

## A2 | 'LEAVE NO ONE BEHIND' – ARE SDGS THE WAY FORWARD?

In September 2015, the UN General Assembly adopted a resolution on the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, of which Social Development Goal 3 (SDG3) – “seek[ing] to ensure health and well-being for all, at every stage of life” – is an essential part. The SDG document recognizes that health and well-being is part of a global and integrated approach, based on development strategies that preserve the planet, and on socially inclusive and sustainable economic growth. The document pledges that “No one will be left behind” and underlines that “[T]his new universal Agenda...seek[s] to realize the human rights of all ...They are integrated and indivisible, and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental.”

The fact that all governments subscribe to such an ambitious plan is important. However, for the SDG goals to be translated into real action the proposed strategies need to be evaluated in terms of the important constraints that have to be overcome to move forward.

To evaluate how this agenda, at least in some essential parts, can be realized by the proposed deadline of 2030, a first and vital step is a reality check. Crucial to that is the proposed comprehensive approach which aims “to address the challenges and commitment effectively”, and acknowledges that “eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, combating inequality within and among countries, preserving the planet, creating sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and fostering social inclusion are linked to each other and are interdependent.” Moreover, it is important that the need for a commitment “to mak[e] fundamental changes in the way that our societies produce and consume goods and services”, is understood.

How realistic is the proposed strategy for change? Former UN/WHO official Jan Vandemoortele criticizes the SDGs as: “[A]n agenda that sidesteps universal challenges such as growing inequalities”, and challenges its proclaimed universal scope. “These omissions are not due to an oversight; they are intentional. Regulating the food industry, financial sector and labor market...do not quite fit within the dominant economic narrative and do not rank high as priorities of most governments”. (Vandemoortele, 2016).

An agenda that sidesteps universal challenges such as growing inequalities and obesity cannot claim to be universal in scope. These omissions are not due to an oversight; they are intentional. Regulating the food industry, financial

### **Box A2.1: The SDG agenda**

“PEOPLE: We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfill their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.

“PLANET: We are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.

“PROSPERITY: We are determined to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature.

“PEACE: We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies, which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.

“PARTNERSHIP: We are determined to mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda through a revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focused in particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.”

sector and labour market—to address obesity and inequality—do not quite fit within the dominant economic narrative and do not rank high as priorities of most governments. Instead, the SDGs conveniently focus on ending extreme poverty and hunger.

In the area of health and well-being for all, the SDGs do offer a more comprehensive framework than the Millennium Development Goals. Nevertheless, to really implement the proposed changes, vested interests will have to be countered, and radical new choices will have to be made. Therefore, this agenda cannot be conducted solely by governments. It must involve social organizations, civil society, academics, community representatives and citizens' assemblies. Without dedicated champions, without a ‘struggle for real change’, these global targets will remain empty words.

### **Fundamental flaws and contradictions in the pledge that no one will be left behind**

The SDGs were severely criticized when they were proclaimed. *The Economist* called the 169 proposed targets “sprawling and misconceived”, “unfeasibly expensive” at US\$ 2–3 trillion per year, and so unlikely to be realized that they amount to “worse than useless” – “a betrayal of the world’s poorest

people" (*The Economist*, 2015). Moreover, the SDGs were ridiculed as "no targets left behind" during a high-profile meeting of Gates Foundation partners (Paulson, 2015).

In defence of the SDGs it is argued that poverty is a complex problem, and that the elimination of poverty will require much more than charity: It will require comprehensive strategies to reduce inequality, combat climate change, strengthen labour rights and eliminate Western agricultural subsidies. The fundamental challenge, which both major proponents and opponents of SDGs tend to gloss over, is that realizing these goals is 'impossible' without changing the fundamental flaws in the current economic and political architecture of the globe.

The SDG document reflects the emerging comprehensive approach to health and well-being, from attending to healthcare needs at the individual level to addressing health in all its dimensions – social, political, economic and environmental. The document articulates the need to achieve "harmony with nature"; the development of "sustainable patterns of production and consumption"; and a halt to the loss of biodiversity, overfishing, deforestation and desertification.

Such a position, however, is far removed from the current paradigm where pursuit of endless industrial growth is producing poverty, destroying the planet and threatening the basis of our existence. This is where the SDGs are – as some would argue – fatally flawed, because embedded in the SDGs is a fundamental contradiction. The SDGs propose growth strategies that seek to perpetuate the current neoliberal model – ever-increasing levels of extraction, production and consumption. An entire goal, Goal 8, is devoted to export-oriented growth, following the existing neoliberal models (Jason, 2015).

This contradictory relationship to growth extends to the SDGs' approach to global poverty. The Zero Draft promotes growth as the main solution to poverty. But of all the income generated by global GDP growth between 1999 and 2008, the poorest 60 per cent of humanity received only 5 per cent. Jason Hickel, an anthropologist at the London School of Economics, has calculated that without fundamental changes in the globe's economic architecture it would take 207 years to eliminate poverty with this strategy, the global economy would need to expand 175 times its present size (Hickel, 2015).

Clearly this is an impossible aspiration. Even if such immense growth were possible, it would drive climate change to catastrophic levels and rapidly reverse any gains against poverty. The SDGs fail to accept that mass impoverishment is the product of extreme wealth accumulation and overconsumption by a few, which entails processes of enclosure, extraction and exploitation. The SDGs avoid addressing these deeper causes. For example, the problems with the structural adjustment programmes, the greatest single cause of poverty since colonialism, imposed by the World Bank, the IMF and the EU (in Greece) are never mentioned in the SDGs. A vague request to "respect each country's

policy space” is made, but, as the Greek crisis reminds us, the world’s biggest creditors are not likely to care much for national sovereignty when their finances are at stake.

Instead of tackling this crucial issue, the SDGs do the opposite: Goal 17.10 calls for more trade liberalization and more power for the World Trade Organization, and support for bilateral trade deals — for example, the Trans-Pacific Partnership; Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership; and Trade in Services Agreement. And instead of demanding an end to financial speculation that has caused food prices to spike since 2007, pushing 150 million into hunger, the SDGs ask weakly that we “ensure the proper functioning of food commodity markets”.

At no moment does the SDG document refer to the need for a strong regulation of the financial markets. Goal 17.13 speaks vaguely of the need to “enhance global macroeconomic stability” through “policy coordination”, with no specific targets. Tax evasion and avoidance drain developing countries of US\$ 1.7 trillion each year. No word about it. Then there’s debt service, which drains another US\$ 700 billion per year; instead of demanding cancellation, the SDGs call for “debt financing, debt relief and debt restructuring, as appropriate”, which specifically means that debts will not be cancelled (Jason, 2015).

Following the weakening of a nation state driven structure of global governance, as evident from the weakening of the United Nations and its specialized agencies, the World Economic Forum’s “Global Redesign Initiative” report proposed a transformation of the UN into a big public-private partnership. The report, *inter alia*, proposes: “Nation states and intergovernmental structures will continue to play a central role in global decision-making. However, those institutions must be adapted to today’s needs and conditions if they want to preserve their use and, hence, legitimacy. They must begin by more clearly conceiving of themselves as constituting just part of the wider global



**Image A2.1** SDG goal 17.10 supports trade deals: Protests in 2014 in India against regional trade agreement (Delhi Network of Positive People)

cooperation system that the world needs. In fact, they should work explicitly to cultivate such a system by anchoring the preparation and implementation of their decisions more deeply in the processes of interaction with interdisciplinary and multistakeholder networks of relevant experts and actors". The report further argues: "...proposals will be based on the notion of the shared responsibility of all stakeholders for global citizenship. Public-private partnerships will be a core element of future governance systems. In short, this initiative will not necessarily represent a consensus of all stakeholders and individuals participating in it, but will represent the most comprehensive thinking and brainstorming on our global future" (World Economic Forum, 2010).

We can already see global governance being increasingly reoriented to allow direct participation of private actors alongside states (see Chapters D1 and D2). As a consequence democratic representation is weakened in favour of private commercial interests. Given this context powerful interests (rich countries, corporations and private foundations) may well view the SDG process as a step towards the 'multi-stakeholderization' of global governance. We wait for first 'philanthropic entrepreneur' to claim his seat at the UN!

The notion of multi-stakeholder partnerships is embedded in the SDGs. SDG 17 includes the following targets:

*"Multi-stakeholder partnerships*

- Enhance the global partnership for sustainable development, complemented by multi-stakeholder partnerships that mobilize and share knowledge, expertise, technology and financial resources, to support the achievement of the sustainable development goals in all countries, in particular developing countries
- Encourage and promote effective public, public-private and civil society partnerships, building on the experience and resourcing strategies of partnerships"

In lieu of providing the private sector a seat on the high table of decision-making do the SDGs ask corporations and private investors to commit themselves to binding commitments designed to end poverty and save the planet or propose some accountability mechanisms? Clearly they do not – the SDGs merely 'encourage' corporations to be readonable! Goal 12.6: "encourage(s) companies, especially large and transnational companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle".

What the SDGs, perhaps deliberately, fail to acknowledge is that the mindless pursuit of GDP growth is not the solution to poverty, and surely not a solution to the ecological crisis. It is the primary cause. Human progress should be measured in terms of more fairness, more equality, more well-being, more sharing, to the benefit of the vast majority of humanity. The SDGs fail us on this. They offer to tinker with the global economic system in a bid to make it all seem a bit less violent. But this is not a time for tinkering (Schuftan, 2016).

### **What is sustainable? The elephant in the room**

While the term ‘sustainable’ has become a buzzword in political, economic and development circles, it has become largely meaningless. Few efforts to achieve sustainable development have seriously done so. The suggestion that more people-friendly and environmentally-friendly practices can simply be incorporated into our daily lives to achieve sustainability is not valid. If this world has to move towards sustainability, wealthy nations must massively reduce the extent of material consumption and waste of resources. Gary Leech calls the blindness of this reality “the elephant in the room” in discussions on sustainable development (Leech, 2015).

This is not only about ‘willingness’. The driving force of ‘our’ capitalist production system is profit. And a central capitalist law is the increasing concentration of profit and financial power. In ‘Capital in the Twenty-First Century’, Thomas Piketty explains that the return to capital is persistently higher than economic growth (The Economist, 4 January 2014). Wealth piles up faster than growth in output or incomes. There can exceptions, when societal counter power (through working class organizations) forces redistribution mechanisms. This was the case in the post–Second World War period in parts of Europe when social struggle in West Europe and the existence of a strong USSR (combined with a period of extraordinary economic growth) led to a more egalitarian interregnum. But, as Piketty explains, this was an exception. And it was the result of a worldwide situation of people’s struggles: decolonization of the South, socialism in the East and strong workers’ movements in the West.

The need to constantly expand the production and consumption of goods, and the increasing concentration of financial power, is not only in contradiction with sustainable development, it will oppose it ‘by all means’. Under uncontrolled capitalism profit comes before people, before the climate, before the planet. Continuing to ‘cohabit with the elephant’— based on solemnly proclaimed agreements – means neglecting these facts. Alternative strategies will have to be based on a development of a broad democratic counter-power, in defence of the right to health and well-being for all, in defence of humanity, and in defence of planet Earth.

In this, the realities of wealthy nations (high human development and high ecological footprint) and poor nations (low human development and low ecological footprint) are directly linked. The unsustainably high per capita ecological footprints of wealthy nations, are achieved by wealthy nations consuming other peoples’ share of the planet’s resources. As a result, the resources of poor countries are exploited not for the benefit of local populations but to satiate the consumption needs of wealthy nations. If we are serious about achieving sustainable development, we have to address this elephant in the room: the better off must dramatically diminish their levels of material consumption, which contravenes the very logic that drives the capitalist system

(Leech, 2015). A failure to implement such systemic change means that all well-intentioned efforts to achieve sustainability will ultimately fail.

### **The search for a comprehensive approach**

For decades, two opposing systems have dominated the health policy debate: the comprehensive healthcare approach, with the 1978 Alma Ata Declaration as its cornerstone, and the profit-making model, emphasizing the role of the private sector. Neoliberal policies create a growing contradiction between increasing health needs and the pursuit of private profits. Market-oriented health reforms pursue the provision of healthcare in a competitive growth model. Not well-being but profit is the primary driving force. The saturation of markets in rich countries leads to pressures towards further liberalization, deregulation and privatization. Not just the 'traditional' economic sectors are included in these programmes; health, education and other social services are also covered in the profit-making model.

Besides ensuring access to care, the right to health includes an adequate strategy towards securing the social determinants of health. A renewed attention to the importance of the social determinants and corresponding strategies for advancing health as a central national objective can be the only way forward. The 2008 report of the Commission on Social Determinants of Health (CSDH) has mentioned that "inequities of power, money and resources have to be tackled" (WHO 2008a). The CSDH has appealed for political action, insisting that "community or civil society action on health inequities cannot be separated from the responsibility of the state to guarantee a comprehensive set of rights and ensure the fair distribution of essential material and social goods among population groups" (Marmot et al., 2008, pp. 1661–69). The strong development of a rights-based approach to health underscores this crucial role of the state in respecting, protecting and fulfilling the right to (the highest attainable state of) health (De Vos et al., 2009, pp. 23–35). Until today this remains a central issue and a largely unfinished business.

In different parts of the world, comprehensive and complementary approaches – embedded in social and cultural traditions – are being developed. An open exchange of aims and objectives and empowering strategies could enrich healthcare concepts, practices and strategies in different parts of the world.

*Integrated health and welfare, with priority for 'VIP' clients* The Finnish social protection model is supported by a large and strong public sector funded by taxation. Residence-based health services are complemented with a broad social welfare approach, with a relatively high level of various kinds of social benefits. Nevertheless, Finnish health workers acknowledge that even today the challenge is to decrease the differences in health outcomes on the basis of gender and social class. There are insufficiencies with regard to accessibility

of services and the coordination of patient care, while loneliness and safety issues at home remain important concerns.

Currently a new integrated social and healthcare model is being tried out, with further integration of health and welfare services through a newly developed ‘welfare centre’ concept. The aim is to have a single entry point for health and comprehensive well-being, focusing on patient needs; easy access to ‘walk-in’ quality services; strengthened cooperation and companionship among all professionals; integrated client processes from the first contact, with focus on VIP-clients (defined as the 5 to 10 per cent of the population needing frequent and different kinds of health and social support). This concept is part of a broader ‘health in all policies approach’ whereby “intersectoral action, healthy public policies and environmental sustainability are identified as central elements for the promotion of health, the achievement of health equity and the realization of health as a human right” (WHO 2013).

*Buenvivir, a social philosophy that inspires the South American social movement*  
The ‘buenvivir’ (good living) approach proposes that humans are only stewards of the Earth and its resources, and therefore individual rights are subjugated to those of communities and nature.

Ecuador is building on its indigenous past by incorporating the concept of ‘sumakkawsay’ – or buenvivir – into its approach to development. Rooted in the ‘cosmovision’ of the Quechua peoples of the Andes, sumakkawsay describes a way of doing things that is community-centred, ecologically balanced and culturally-sensitive. A far cry from the market-is-king model of capitalism, it inspired the recently revised Ecuadorian Constitution, which now reads: “We... hereby decide to build a new form of public coexistence, in diversity and in harmony with nature, to achieve the good way of living.”

Buenvivir loosely translates as ‘good living’ or ‘well living’. But for Eduardo Gudynas, a leading scholar on the subject, both these translations sit too close to Western notions of well-being or welfare: “These are not equivalents at all. With buenvivir, the subject of well-being is not [about the] individual, but the individual in the social context of their community and in a unique environmental situation” (Balch 2013).

While concepts and reality might still be two very different things, similar thinking is inspiring other social movements across South America. The link to other indigenous belief systems, such as those of the Aymara peoples of Bolivia, the Quichua of Ecuador and the Mapuche of Chile and Argentina, is explicit. Nevertheless, Eduardo Gudynas clearly states that “it certainly doesn’t require a return to some sort of indigenous, pre-Colombian past” and “[i]t is equally influenced by Western critiques [of capitalism] over the last 30 years, especially from the field of feminist thought and environmentalism.”

## The future starts today

The discussion on the road ahead remains open. Nevertheless, it is clear that change will not occur by itself. It will be the result of the clash of opposing forces, in which we clearly position ourselves on the side of 'well-being for all' and a healthy planet, and against profit for a few. Under which political, economic, social and environmental conditions will health and well-being for all be realizable in the near future? How to ensure strong democratic governments? How to strengthen people's participation at all levels? Under which economic conditions will responsible industries become a 'normal thing'? The debate continues. And we need to mobilize.

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