

Beyond 2015? Or back to the 1980s?

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We are mid-way in the post-MDG process, notionally towards a new development agenda. Consultations, building on last year's Rio plus 20 Summit, are advocating for a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). In parallel, there is a UN process more explicitly modeled on the existing MDGs, their successes, failures and omissions.

A UN-wide task team, covering all agencies including the World Bank and IMF, has published a report on a "[UN Development Agenda](#)". The UN has convened [eleven thematic groups](#) on hunger and food security, inequality, employment, health, education, water, energy and other core structural concerns. Over 80 country-level dialogues are underway. [Web-based surveys](#) and [discussions](#) are on offer for those with internet access. And: more than 200,000 people have participated in UN-sponsored MDG discussions and "[conversations](#)".

There is also the [UN Secretary-General's Panel of Eminent Persons](#) on the Post-2015 Agenda – which just completed their consultations in Bali (25-27 March). This group's editor is now to draft the UN Secretary-General's report to the UN General Assembly – which is to lay out a vision for development beyond 2015. That it is why it is important to engage with the Panel's concluding [communiqué](#) – which otherwise is too anodyne to merit any attention. What does it say?

The Eminent Panel: a striking lack of vision

The Panel's communiqué highlights five key areas (Communiqué 2013: 2). Three are operational, namely to reshape and revitalise global governance and partnerships – by this, they mean avoid overlap and duplication of efforts and encourage joint work on crosscutting issues; to strengthen the means of implementation, including financing for development; and the need for a "data revolution" - better data availability and accountability for measuring progress.

The two other key areas are sustainable development and the economy. The obvious concern for the protection of the global environment is compressed into addressing global environmental challenges, strengthening resilience, and improving disaster preparedness capacities.

The most important area of a development agenda, the real economy, is folded into a brief point on sustainable production and consumption – cast as the "need to manage the world's production and consumption patterns in more sustainable and equitable ways" (Communiqué 2013: 2).

The Panel's discourse appears oblivious to the fact that it is the current structure of the real economy, and the concrete impact of climate change, which are producing hunger and malnutrition, working poverty, and the largest social and economic inequities ever witnessed. The Panel appears deaf to the call for a transformative agenda – even if they use that term in their communiqué. And human rights feature but once in their text. There is nothing left from

the grand visions of the 1990s and the Millennium Declaration, or the more shallow, but at least galvanizing spirit of the MDGs.

The public debate: human rights, a universalist agenda, employment and equity

Perhaps the eminent persons are too eminent to have time to listen or read. But many ideas – many tame, a few more fundamental - have been generated by the MDGs process to date, so that the Panel would have had a large compendium of recommendations and analyses to draw on, even if they were frightened of the more radical tones of earlier development decades.

For one, there are the emerging views of people across the globe, collected and compiled by the UN Development Group. They unequivocally place human rights and freedom from insecurity and violence at the centre of their concern, as a non-negotiable overarching principle. The right to food, the right to water, the right to land, reproductive rights, and a more encompassing notion of human security, are clear and vocal demands (UN Development Group 2013: 3; 32; 37; 44; 45; 50; 51; 55; 56).

For the remit of the overall development agenda, these views advocate for an “equilibrium between social, environmental, economic and political priorities” and “an agenda which acknowledges that global resources are finite and that sharing these resources will be necessary in the future development agenda.” (UN Development Group 2013: 45).

The participants in the global consultations and “conversations” have again and again called for “universal access to basic services and resources, and ‘getting to zero’ – such as eradicating extreme poverty, hunger and preventable maternal and child deaths” (UN Development Group 2013: 49).

On the economic agenda, these global voices have been arguing for transformative economic policies. These have been defined as “aimed at generating employment, including supportive macroeconomic policies and public investment in infrastructure and social services. ... The demand is for a global development framework that places transformation at the heart of its rationale and national policies to increase productive capacities and foster structural change of the economies. ... for most poor countries the promotion of labour-intensive manufacturing and agricultural sectors is critical for generating decent jobs and transforming their economies. ... Structural transformation is critical for sustained growth.” (UN Development Group 2013: 45.) Job creation – necessary for dignity and for income (UN Development Group 2013:22) - weaves through most public consultations.

Corroborating the voices from the ground are outcomes from established UN and [academic groups](#), pulled together in thematic groups and [other outlets](#). The [FAO Committee on World Food Security](#), for instance, has presented a fairly comprehensive analysis of the root causes of hunger. It points to a range of interrelated factors needing redress. They include high unemployment and not enough decent work; inadequate social protection systems; unequal distribution of productive resources and continuing insecurity of land tenure and access to land, water and other natural resources, particularly for women farmers; insufficient purchasing power for low-waged workers and the rural and urban poor; marginalisation and discrimination against vulnerable groups such as indigenous peoples, internally displaced persons or refugees, and social and cultural exclusion. Technically, there is low productivity of resources. Internationally, there is a lack of an open, non-discriminatory, equitable, distortion-

free, transparent multilateral trading system that could promote agriculture and rural development in developing countries. And hunger is increasingly owed to climate factors, such as the degradation of ecosystems and the depletion of natural resources, especially biodiversity. (Committee on World Food Security 2012: 7-8). This list offers sufficient insight on what needs to be integral to the next development agenda, if hunger and food security are to disappear.

The ILO and the ICFTU have elaborated a comprehensive agenda for employment and decent work and for social protection. It encompasses [four elements](#), creating jobs through opportunities for investment, entrepreneurship, skills development, and sustainable livelihoods; guaranteeing rights at work through the core labour standards, representation and participation; as well as social dialogue through strong and independent workers' and employers' organisations. The fourth element is about extending social protection, which has become a rallying call for addressing inequalities and an anchor in national and international policy discourse since the adoption of the Recommendation on [Social Protection Floors](#) (June 2012). These concerns too need to be central to the new development agenda.

The Panel did not take on any of these points. They are complex, tricky, perhaps, and difficult to pack into a brief communiqué. But they are legitimate demands and concerns, and only if they become part of the discourse, will the global community move on beyond 2015 towards a world one would actually want.

Outlook

The suggestions from the global consultations, the recommendations from experts are not very radical. They conform with past UN and civil society demands, and most long since adopted by the international community. It will be important that the UN Secretary-General's Report to the General Assembly this autumn, outlining a new UN development agenda, does not fall behind earlier commitments. But the risk is enormous that the "new" agenda does not even meet those – low – expectations, and falls behind past decades.