

Holding Governments Accountable to a Vision for “Post 2015”

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This week, the [UN General Assembly \(GA\) will assess the MDGs](#) - their progress and gaps and officially launch the intergovernmental discussion on a new, sustainable development agenda – perhaps to be encapsulated as sustainable development goals (SDGs)

The UN Secretariat was initially cautious in terms of intertwining an MDG assessment with a design of a successor agenda, lest momentum for achieving the goals fizzle out, instead of concentrating on a last spurt towards meeting the targets. But already last year, academics and civil society pushed the UN to start thinking about a new agenda, by commissioning studies, convening workshops, and publishing blogs (see for example Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives, [Towards a Framework of Universal Sustainability Goals as Part of a Post-2015 Agenda.](#))

As a result, the General Assembly has a myriad of ideas to draw on, put forward since the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development last year. [One million opinions were collected in consultations](#), face-to-face, and via the internet civil society and academics provided numerous, [often scathing contributions and reflections](#) and a number of more officious reports have been published– starting with the outcome from the Rio plus 20 process [The Future we want](#) followed by the work of the [UN interagency task team](#) then the input from the [UN Secretary-General’s high level panel of experts](#), and finally, the [UN Secretary General’s July 2013 report](#) on a life in dignity for all.

In light of this somewhat overwhelming set of views, one prominent commentator is asking the UN to offer leadership – instead of merely serving as a broker of views (Jan [Vandemoortele, Post-2015 – why another approach is needed](#)).

I agree that leadership - or better vision - is needed.

Before getting to a **genuinely new agenda**, several questions are on the table:

- Do we need global targets, and if so why? The answer is simple and obvious: targets to which governments, individually and as a community, commit can focus their interventions and then be used to measure their sincerity, effectiveness, and resource commitments. They can help to hold the government, or the community of governments – accountable.

If that is so, what kind of targets do we need? Here, the answer is far more complex.

- Many protagonists argue for a simple list of clear, measurable, achievable targets. This would – notionally - single out the most pressing issues for priority attention - such as hunger, income poverty, social exclusion, destruction of the environment, ill health, illiteracy, political oppression and violent conflict – in short, the many forms of violations of human rights – and formulate targets, as was done with the MDG process.

However:

- If targets are simple and measurable, they [reify the issues](#). Reducing poverty to a single number for example – even if it is the composite number offered by the multidimensional poverty index or the human development index - obscures its multi-dimensional manifestations, and the loss of human dignity that is always connected to poverty remains invisible.
- If targets are achievable, they are not likely to be ambitious, and thus ultimately serve to cement the status quo. Goal setting tends to gravitate towards the smallest agreeable target, such as towards reducing rather than eliminating hunger, or poverty, or at best towards eradicating extreme poverty over a very long time period. But, as [FAO Director-General Jose Graziano da Silva put it](#) with respect to the world's massive number of people living with hunger: “We live in a world of plenty which has enough food to feed everyone. For us, the only acceptable number (of people living in hunger) is zero”.
- And most importantly, simple, achievable goals and targets conceal the causes of poverty, hunger and oppression.
- They thereby also skirt the issue of identifying the required policy steps, and agreeing on policy space for countries serious about tackling the issue. Simple goals do not try to even attempt to analyse power and structures. They thus inhibit any transformative action.

Therefore, I would argue that the shortcomings of the current debate on the underachieved MDGs and on framing the new development agenda post 2015 are not about too few, too many, too vague or too ambitious targets, but rather about missing the point entirely.

The discussion needs to clearly and courageously analyse the causes of the immense and continuously increasing inequities and oppressions in and among countries. This analysis then needs to put forward policies to radically change the pernicious structures within communities, within countries, in regions and globally. And from there it must move towards nailing down the primary addressees – governments.

Governments are the actors who sit in the UN General Assembly. They have an interest in shortlisting simplified, achievable goals. But: governments can be pressurised to make concessions. And it is governments that can be held accountable.

This is where the UN could come in – offering a vision that rises about the interests of communities, ruling elites, governments, regional groupings and power blocs – and demanding instead that the aspirations of a dignified humanity be met. This would be a world free from fear and fear from want - as electrifying a vision as the Universal Declaration of Human Rights when it was first released, and one against which governments would need to be held accountable.