

The Trouble with the Sustainable Development Goals

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One of the things that I have found most frustrating in my career in development is the way that any discussion must lead immediately to answering the question: “What should we do?” Otherwise it is dismissed as irrelevant. (This author is speaking from experience—one reviewer of a recent book of mine was horrified by the “lack of explicit recommendations.”) Of course, the insistence on answering this question is completely understandable. When faced with tragic problems of poverty, hunger, and preventable deaths, anything that does not stress immediate action seems heartless.

Yet answering “what should we do?” is not as helpful as it might seem. This approach suffers from at least three major fallacies: First, that answers to the question do indeed lead to actions; second, that “we” are the right ones to undertake such actions; and third, that action recommendations are the only way to induce progress. The third fallacy is actually cause for hope—whatever is going wrong with the “what should we do?” approach, progress is happening anyway!

The United Nations’ September 2015 announcement of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2030 is one verbose 35-page-long advertisement of these fallacies. The whole point of the SDGs—further elaborated in 169 targets—is to answer “what should we do?” over and over again. But the SDGs are about as likely to result in progress as beauty pageant contestants’ calls for world peace.

The UN manifesto’s tortured opening summary immediately gives some hint of the fallacy that action plans lead to action: The SDGs, it says, are about “Integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to the outcomes of the

major United Nations conferences and summits in the economic, social and related fields.” The translation from UN-speak is: “The UN SDGs summit recommends actions that failed to happen after being recommended in many previous UN summits.” The SDGs document itself lists two previous UN meetings advocating action on sustainable development.

Why wouldn’t action plans produce action? Well, action requires that somebody must at least notice the action plan. We development people inside our own bubble think the SDGs have seized the globe’s attention, but other subjects command much more attention. On the *New York Times* website, a search in early October 2015 found that there were more than five times as many stories on the one small country of Burkina Faso as there were on the Sustainable Development Goals, even with Pope Francis and President Barack Obama giving speeches at the SDGs summit. *Times* editors apparently believed their readers were less interested in the SDGs summit than they were in the ups and downs of the struggle in Burkina Faso to replace despotic rulers with democracy.

There was even less notice taken of the previous draft action plans that eventually resulted in the SDGs action plan. Hardly anyone was paying much attention to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the 13 sessions over 2013–14 of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals, the Stakeholder Preparatory Forum for the Post-2015 Development Agenda Negotiations, and the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. Please don’t ask me to explain any of these groups. I already made a fool of myself in a meeting with a top UN adviser by confusing the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons with the Open Working Group.

The UN is not alone in producing action plans that nobody notices. The World Bank promotes itself as the “Knowledge Bank” for action recommendations. Yet a recent World Bank study found

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that 31 percent of the World Bank's "knowledge products" full of such recommendations have never been downloaded, and 87 percent were never cited.

ESCAPE CLAUSES

Even if somebody notices your action plan, there still must be a way to motivate actors to act. Which brings us to the second fallacy underlying the "what should we do?" mindset—who is this "we," and are "we" the right actors? The usual answers lead to weak actions with weak motivations.

The "we" for the SDGs is "We, the Heads of State and Government" of all 193 UN members. The UN statement brags, "Never before have world leaders pledged common action and endeavour across such a broad and universal policy agenda." But the higher the number of leaders that agreed to this consensus, the less likely is any concrete action. How many effective actions are going to be possible after a process in which any leader in the world—from Vladimir Putin to Bashar al-Assad to Kim Jong-un—could veto any action he or she didn't like? This need for consensus might account for a lot of the vague, utopian language that fills the SDGs, such as Target 3.8: "Achieve universal health coverage, including financial risk protection, access to quality essential health-care services and access to safe, effective, quality and affordable essential medicines and vaccines for all." This is a wonderful goal to which nobody could object, but also one which nobody expects to happen.

The one thing that all 193 leaders could agree on was that the SDGs did not actually bind them to anything. The abundant escape clauses are disguised in respectful language. The signatories are committed to "respecting national policies and priorities." The SDGs, we learn in paragraph 55, are only "aspirational," with "each Government setting its own national targets." In case you still don't get this point, Target 17.15 is to "Respect each country's policy space and leadership"—that is, to do whatever they want regarding the other 168 targets.

Even if there were any real commitments to action left on the list, collective responsibility provides poor incentives to make such actions happen—just as collective farming does not work when there is little linkage between effort and

payoff for each farmer. The SDGs continue a venerable UN tradition in which nobody is ever individually accountable for any one action, but all the leaders, UN agencies, multilateral and bilateral aid agencies, and numerous other private sector, nongovernmental, and civil society actors are collectively responsible for all the outcomes. This may shed some light on why the previous UN summits left so many unkept promises to be reaffirmed at the SDGs summit, including the immediate predecessors to the SDGs, the Millennium Development Goals. The SDGs promise, "We recommit ourselves to the full realization of . . . the off-track Millennium Development Goals," the ones that eluded the target date of 2015, such as those "related to maternal, newborn and child health and to reproductive health."

At least the more universal UN "we" of the SDGs is an improvement over another common definition of "we"—would-be saviors in the West asking "what should we do?" about the helpless, passive victims in the Rest. The MDGs effort was the golden

age of Western saviors like Bono, Bob Geldof, Tony Blair, Jeffrey Sachs, and Bill Gates. Perhaps the high point (or low point) was the 2005 Live 8 concert organized by Geldof and Bono to motivate the Blair-hosted

G8 summit to increase Western aid in order to achieve the MDGs. The concert's logo featured an emaciated African child. Degrading images of African children in humanitarian advertising today are more likely to be labeled "poverty porn." There is a little more awareness that the poor are more likely to save themselves than to be saved by middle-aged white male experts.

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UNDERRATED IDEALS

The third fallacy I mentioned is that action plans are the only way to progress. The spread of ideals is a much-underrated way that progress happens, for example in moving toward racial or gender equality. Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s most famous speech was not called "I Have a Plan." The spread of the ideal that "all are created equal" advanced the end of segregation, colonialism, and apartheid. Despite the frustration of failed Arab Springs, the long-run trend for the global spread of democracy is positive. People fighting for their own rights do not give up after a failed attempt. In their 2015 book *Africa Uprising: Popular Protest*

and *Political Change*, Adam Branch and Zachariah Mampilly list more than ninety political protests in forty African countries in the past decade. As with the *New York Times* coverage of just one democracy movement in Burkina Faso over the past year, poor people's own political protests engage the attention of Western news readers far more than verbose UN action declarations like the SDGs. And these efforts are gradually working: Africa today has fewer horrific cartoon-villain despots like Idi Amin and Mobutu Sese Seko, and more governments that face competitive elections.

The spread of the ideal of economic freedom around the world is an even more underrated way that progress is happening. Many governments in the developing world from the 1960s through the 1990s used a combination of interest-rate controls, high inflation, unrealistic official exchange rates, and controls on buying or selling foreign currencies to expropriate savers and exporters, hurting the poor as well as the rich. In the past 15 years, these violations of economic freedom have become much less common, in part because of the arguments of economists in both the West and the Rest against such self-destructive policies.

As a result, despite the ineffectiveness of repeated UN action plans, individuals, entrepreneurs,

and activists in the developing countries enjoy increasingly favorable conditions for their own homegrown success. Economic growth in low- and middle-income countries has far surpassed growth in the high-income OECD economies since 2000. There are other more specific signs of success in poor countries in the new millennium, like the explosion in cell phone usage in Africa and the surge in foreign direct investment and remittances from migrants. The positive long-term trends in clean water, education, and health have remained steady for more than six decades, regardless of the vagaries of the UN's nonbinding collective promises of action.

The "what should we do?" industry does not show any signs of going out of business soon. It gives us public intellectuals something to do and it gives politicians something to recommend. Much more positively, it does engage the very welcome idealism of altruists who want to make the world a better place. But the SDGs may be the best demonstration yet that action plans don't necessarily lead to action, that "we" are not necessarily the right ones to act, and that there are alternative routes to progress. Global progress has a lot more to do with the advocacy of the ideal of human freedom than with action plans. ■