Already a key component of sustainable development policies, the alleviation of inequalities within and between countries also stands as a policy goal, and deserves to take centre stage of the Sustainable Development Goals, agreed during the Rio+20 Summit in 2012. The 2013 edition of A Planet for Life represents a unique international initiative grounded on conceptual and strategic thinking, and – most importantly – empirical experiments, conducted on five continents and touching on multiple realities. This unprecedented collection of works proposes a solid empirical approach, rather than an ideological one, to inform future debate. The case studies collected in this volume demonstrate the complexity of the new systems required to accommodate each country’s specific economic, political and cultural realities. These systems combine technical, financial, legal, fiscal and organizational elements with a great deal of applied expertise, and must be articulated within a clear, well-understood, growth- and job-generating development strategy. Inequality reduction does not occur by decree; neither does it automatically arise through economic growth, nor through policies that equalize incomes downward via blind taxing and spending. Inequality reduction involves a collaborative effort that must motivate all concerned parties, one that constitutes a genuine political and social innovation, and one that often runs counter to prevailing political and economic forces.
The decision by governments at the Rio+20 conference in June to articulate and adopt a comprehensive set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was then — and is still — hailed as one of the most positive outcomes of the conference. With very few genuinely new commitments emerging from Rio, the sustainable development community has pinned its hopes on the adoption of binding and shared goals covering the period from 2015 forward and addressing the range of sustainability challenges facing humanity. The process for making this aspiration a reality, including the creation of an Open Working Group (OWG) with heavy input from civil society and the private sector, has begun at the UN General Assembly in New York.

As we all know, however, the UN in New York has become a highly vexed forum in which to seek international consensus. What chance do the SDGs have of seeing the light of day, and how can they go beyond the simply aspirational and actually serve as a framework for global development efforts? And what chance does the SDG process have of crossing the mosquito-ridden marsh without sinking irrevocably into the mud?

The most recent proximate experience is that of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Adopted at the Millennium Summit in 2000, the general consensus is that they have proved useful in focusing development effort and available funding on a handful of achievable targets and that, by the time their period of implementation has elapsed, at least some of them will have been met while others will have progressed considerably. Indeed, setting the initiation date of the SDGs in 2015 is intended not only to give space for consensus-building around the new goals, but to provide no excuse whatsoever for distracting attention from the completion of MDG obligations.

By 2015, the UN also aims to adopt a new development agenda, drawing not only on all the intergovernmental undertakings over the two decades since the Earth Summit in 1992 but also very much on the outcomes of the Rio+20 conference. Further, it has established a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons to advise it on this agenda. The interplay between the development agenda, the Panel and the OWG for the SDGs is clearly important, and the years until 2015 will allow the optimal synergy between the different processes to be achieved — or for one to dominate the others.

But, as so often happens in the intergovernmental world, we have entrusted the realization of our lofty intentions to one of the world’s most politically-captured institutions, one with a long track record of sending initiative after initiative into the quicksand. Will the momentum from Rio carry the SDGs across the swamp to dry land on the other side? And how can we organize, run and support the process to maximize our chances for real success?

It is instructive to look at the experience of the MDGs to see what lessons can be learned for the SDG process. On the plus side, despite a slow start, the MDGs achieved a snowball effect throughout the development community and well beyond into civil society and the private sector. Here were — finally — eight goals and an accompanying set of targets that were politically, financially and logistically achievable; in fact the greatest criticism was that they lacked ambition, that in 15 years we should be able to accomplish even more. Indeed, suggesting that we could arrive at 2015 with over a billion still poor and hungry was...
not easy for many to accept, especially knowing that the resources exist to feed everyone on the planet. Similarly, halving the proportion of people without access to safe drinking water and decent sanitation is a modest goal, especially given that it could leave more people without safe water in 2015 than there were in 2000.

Nevertheless the MDGs, built as they are on existing programmes, served to concentrate and structure international effort and offered a clear and for the most part numerically monitorable pathway to progress and final achievement. The wide acceptance and high profile that the MDGs eventually achieved certainly led to new resources being mobilized and exerted moral pressure on countries to demonstrate what they were doing to favour their successful achievement. As a result, the MDGs rose to the top of the development agenda and stayed there for much of the decade since their adoption. That in itself explains more than any other factor why the MDGs have been regarded as a success, and why the SDGs are expected to meet the same high standard.

The choice to focus on the successes of the MDGs cannot be allowed to mask the much bleaker reality: in most cases the goals will not be met – the majority will not even be approached. Public discourse around the goals focuses on the poverty alleviation targets – regarded as the greatest MDG success story. But even if, as seems possible, these targets are met, it will largely be thanks to the rapid emergence of a middle class in China and India. If we subtract these two factors from the equation, the arrow not only fails to hit the bull’s eye, it falls well short of the target itself. And it would be a stretch to claim that the relative success of China and India is the result of actions taken in response to the MDGs.

Some of the MDGs should have been doable with readily available technology and with existing levels of institutional organization and funding – e.g. the targets on drinking water and sanitation, HIV/AIDS or improving the lives of slum dwellers. Others were included because their absence would have made the package seem imbalanced, even if not many observers felt they were achievable in the time period. Ending gender discrimination throughout the planet or ensuring that all girls receive primary education, while worthy and urgent, was not likely to be achieved, even with the most earnest of efforts.

Further, MDG success should not simply be judged on the differential between 2000 and 2015, but on the differential between 2015 and the likely 2015 scenario if the MDGs had not been adopted. After all, development was proceeding before 2000 and it would have continued even if the MDGs had not been set. It should be possible to project the trends in evidence in 1999 forward to 2015 and determine whether or not the MDGs have caused a major increase in development achievement.

So what will happen in 2015? In all likelihood, we will celebrate the MDGs as a major triumph for development and urge governments not to let up in their efforts to achieve the goals finally and fully. Those goals that were not met will no doubt find their place in one form or another in the newly-minted SDGs; those that were met will be tightened and similarly included. And a new horizon, probably 2030, will be fixed, elegantly kicking the can down the road well beyond the political mandates of any who might be blamed for failure.

How, then, can we build on the successes of the MDGs, and how can we avoid repeating their failures?

One criticism of the MDGs is that they were cooked up in the UN Secretary General’s office and sprung on Heads of State at the Millennium Summit with inadequate consultation. Whether or not it is justified, this criticism has stuck; the halls of Rio echoed with warnings not to make the same mistake with the SDGs. This is one of the reasons why a comprehensive set of draft goals was not tabled in Rio, and why a three-year period has been booked for their elaboration. The SDG process not only allows for the OWG and for eventual approval by the General Assembly but also for input from the Secretary-General’s new high-level panel and a still-to-be-defined process for collecting ideas from civil society and the private sector. Ideas abound, as do visions for how the process should be organized. The Secretariat will gather, sift and organize these proposals but, in the end, they will feed into a political process that will not necessarily assess them on their merits alone. Recent examples of the broad trawl for ideas, including the commendable process set up by the Brazilians for Rio, while inclusive and welcoming of a wide range of approaches, have had little effect on negotiated outcomes.
Access to water has significantly improved worldwide over the last decade, and is approaching universal provision. It can be said that in 2010, five years before the deadline, the goal of having halved the number of people without access to water compared to the 1990 level was achieved. Sub-Saharan Africa however remains below the overall growth rate, with only 61% of the population having access to water in 2010.

Conversely, five years before the deadline, access to sanitation is one of the goals where least has been achieved. 2.5 billion people have no access to any form of sanitation. Coverage should reach 67% of the world population in 2015 instead of the 75% expected. In sub-Saharan Africa, but also in many Asian countries, investment in this area is virtually non-existent.

Second, the SDGs must avoid the accountability failures of the MDG process. At the intergovernmental level it is easy to make promises, in large part because there is no price to be paid for not fulfilling them. It is all very well to promise to “Reduce Biodiversity Loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss” (MDG target 7B). The real questions are: who will take what actions to reduce this loss, by when, with what means, and with what consequences if the actions are not taken? In the absence of clear answers to these questions, nobody can be held to account except the elusive “global community” that is, in any event, exempt from punishment. So what happens in such cases? We sit back and hope that somebody, somewhere, will take steps to stem the global haemorrhage of biodiversity because they were inspired by the loftiness and global acceptability of the goal. To pin our hopes on this approach is to suffer from life-threatening naivety.

In fact, what was expected was that the goal would lead governments to beef up existing programmes on biodiversity conservation in FAO, UNEP and others, to launch new initiatives (such as REDD and REDD+) and place biodiversity loss higher up the political agenda. Did that happen? Yes, all of it happened, but in proportions entirely inadequate to the challenge. Who, then, was sent to the corner sporting a tall cone-shaped hat? Nobody, of course. Even when binding, most international undertakings are in reality voluntary, and the will is not there, or at least not powerful enough, to set in motion the game-changing decisions without which we will inexorably fall short of our goals.

The SDG process must take this lesson solidly on board. Without a clear and robust accountability framework, the goals will not be achieved, even if there is a strong intention at the outset to succeed. Each goal adopted should specify who will take what action, against what timetable. The funding needed to reach the targets must be identified and committed, and there must be a genuine link between failure and sanction – or between success and reward.

This is important. We are too inclined to think that accountability means punishment, but accountability can also be positive. How much more successful would we be if full implementation of agreed actions led to economic or political reward? Is it inconceivable that African countries might be rewarded with trade preferences for reaching their targets? Or that they receive an increased quota of scholarships to universities in the OECD countries? Or funding for the next stage of effort?
Finally, and equally important, the MDGs are falling short of our aspirations in part because we have counted on governments to take the bulk of the action. If the SDGs are to draw on the ingenuity and sense of innovation evident in the broader sustainable development community, they must be structured so that each component of that community has a role in achieving the goals. Of particular importance is the private sector which, more so even than governments and civil society, has the financial, institutional, logistical and human capacity to take the lead in turning the goals into achievements. It is idle to suppose that the private sector will be inspired by the kind of insipid soup that is dished out these days by intergovernmental process. It follows that the process around the OWG must be constructed with a good deal of imagination, so that the energy and spirit of enterprise that abound in civil society and the private sector are harnessed to build a bridge across the fetid swamp into which too many good international intentions tend to subside.

In the end, it may be better to set a limited number of SDGs, and to adopt only those to which we are prepared to commit and to whose achievements we are prepared to hold ourselves accountable and for which we have significant buy-in from both the corporate sector and the wider organizations of civil society.
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