

Missed Opportunity? Comments on two global reports for the post-2015 goals process

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This document comments briefly on the following reports:

- *A New Global Partnership: Eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development*, High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons of the Post-2015 Development Agenda (hereafter referred to as the ‘High-Level Panel’ report)
- *An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development: Report for the Secretary General*, Sustainable Development Solutions Network (hereafter referred to as the ‘SD Solutions’ report)

The post-2015 goals process is a historic opportunity for the world to move towards a bold new vision of the future, which has socio-economic equity, ecological sustainability, and genuine prosperity for all as its central pillars. The two reports under comment here, started with this promise.

Both reports have a number of positive elements, including a focus on the need to eradicate extreme poverty, reach basic entitlements to all, integrate the multiple objectives of development, environment, and equity (including gender), enhance both jobs and livelihoods, phase out fossil fuel subsidies, and achieve sustainable production and consumption. The comments below do not take away from appreciation for this progressive orientation.

However, actually achieving these objectives requires a robust and deep diagnosis of the problems we face today, including their structural basis; and then a bold set of actions that are able to tackle the roots of these problems. Unfortunately neither report provides an assessment of why, for instance, Agenda 21 was not implemented, why Rio+20 could not come out with as concrete and bold an outcome as Rio did 20 years before it, why nation-states have failed to come up with a coherent response to the climate crisis starting at us, and so on. The systemic and structural roots of continuing poverty, destitution, hunger, and malnutrition, and ever-increasing inequities, are not dealt with.

Given the above failure of diagnosis, it is not surprising that the reports do not go the distance and direction needed to achieve the objectives they set themselves. The SD Solutions report goes beyond the High-Level Panel report on some counts (mentioned below), but both contain fundamental weaknesses and gaps that will render them unable to achieve, beyond some marginal improvements, the goals of sustainability, equity, and meaningful prosperity.

The key problems with these reports are:

1. ***Inadequate focus on direct democratic governance:*** there is welcome stress on accountability, transparency, and participation, but the reports do not recommend

clear changes towards direct democracy (despite a call for goals and targets be “grounded in the voice of people”, pg. 14 of High-Level Panel report). This would be where decision-making emanates from citizens and communities at the ground level, in rural or urban settlements of a size where face-to-face deliberations can happen, and people can be central voices in decisions that affect their lives. Power in such a deeply or radically decentralised polity would flow upwards from the ground, enabling far greater achievement of accountability and transparency than is possible in today’s representative democracy structures. The following sentence from the High-Level Panel report (pg. 50) is symptomatic of this failure: “People everywhere want more of a say in how they are governed.” Instead, full decentralization would be about how people would be the central pillars of governance themselves. In the words of a self-rule village from central India: “in Mumbai and Delhi is the government we elect; in our village we *are* the government”. Another example is Goal 9 on ‘Manage natural resource assets sustainably’ (pg. 48), where rather than advocate community tenure and governance of forests, market mechanisms like REDD are recommended. At the least, the reports could have mentioned indigenous peoples’ rights of self-determination (now recognized under UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples), the need to provide legally backed free, prior and informed consent powers to communities in the use of the lands and resources they have customary rights over (also recognized in UNDRIP and other international instruments), powers of law-making and administration that communities have in many countries, and other such mechanisms of direct democracy.

2. ***Inability to recognize the inherent limitations of economic growth:*** though the reports recognize the need to respect ecological limits, they do not see the inherent contradiction between this and unending economic growth. Instead, there is repeated talk of ‘accelerated growth’. As a number of people have shown, complete decoupling of growth (in conventional GDP terms) from energy and materials throughput is not possible, and given that human activity has already crossed the earth’s limits in many respects, we may actually need global *degrowth* (where growth remains coupled with increasing energy/materials use), or at least stabilization at current growth levels, along with radical redistribution of wealth, resources, and entitlements so that countries/regions with inadequate facilities and access are able to gain them without further threatening the earth. The approach needs to focus on increasing employment and livelihood security, access to basic needs, health and learning, and so on ... and if these lead also to growth that does not cross ecological limits, well and good. This also calls for replacing GDP as the standard measure of ‘development’ towards a basket of genuine progress or well-being indicators, which include not only quantifiable but also qualitative aspects. The SD Solutions report mentions some such approaches and the need for countries to report on how they are contributing to meeting ‘planetary boundaries’, but neither report places this at the core of the macro-economics revolution needed to move towards sustainability and equity.
3. ***Continued subservience to private capital:*** Not once in these reports is there a mention of the need to reign in and penalise big business’s irresponsible and criminal behaviour towards the earth and people; instead there is a soft-handed

- approach, recommending incentives, voluntary commitments, and so on. This, and the focus on private investments, and the faith in ‘free’ markets and market mechanisms (e.g. REDD), and the assertion that several companies have already changed behaviour (ignoring how they behave differently in different parts of the world) is particularly visible in the High-Level Panel report. There is some mitigating focus on the need to encourage small-scale sector, but missing are a stress on moving manufacture, business, and markets towards community and worker-run operations. Such initiatives are highly successful in many countries, showing highly responsible approaches towards equity, democracy, and sustainability, but they are not prioritized over the highly iniquitous big private business sector.
4. ***Modern science and technology held as panacea:*** Neither report even mentions the importance of diverse forms of knowledge that have sustained human societies for millennia, and that are widely acknowledged as crucial elements of sustainability and equity in the future (again, despite saying that goals/targets should be “grounded in the voice of people”). For instance under Goal 4 (Ensure healthy lives, pg. 39), traditional and community-based health systems are completely absent. Under Global Partnerships, there is a section on ‘Scientists and academics’ (pg. 11) which ignores communities and people with traditional and local knowledge, skills and technologies, and makes no mention of democratic, community-based R&D. A mitigatory aspect is the mention of ‘open platform science’, which can be a vehicle for democratic S&T, R&D, etc. But why the complete absence of traditional and diverse forms of knowledge, skills and practices, including in various Goals (e.g. nothing on farmer-led R&D in Goal 5, ‘Ensure Food Security’)? Surely what is needed is a synergistic use of these along with what modern science has to offer ... so many countries and communities are already doing this with great success, so its absence from these reports is shocking and puzzling.¹
 5. ***Biased attention to cities:*** The High-Level Panel report is heavily biased towards urban areas, with statements such as “cities are the world’s engines for business and innovation” (pg. 3), and “inclusive growth emanates from vibrant and sustainable cities, the only locale where it is possible to generate the number of good jobs that young people are seeking”. Both these statements are patently false, unless of course one defines ‘innovation’ as only that which is found in the formal modern sector, and ‘good jobs’ as only those which are urban and modern, in which case these are erroneous tautologies. The SD Solutions report has a greater focus on the need for vibrant rural areas, focusing on agricultural and non-agricultural livelihoods, access to high-quality infrastructure, and so on (pp. 17, 30). Both reports however miss out on the possibility of slowing and perhaps eventually reversing the rural-urban migration flow; everyone seems to take such

¹ Interestingly, this failure to recognize the role of diverse knowledge systems was also a feature of the report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability (2010). Several of the fundamental shortcomings of the current High-Level Panel report are shared by that one ... perhaps High-Level panels are so high up that the grassroots may be invisible?

- migration as inevitable, and some countries even encourage it in the same mistaken belief that cities are where the opportunities are that the High-Level Panel displays. But such slowing down and reverse migration has been shown possible in a number of rural areas, for instance in India, where local economic and social transformation has brought people back.
6. ***Culture, ethics, spirituality nowhere in the picture:*** An astounding omission from both reports is the importance of cultural diversity, ethical values (towards fellow humans and the rest of nature), and opportunities for personal spiritual depth (without falling into bigoted religious fundamentalism). The crucial links between culture, sustainability, and equity are emphasized repeatedly in initiatives towards sustainability and secure livelihoods around the world, and have to be core parts of the post-2015 agenda. A crucial part of this would also be the acknowledgement of nature's inherent rights, not only viewing it as 'resource' for human use and exploitation.
 7. ***Unbridled consumerism not tackled head-on:*** While both reports hint at the overconsumption patterns being a serious concern, and mention the need to move towards sustainable production and consumption, neither explicitly mentions the need to curb and drastically cut down the present consumption levels of the global North (which includes the rich in poor countries). Systems of both incentives and disincentives, including social and legal means of achieving sustainable consumption lines, are needed in all countries; in the global North, a target of significant (some say, by a factor of 10) reduction in materials and energy consumption is necessary. Without this, its business as usual, and the poor will never have the space needed to become more secure and genuinely prosperous.
 8. ***Global relations built on localization and self-reliance missing:*** there is little acknowledgement in these reports of the need to empower communities to be relatively self-reliant, at least for basic material/physical, learning, and health needs, with governments and civil society being responsible to facilitate and support to such initiatives. Thousands of examples across the world testify to the possibilities of such a transformation, which dramatically cuts unsustainable transportation, empowers people to be in control of their own lives and societies, democratizes markets and trade, encourages better social relations amongst neighbours, and provides a stable basis for wider economic, social, and political relations across communities and countries. But this would also mean challenging and dismantling the current control of global finance, changing the nature of globalisation (from being finance-driven to focusing on cultural, social, and knowledge exchanges, and promoting diversity rather than homogeneity).
 9. ***No new architecture of global governance:*** Mirroring the need for radical or direct democracy mentioned above, is the need to change the current system of global governance to be far more responsive to the *peoples* of the world, not only to nation states. Whether it is a reformed UN, or a new global assembly of peoples that brings on board all the partners mentioned in the High-Level Panel report (and in particular indigenous peoples and local communities), the failure of these reports to mention the need for significant changes is disappointing. Such new global governance would also put the human rights and environmental treaties and agreements as underlining global relations, especially by subsuming

economic, finance, trade, and commerce agreements under them. Without this, the current regimes of global finance and trade will continue to undermine sustainability and equity.

10. ***Miscellaneous specific gaps***: A number of other specific gaps can be pointed out. For instance, in the High-Level Panel report, Goal 8 on jobs and livelihoods misses the focus on green jobs that was brought out by a 2008 UNEP report, which clearly showed how ecologically sustainable sectors have greater potential for employment and livelihoods. It also does not recommend the protection and promotion of natural resource based livelihoods that may have nothing to do with the financial economy; sustainable and dignified self-employment is not mentioned at all. Goal 5 on food security does not define 'sustainable agriculture', leaving open various interpretations of what this means (corporations promoting chemical fertilizers and pesticides, or GMOs, tend to call their models 'sustainable'). Goal 9 on natural resources says 'we treasure what we measure', which ignores the fact that human societies have also treasured the unmeasured or unmeasurable, or the qualitative aspects of nature, human relations, and ethical/spiritual values (this also relates to point 6 above).

Overall, these two reports, and especially the one by the High-Level Panel, are more about reforms within the existing system of financial, corporate, and nation-state control. They are not about truly empowering human communities at all scales to be leading the way towards sustainability and equity. The reforms proposed may postpone the social, economic, and ecological disasters we are sliding towards (many of which are already manifesting themselves, including through climate crisis events), but not for long. Many of the reforms mentioned could well be important as interim or short-term measures, but a truly sustainable and equitable future needs far bolder and more radical transformations. These reports have missed the opportunity to take us a few steps closer to such transformations.

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