

A flawed agenda for development

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A narrow focus on growth-led development is the cause of the world's sustainability crisis, not its solution



People the world forgot An impoverished vision of development KV Poornachandra Kumar

The world's political leaders meet in New York today to adopt a 'sustainable development' agenda. On the face of it, this sounds very hopeful. It signals that finally, humanity may move towards making peace with the earth, even as it erases the shame of over two billion people still living in deprivation and poverty. Do we have cause to celebrate?

The document, *Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, was negotiated over several months of intense discussions amongst government delegates from every country. It also involved extensive consultations with the public. It lays out 17 goals and 169 targets, covering poverty, health, education, gender, water and sanitation, energy, economic development, inequality, infrastructure, settlements, production and consumption, nature and natural resources, and climate.

It is a distinct improvement over the Millennium Development Goals (2000-2015), most notably in making sustainability a cross-cutting objective, and in bringing inequality and gender issues more clearly into focus. Its preamble declares, boldly: "We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination ... A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources are sustainable. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected."

Growth is unsustainable

But unfortunately, the SDGs (sustainable development goals) are unlikely to take the world to either ecological sustainability, or to eliminating poverty and stark inequalities. One major reason for this is the continued dependence on 'economic growth' as the engine to achieve these outcomes. The sum total of human activity on earth, in the name of development and growth, are already beyond what the planet can bear. Both modern science and indigenous peoples have warned that we are consuming resources beyond their regeneration capacity. Alarming high rates of extinction of animal and plant species, and climate change, are symptoms of this 'ecological overshoot'.

In other words, further economic growth is simply not sustainable. The document says "we will decouple economic growth from environmental degradation". There is no evidence of any country having sufficiently 'decoupled' growth from the use or 'throughput' of energy and materials, despite many technological advances. 'Sustainable growth' has been, and remains, an oxymoron.

Another issue being hidden in the hype of the SDGs is that the dominant model of development across the world has not tackled poverty at a rate that anyone can consider acceptable. According to an open letter signed by Noam Chomsky, Naomi Klein and over 1000 other eminent thinkers and activists, at this rate, it will take at least another 100 years for the (at least) 2 billion poor people to move out of poverty. And this will mean a 12-fold increase in the size of the global economy! The resultant ecological damage will more than wipe out whatever gains are made.

No answers on inequality

What the world does require is a radical redistribution of economic wealth and political power. One per cent of humanity owning 50 per cent of its private wealth, while billions of people suffer deprivation, is ethically preposterous, and also socially unsustainable. It is a recipe for resentment and conflict. Also untenable is the concentration of power in the hands of a few, whether elites in state and religious and scientific institutions or CEOs of private corporations, while the vast majority have little more than voting rights. Across the globe, the rise of peoples' movements is signalling that people want a change in both these conditions.

Unfortunately, the SDGs are weak or silent about these aspects. On inequality, they only have targets like "progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average". There is nothing about reducing the wealth of the super-rich, or their wasteful consumerism. Language on corporations is soft and placatory, with nothing on mandatory regulatory mechanisms to make them

ecologically and socially responsible.

While participatory and accountable governance is advocated (welcome in itself), there is no explicit commitment to direct democracy in which people and communities have full decision-making roles where they live and work. Modes of production will remain in the hands of capitalists or the state, as there is nothing explicit on transferring their control to producers and workers. The SDGs also do not contain any substantial democratic reform of the United Nations system, a system too heavily dependent on the power of the nation-state, and with no formal decision-making role for indigenous peoples, local communities, and citizens' groups.

Missing the signs

Rather than pursuing the tired and failed strategies of economic growth, capitalist production and nation-state led governance, the SDGs could have broken new ground. For instance, they could have moved away from indicators like GDP towards meaningful ones like basic needs, well-being in all its dimensions, and harmony with nature (they only suggest, vaguely, that countries consider other indicators to "complement GDP"). They could have given options to move towards worldviews already present, and being revived in peoples' movements, instead of growth-led development; these include *buenvivir* (good life) in various forms across Latin America, *swaraj* in India, *ubuntu* and various similar concepts across Africa.

Thousands of initiatives in these regions are showing that such approaches are not simply up in the air, but practicable in every sector of life. Greece today survives its worst crises partly because of such grassroot community efforts keeping economically impoverished families afloat. The Zapatista in Mexico have shown that autonomous, direct democracy-based communities can thrive, despite a hostile national government. Hundreds of sustainable farming, decentralised water harvesting, renewable energy, nature conservation, and decent livelihoods initiatives across India are helping communities survive and thrive. Interestingly, even the Pope, and a large number of Islamic clerics, have issued declarations that call for stronger action on environment, inequality, and injustice, than is envisaged in the SDGs.

Unfortunately the SDGs appear to have missed these signs.

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