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A high-level let-down

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OMISSION: The report fails to explicitly recommend a drastic reduction in the present consumption levels of the rich. Without this, the poor ^{AP} will never have the space needed to become more secure and prosperous. The picture shows the Dharavi area in Mumbai. File photo

A recent U.N. report on sustainable development is soft on big business and private investments, making sustainability, equity and well-being difficult to achieve

The Millennium Development Goals (MDG), set in 2000, promised a world with dramatically less poverty, hunger, oppression, and environmental damage by 2015. Even as debate on their success or failure rages, there is widespread recognition of the need for a fresh approach after 2015. Meanwhile, the Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development has also taken place in 2012 and there is a strong demand for ecological sustainability to be a fulcrum of the post-2015 agenda.

The positives

This is the focus of a recently-released report, “A New Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty And Transform Economies Through Sustainable Development.” Authored by the U.N. Secretary-General’s High Level Panel of Eminent Persons (chaired by the Presidents or Prime Ministers of Indonesia, Liberia and United Kingdom), it has several positive elements: eradicating extreme poverty, reaching basic entitlements to all, integrating the objectives of development, environment and equity (including gender), enhancing jobs and livelihoods, phasing out fossil fuel subsidies, and achieving sustainable production and consumption.

Unfortunately, the report does not deal with structural roots of poverty, malnutrition, unsustainability and inequities, or answer why so many hundreds of millions of people still suffer from these. It does not analyse why Agenda 21, forged in 1992 as a bold and practical vision of how the world could be a better place by the 21st millennium, has been forgotten. These failures of diagnosis lead to recommendations that are not transformative enough to achieve sustainability, equity, and well-being.

The report stresses accountability and transparency in governance, but does not recommend direct democracy. Power in such a polity would flow upwards from communities in face-to-face settings, enabling greater accountability and transparency than possible in representative democracy. The report says: “People ... want more of a say in how they are governed.” However, people need to be central to governance; as the village of Mendha-Lekha in central India says, “we elect the government in Delhi and Mumbai, but we are the government in our village.”

On growth

Disappointingly, the report does not see the inherent contradiction between the earth’s ecological limits and unending economic growth. Instead, there is repeated talk of “accelerated growth.” Given that human activity has already crossed

several planetary limits (leading, for instance, to the climate crisis), we may need global degrowth, along with radical redistribution so that countries/regions thus far deprived can gain without further threatening the earth. The focus should be on increasing livelihood security, access to basic needs, health and learning ... which itself can lead to meaningful growth. GDP as the standard measure of “development” has to be replaced by a basket of well-being indicators, both quantifiable and qualitative. Sadly, the report fails to explicitly recommend a drastic reduction in the present consumption levels of the rich. Without this, the poor will never have the space needed to become more secure and genuinely prosperous.

Corporate sector

This failure is linked to an excessively, soft approach towards big business. Not once does the report mention the need to penalise the corporate sector’s irresponsible behaviour towards the earth and people. There is a focus on private investments, and a faith in “free” markets and market mechanisms (e.g. Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Degradation), which seem highly misplaced. Instead, no confidence is put into turning over manufacture, business and markets towards community, worker and consumer controls.

Knowledge forms

The report fails to acknowledge the diverse forms of knowledge that have sustained human societies for millennia, with only modern science being highlighted. In the goal on health care, traditional and community-based health systems are completely absent; in agriculture, the same with farmer-based R&D. Synergistic use of diverse knowledge systems is crucial to successful initiatives around the world, so this gap is surprising. Equally surprising is the omission of cultural diversity, ethical values (towards fellow humans and the rest of nature), and opportunities for personal spiritual depth. The links between culture, knowledge, sustainability, and equity (including nature’s inherent rights) have to be core parts of the post-2015 agenda.

The report is heavily biased towards urban areas, with statements such as “cities are the world’s engines for business and innovation ... the only locale where it is possible to generate the number of good jobs that young people are seeking.”

This is false, given that villages have been sources of enormous innovation (we would all be starving to death if it had not been for the creativity of farmers), and that rural revitalisation has often been a significant employment generator. Examples across the world testify to the possibilities of relative self-reliance through decentralised, democratic economies, which dramatically cut unsustainable transportation, empower people to be in control of their own lives, democratise markets, and provide a stable basis for wider socio-economic and political relations across communities and countries. Indeed, through such initiatives, it has even been possible to reverse distress migration of villagers into cities.

Governance

The report also ignores the need to change the current system of global governance to be far more responsive to the peoples of the world, rather than concentrate all decision-making power in national governments. A new global governance would also prioritise environmental agreements and human rights instruments over finance, trade, and commerce agreements.

Overall, the high-level panel report is about reforms within the existing system of financial, corporate, and nation-state control. Such reforms could be interim measures, but a truly sustainable and equitable future needs far more radical transformations towards community-centred pathways of development and governance.

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