategic assessment at the SDC analysing public policy, sustainable operations and procurement, strategy, governance, and decision-making in order to hold the UK Government to account and improve its sustainability performance. In all, Farooq has over ten years of experience at international, national and local levels in public policy and sustainable development, with a further three years of private sector consultancy experience. Moreover, Farooq is a Specialist Advisor to the UK Parliament's Environmental Audit Committee, a member of Future Earth's Engagement Committee, a member of the Alliance for Future Generations, as well as a founding member of Brighter Future, a climate-change action group in London.

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