

# On the Cusp of A Genuinely Transformative Agenda?

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At least 2.2 billion people are affected by multidimensional poverty ([UNDP HDR 2014](#)),<sup>1</sup> and probably one billion by hunger. [Income, wealth and health inequities are spiraling](#). There are currently over [40 million people in acute distress as internal or cross-border refugees](#).<sup>2</sup> The planet is suffering from perhaps irreversible climate change and biodiversity loss, man-made and system-generated.

To address these unprecedented attacks on human rights and human development, four parallel but interrelated negotiation processes are currently underway in the multilateral sphere – on the post-2015 development agenda, on climate change, on an update of the women's agenda, and on financing for development. Efforts to meet the unfulfilled MDGs are also meant to continue until the end of 2015. If all went well, there could be a unified, global agenda for sustainable development by December 2015. If not, the situation will continue to deteriorate.

## Searching multilateralism for the much-vaunted paradigm shift

The international community and the UN had promised a paradigm shift for this new round of development. And yes, one notes progress on the content side. The proposed 17 [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) drawn up after protracted negotiations by the Open Working Group and the [Nine Major Groups](#)<sup>3</sup> in July 2014, are far more comprehensive than the MDGs. Human rights, governance, the environment, and economic and social development are recognised as interconnected, the way they were perhaps intended to be in the intent of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

There are improvements over the MDGs in two ways. Firstly, the social dimensions of development around education and health are cast in a more rights-oriented way, moving away from increasing these by some modest fraction, to a notion of universal access. Secondly, there is a broadening of issues beyond social development, with policy areas that address the importance of industrialization – perhaps better called industrial strategy - and productivity. The SDG draft refers to value chains and the necessity of retaining value added in the producing economies. Political rights and good governance have their own goal. Building on the Rio+20 outcomes, there are several specific goals on climate change and the environment. The two most striking goals are the call for equality in and among countries, and for sustainable production and consumption.

The UN recently published the [Secretary-General's Synthesis Report](#) to accompany the next

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<sup>1</sup> Using income-based measures of poverty, 1.2 billion people live with \$1.25 or less a day. But the Multidimensional Poverty Index reveals that almost 1.5 billion people in 91 developing countries are living in poverty with overlapping deprivations in health, education and living standards, and almost 800 million people are at risk of falling back into poverty if setbacks occur.

<sup>2</sup> There are 15 million registered refugees and 28 million internally displaced persons.

<sup>3</sup> Agenda 21, adopted at Rio 1992, recognised nine sectors of society as the main channels for sustainable development. They are: Women; Children and Youth; Indigenous Peoples; Non-Governmental Organizations; Local Authorities; Workers and Trade Unions; Business and Industry; Scientific and Technological Community; and Farmers.

round of negotiations. Much hype preceded its release – would it be radical and go beyond the OWG draft, would it provide critical analyses, would it offer political guidance and inspiration from the Secretary General?

The Synthesis Report contains some encouraging references to

- decent jobs (§ 45, 54, 72);
- labour rights for all (§50) ;
- social protection (§50) and the social protection floor (§91)
- remedying social exclusion (§91);
- the role of public funds (§90) and state responsibility for social needs (§108);
- the need to increase ODA (§90);
- calling on the IFIs to be more responsive;
- international coordination of macroeconomic policies of major economies; and countercyclical macroeconomic management (113);
- tackling illicit financial flows (§115);
- improving taxes (e.g., financial transaction taxes, carbon tax, airline ticket levies) and non-tax mechanisms (§112);
- Economic and Environmental Governance Reporting (§104) and a Technology Bank (§126).

There is also a critique of the “inequities that have plagued the international system to the disadvantage of developing countries” (§95), of spending on military budgets and of disadvantageous licensing (§119).

However, the issues of inequities, gender, unequal power relations, sustainable production and consumption – which the SDG process succeeded in bringing to the fore - are not prominent in the Report despite its high-flying title “The Road to Dignity”. Crucial areas that the SDGs draft tackled are absent – such as the concept of global value chains which is needed to understand immiserising trade, or the concept of the care economy – so relevant for gender equity and empowerment, and also for the rights to health and education, and to ensure decent work and social protection for all.

One searches in vain for some clear illustrations of the policies that would be necessary. Decent jobs is a reductionist formula that does not spell out the right to decent work and productive employment which would encompass measures for employment creation, decent wages, rights at work, labour standards, the right to social protection, and gender equality. In the taxation discussion, one finds no new and audacious proposals, such as taxes on wealth or inheritance or proper mineral taxes, to counter the massive concentration of wealth, the exploitative extraction of natural resources and rampant land-grabbing, and the need for greater fiscal space so that governments could properly and reliably fund public goods and services.

The Report’s policies are moreover strewn across the body of the text; the policy interventions listed come across as siloed and fragmented, it is a projected policy approach. One misses systematic policy thinking, something one would expect from a synthesis coming out of the UN system. [UN DESA would have given ample Keynesian policy ideas in this regard](#). In fact, the sidelined 2<sup>nd</sup> International Decade for the Eradication of Poverty, which follows the issues raised in that progressive World Summit on Social Development (Copenhagen 1995) [has produced a policy paper](#) that organises policy responses around the concern for full employment decent work, widening inequality and climate. It presents a pertinent catalogue of coherent policy

interventions and one is puzzled why the Synthesis Report did not build on this knowledge base.

But then, to expect audacious policy proposals from the Synthesis Report would be misguided since it offers no analysis why and how the global systems are creating poverty, exclusion, environmental destruction, and political oppression, ultimately resulting in violence. Without such an analysis, it cannot even begin to offer systematic policy advice<sup>4</sup>. So the paradigm shift towards a truly transformative, holistic, analytically founded agenda for economic, social and environmental justice integrated with human rights – still remains to be developed.

### **Where else to look?**

Formally, it is in the hands of the will, the skills, and the activities of the UN member states and the President of the General Assembly (PGA), and to the analytical, convening and moral power of the UN secretariat, whether there will be a paradigm shift. That will in turn depend crucially on whether the UN and the member states will allow the nine major groups and other civil society stakeholders to remain equal partners in the process.

UN member states, however, are not monolithic. Some would like to see the 17 SDGs substantially plundered, notably cutting out the equality and the sustainability goals. Some of the developed countries would like to see chasms among the G77. Some hope there will be a deadlock and negotiations will ultimately, come September 2015, revert into the hands of a few powerful heads of state.

As the UN loses clout, new constellations and self-selecting political alliances have become policy players at the global level and this may well impact on the negotiations. These include the BRICS on the one hand and the G7/G8 on the other; both groups are expected to formulate an SDG policy stance at their respective summits (in Germany for the G7/8 in June and in Russia for the BRICS in July). These summits will just precede the Financing for Development Summit in Addis Ababa. The BRICS may offer a bargaining chip in the form of the BRICS Bank that could help advance the financing for development agenda in the interest of the low-income countries. The G7/8 are more likely to defend their political control of financial markets and the International Financial Institutions, and their ideological push for austerity.

The EU was formative for the MDGs because of influential progressive development cooperation ministers in several of the countries in the early 2000s. But it has since then veered to the right towards open neo-liberalism. The EU-Presidency in 2015 lies with Latvia and then Luxembourg, suggesting that politically conservative countries will be heading the European consensus building process. Expecting that this set of players will be striving for a paradigm shift would be politically naïve.

If the ever-deepening attacks on human rights and human development are to be countered with a genuinely transformative paradigm, it will be imperative to have a coalition of governments committed to social justice. And it will require the [guaranteed participation of progressive civil society](#).

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<sup>4</sup> Ironically, a critical stance has come from an unexpected source: in many of his recent statements, the [Catholic Pope has offered an outspoken analysis and critique of unfettered capitalism](#) – which he describes as a silent Third World War - and the responsibility of society to curb capitalism.