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SDGs

WHAT, WHY AND HOW

One of the key debates that will culminate this year as the MDGs come to an end is the post-2015 development agenda: Will the world agree on a comprehensive development framework? Hurdles remain – the inclusion of the ‘peace and security’ provision, for example – but clear steps need to be taken to push forward a global agreement on development parameters. India, too, can take definitive action towards this end.



by SUNIL SURI

What is the post-2015 development agenda?

In 2015, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) will expire. Discussions on the framework that will replace the MDGs – known as ‘the post-2015 development agenda’ – have been underway for the past two years. An initial set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), drafted by 70 UN Member States, including India, was recently put forward as the “main basis” for full intergovernmental negotiations starting in January 2015. The new draft framework is expected to be formally adopted at a special UN Summit in September 2015.

Why is a post-2015 development agenda necessary?

While the relevance and utility of the MDGs have been widely debated, the need for a new global development framework is arguably greater than when the MDGs were established. As one commentator describes it, the post-2015 development agenda is “the only global, cross-issue, high-level, government-led conversation currently underway about the need for a transition to more sustainable and inclusive globalisation.”

First, a new global development agenda offers a chance to change the wider discourse around development through the inclusion of crucial dimensions that were missing from the MDGs, such as inequality, climate change, peace, governance and justice. For example, there continue to be questions about who exactly are

the beneficiaries of globalisation: According to Credit Suisse, the richest 10% of the global population reportedly hold 86% of the world’s wealth while the bottom 50% owns a meagre 1%. While poverty eradication will remain at the centre of the post-2015 agenda, the integration of the Rio+20 process on sustainable development and the emphasis on a universal agenda means that the new global development framework will be far more ambitious in terms of what issues are to be addressed.

Second, international development urgently needs to evolve in response to changing global dynamics. Recent analysis that identified a hypothetical “new G7,” comprising the BRICS and three of the so-called MINT economies (Mexico, Indonesia and Turkey) with a greater purchasing power parity than the original G7, reinforced vociferous criticisms of the distribution of influence within the global governance institutions that shape international development. While many emerging economies still face pressing development challenges at home, they are also increasingly important global actors and are fostering South-South cooperation as an additional engine for poverty reduction.

For example, India’s development assistance increased seven-fold between 2000 and 2015. The agreement through the UN system on a post-2015 development agenda presents an opportunity to transform global development so that it is more representative and reflective of today’s world. Third, collective action to respond to global challenges like climate change, population growth and resource scarcity remains a critical imperative. The consequences of failing to effectively respond to global challenges will not be limited to a few countries, as the recent Ebola outbreak in West Africa has demonstrated. Nearly two decades of declining death rates from armed conflict are at risk of being reversed by multilateral stasis in the face of violence in countries such as Syria, Ukraine and Palestine.

While it cannot be the sole mechanism to address all of these global challenges, the post-2015 development framework can help to address global problems by fostering collective responses through a universal agenda that catalyses action by developed and developing countries alike.

THE DEBATE OVER CBDR AND ITS APPLICATION WILL CONTINUE OVER THE COMING YEAR AND COULD POLARISE DISCUSSIONS.

What are the likely challenges in the coming year? Two sets of challenges stand in the way of an agreement on a new global development agenda. The first is related to the framing of the post-2015 agenda. Despite an array of inputs into the post-2015 discussions, there are still questions about its exact purpose. As Charles Kenny of the Center for Global Development states, “we all knew the point of the MDGs (or at least how they were mostly used): setting a framework for global aid discussions.” It is clear that the SDGs are much more ambitious in their scope, setting out how

global development will support both sustainability and poverty eradication, whilst being underpinned by the principle of universality – so that agreed goals and targets will be “applicable to all countries.” This

strong emphasis on a universal agenda stands in deliberate contrast to the MDGs, which many felt to be based on a donor-recipient model that didn’t place enough emphasis on action from developed countries.¹

However, the failure to explicitly agree on a common understanding of the purpose of the post-2015 development agenda has enabled potentially critical fault lines to emerge – most notably around the principle of ‘common but differentiated responsibilities’ (CBDR). A principle that was codified in the 1992 Rio Declaration, CBDR reflects the need for all states to take collective responsibility for the environment, while allowing countries of varying levels of development to contribute according to their capacity. Developing countries, including India, argue that CBDR should be the “guiding principle in the development and implementation of SDGs,” while developed countries have resisted to its inclusion on the grounds that CBDR has previously been explicitly tied to environmental issues. While CBDR is referenced twice in the chapeau accompanying the initial set of SDGs, the debate over its inclusion and application will continue over the coming year and could polarise discussions.

The second set of challenges obstructing agreement on a new global development agenda relates to the actual content of the SDGs and whether to include issues related to inequality, climate change, sexual and reproductive rights, governance and justice. One contentious area has been the inclusion of targets focused on the reduction of violence

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and its causes. The majority of states have backed such an agenda for sustainable peace, pointing to the fact that 37% of people living in extreme poverty live in countries at risk of high levels of violence, and that current trends project that this share will rise to 75% by 2030. Some UN Member States including India have consistently expressed the view that “we need to be cautious against importing security and human rights issues and placing them the centre of the development discourse.” While all states have effectively endorsed the inclusion of a specific goal on “peaceful societies” in the initial set of SDGs, there is still potential for these issues to derail efforts to agree on a new global development agenda. Indeed, the inclusion of peace, governance and justice issues within the post-2015 development agenda has become tied to discussions on the global partnership for development and the willingness of developed countries to engage in a genuinely open and robust debate on addressing global governance deficits.

What needs to happen to realise a transformative post-2015 development agenda?

An agreement on a transformative post-2015 development agenda depends on a substantive global partnership for development, genuine engagement on reform of global governance institutions, and the inclusion of goals and targets to reduce violence and address its drivers through a developmental approach. A progressive resolution of these issues will require action from all countries.

First, a substantive global partnership for development will need to encompass a range of issues that goes beyond international aid, especially if the post-2015 development agenda is to be of relevance to middle-income countries – such as India – which are not dependent on international aid. While it is imperative that developed countries make new commitments on official development assistance, the opportunity to address major structural issues such as improving trade and intellectual property policies, facilitating technology transfer and reforming the international debt architecture must also be taken. For example, of the world’s low-income countries two are in debt distress, 13 at high risk of debt and 28 are at moderate risk. This leaves developing countries facing what one commentator has described as a “perverse choice” when they

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consider how to develop their countries – either they get into more debt to meet their needs (e.g. in terms of infrastructure) and pass the challenge of debt repayment onto future generations, or they simply fail to meet their own needs. A transformative global partnership for development can break new ground if Member States look holistically at how the range of their international policies can better support opportunities for development for all countries.

Second, while undoubtedly challenging, efforts towards reform of global governance institutions will also be pivotal to the legitimacy and effectiveness of the SDGs and a robust global partnership for development. Encouragingly, the co-chairs of the intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda have already signalled their intent by including plans to discuss implications of the new agenda for the UN system and its institutions (“UN Fit for Purpose”). Given the difficulties inherent in making progress on global governance reform, this will also require innovation and creativity on the part of Member States. For example, one policy analyst recently suggested that symbolic willingness to engage constructively on global governance reform could be indicated by formal declarations by European governments and the United States that the next Managing Director of the International Monetary Fund and President of the World Bank will both be from developing countries.

Finally, a transformative post-2015 development agenda must incorporate peace, governance and justice concerns. Those Member States sceptical of their inclusion should recognise that a wide range of inputs to the post-2015 processes indicate that these are integral subjects for both developed and developing countries alike. Most notably, the [Common African Position](#) on the post-2015 development agenda, which collectively represents the views of 54 African Member States, includes a pillar on peace. The inclusion of targets for issues like violence reduction, access to justice, tackling corruption, establishing accountable and responsive institutions, and reducing inequalities between social groups will all help prevent conflict. A focus on peace does not mean importing security issues into the development discourse. Instead, there is a pressing need to consider how best development approaches can be leveraged to

prevent conflict, and how efforts to build peaceful societies can, in turn, enable development. This will not only have implications for poverty reduction; agreement on such actions will also ease the burden on other parts of the multilateral system by reducing the frequency of conflict, helping to reduce the costs of UN peacekeeping and crisis response, and lessening the highly politicised disputes and distrust regarding these issues between Member States.

What can India do to help secure an agreement on a new post-2015 development agenda?

One of the biggest concerns about deliberations on the post-2015 development agenda to date is that despite being more inclusive and consultative than the MDG process, they have still taken place in what has been described as “the UN bubble in New York,” disconnected from the day-to-day lives of those who have the most to gain (or lose) in the post-2015 agenda: the world’s poorest. India could help bridge this disconnect by selecting a goal that it most needs to meet from the SDGs and making public commitments towards it to its citizens and the world. Indeed, in his speech at the opening of 69th UN General Assembly, Prime Minister [Narendra Modi highlighted](#) a number of issues that urgently require domestic action in India and globally:

When we think of absence of basic necessities of the world – 2.5 billion are without access to basic sanitation; 1.3 billion people are without access to electricity; or 1.1 billion people without access to drinking water, we need comprehensive and concerted direct international action.

By championing a particular SDG, India could raise the profile of the post-2015 agenda, help ensure that it has a positive and meaningful impact and, at the same time, become a vanguard in shaping how the new global development agenda will be taken forward over the next fifteen years.

On aspects of the post-2015 development agenda where there are divergences between UN Member States, such as on the concept of CBDR, India could help broker agreement by clearly articulating what exactly CBDR would mean in practice when applied to the SDGs. The same principle applies to other challenging aspects

of the post-2015 discussions, such as global governance reform. What indicators of progress towards global governance reform would India like to see happen as part of the post-2015 development agenda? And on the inclusion of peace, governance and justice issues, India could engage more proactively in dialogue to ensure that its concerns are better understood and, in turn, to improve its own understanding of the needs of other Member States. For example, the planned India-Africa Summit in 2015 could include a specific focus on the post-2015 development agenda, creating space for dialogue on the Common African Position, which includes a pillar on peace.

In his [recent report](#) on the post-2015 development agenda, the UN Secretary-General looking ahead to 2015 stated that “never before has the world had to face such a complex agenda in a single year. And this unique opportunity will not come again in our generation.” With the Indian population estimated at around 1.2 billion (or 17% of the total global population), whatever progress is made towards poverty eradication and sustainable development in India will have a significant bearing on whether the aspirations of the post-2015 agenda are realised. Put simply, the world needs India if the new global development framework is to be effective.

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1 In the words of one senior Indian official the “MDGs sort of came from the sky. There is a modern day Ten Commandments – you will do this, you will do this, you will do this, you will do this.”