

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development – w(h)ither its success?

A paper for the Club of Berlin

By

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The 2030 agenda for sustainable development - w(h)ither its success?

1.0 - - Introduction

In September 2015, in the presence of more than 140 Heads of State and Governments, the United Nations' 193 member states decided unanimously in the General Assembly of the UN to adopt the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They stated:

“Today we are also taking a decision of great historic significance. We resolve to build a better future for all people, including the millions who have been denied the chance to lead decent, dignified and rewarding lives and to achieve their full human potential ... The world will be a better place in 2030 if we succeed in our objectives.

What we are announcing today – an Agenda for global action for the next 15 years – is a charter for people and planet in the twenty-first century. Children and young women and men are critical agents of change and will find in the new Goals a platform to channel their infinite capacities for activism into the creation of a better world.”¹

For this agenda to be successful, at least three criteria must be met with a minimum of satisfaction: how its implementation is measured, how it is judged and what it represents:

1 - The success of the plan for the future, the plan to ensure “The Future We Want”² aptly named “Transforming our world – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”³ will have to be measured by the successful implementation of all the 17 Sustainable Development Goals, the SDGs, with a minimum fulfilment of the 169 targets, monitored by the 500 or so indicators in every country at every level involving every relevant stakeholder, official and nonofficial in all its related processes.

2 - The success of the implementation will be judged by three factors;

- that the implementation is carried out through partnerships involving all stakeholders
- that the implementation is monitored;
- that the implementation is reviewed;

¹ From paragraphs 50 and 51 of the document “Transforming our world – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development“, UNGA A/RES/70/1, 21 October, 2015

² The Future We Want is the peremptory title given the final outcome document from the Rio+20 conference in 2012

³ UNGA A/RES/70/1, 21 October, 2015

3 – That the 2030 Agenda is implicitly and explicitly understood, politically, conceptually and in practice and that the goals and targets and the proposed indicators represent the minimum of accomplishments.

The predicaments identified in almost all contexts and levels - local, national, global - pertaining to sustainable development and environmental issues, give urgency to the implementation of this agenda. The implementation to rectify and stop what is wrong and what is going wrong must be bold, creative and dynamic. Resources must be found to fund the agenda. The three mantras of political excuses must be abolished as completely unacceptable and counterproductive to the very tenets of the 2030 agenda; we must stop accepting and using: 1 - doing more with less, 2 - less is more and 3 - do better with what we have. To secure success, our tenet must be: to do more with more and do it better all the time.

This paper aims at a provocative analysis of the efficacy of the 2030 agenda while also commenting on where we are today.

I have been asked to address the following four points in this paper:

- Main issues for countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda
- Steps taken at UN level since the adoption of 2030 Agenda
- Lessons learnt from HLPF 2016
- Civil society mobilization around 2030 Agenda implementation

In addition to these points, I will also discuss the following four elements which I deem crucial to the success of the 2030 agenda

- Interrelationship and connectivity, the indivisible nature of the goals
- Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development
- Ethics and values
- Governance and partnerships

In discussing these points, it should be possible to ascertain the degree of success of the 2030 agenda as well as assess a possible fulfilment of its ambitious and bold vision bearing in mind its dark undertone which in all its stark reality, emphasises its urgency: “We can be the first generation to succeed in ending poverty; just as we may be the last to have a chance of saving the planet.”⁴

Even if it may be written off as a truism, it is worth our while to keep in mind the following observation: Unless governments own intergovernmental processes, policies will never be taken seriously; unless people feel ownership with development, little – if anything - will be implemented. The two forces of society – governments and ‘peoples’ often function as opposing forces, but it is when they are aligned that implementation can

⁴ Ibid, Paragraph 50

successfully take place. And to make this alignment, basic governance principles must be adhered to.

2.0 – A few thoughts about the current situation

2.1 - Main issues for countries in implementing the 2030 Agenda

This year's (2016) High Level Political Forum, HLPF, has been listed as the first 'real' HLPF when UN member states made efforts to comply with one of the key intentions of the 2030 agenda, to subject implementation of the SDGs to a global review and evaluation.

Paragraph 8 in Resolution 67/290 which established the HLPF back in 2013 points to this obligation:

“Decides that the forum, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, shall conduct regular reviews, starting in 2016, on the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post-2015 development agenda ...”⁵

The HLPF in 2016 heard 22 Voluntary National Reviews⁶ during the course of five sessions in two days. As the SDGs and the 2030 agenda officially began to function on January 1st, 2016, the preceding HLPFs, the one in 2014 and 2015 may be discarded as mere trial sessions, even though several procedural and political patterns were established – some more by default than by design. Was the 2016 HLPF a success? Opinions differ.

To a newcomer, delegate or civil society representative – HLPF 2016 may appear as a successfully run UN conference. HLPF was well attended. All of the 193 member states participated with a large number of delegates and non-state actors. Around 1 500 people were present over the course of 8 days. The HLPF was subjected to a challenging, complex and complicated agenda with logistics at an almost unprecedented level. The member states had through the guidance of the President of ECOSOC, the UN Permanent Representative of South Korea. Oh-Joon, who also functions as the head of HLPF, agreed to give this year's HLPF a theme: “Leaving no one behind.” Focussing on the most vulnerable of the global population, the subsequent thematic agenda tried to cater to the overarching theme of the HLPF. The five HLPF days – July 11 to July 15 – contained 18 main themes and 37 side events. During the three Ministerial days, July 18 – 20, five different themes were debated by the delegates, two key-note speeches were delivered⁷, the Secretary General of the UN, Mr. Ban Ki-moon gave a special presentation, 22 Voluntary Country Reviews were heard and a Ministerial Declaration was adopted.

⁵ Paragraph 8 of A/RES/67/290 adopted by the UN GA on July 9, 2013

⁶ The countries delivering the Voluntary National Reviews in 2016 were: China, Columbia, Egypt, Estonia, Finland, France, Georgia, Germany, Madagascar, Mexico, Montenegro, Morocco, Norway, Philippines, Republic of Korea, Samoa, Sierra Leone, Switzerland, Turkey, Togo, Uganda, Venezuela (see also: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf>)

⁷ By Prime Minister of Norway, Ms. Erna Solberg and Vice-President of Viet Nam, Ms. Dang Thi Ngoc Thin

A more seasoned delegate was not impressed by this year's HLPF. He reflected quietly over a coffee in the Vienna Café outside Conference Room 4, where HLPF held its ordinary sessions, and said that the entire HLPF reminded him of a week-long side event – panels, discussions, questions and answers, followed by a new set of panels with a different theme to be followed by a new panel – and so on. The three Ministerial days were crammed with country reviews much too short and the discussions in plenary reminded him more of political posturing than an exchange of ideas and a proper review where gaps were identified, shortcomings underlined, and success stories used as good examples to be replicated.

Most of the reviews seemed to converge on a few main issues, though – the need to have a system in place, often referred to as mechanical institutions, in the country through which the SDGs could be coordinated, monitored and reviewed. In short, very few specifics, and lots of generalities, themes that seemed to be confirmed by the summation done by the UN DESA secretariat working hard to sum up the 'key outcomes' of the first week.

2.2 - Messages from week one of the HLPF

The two Vice Presidents of ECOSOC, Permanent Representative of Switzerland, Mr. Lauber and Deputy Permanent Representative of Honduras, Mr. Alejandro Palma Cerna summed up the main messages from the first week of HLPF, presented as the key themes emanating from the 18 thematic panel discussions. In some way there seemed to be a consensus among delegates that there were a few key elements to the successes of implementing the SDGs. They were: strengthening national statistical institutes; reaching the most marginalized first; revitalizing the global partnership; Science Technology and Innovation (STI) cooperation; and the Global Sustainable Development Report, to be published in 2019 to address emerging issues and bottlenecks; generate national- and grassroots-level ownership of the SDGs; involve stakeholders; address challenges of countries in special situations; work with regional forums; and ensure robust and participatory Voluntary National Reviews.

The Ministerial Declaration highlighted what was positive of this year's HLPF, and emphasised the importance of climate and the SDGs. It was adopted after a vote had taken place!⁸

2.3 - Member states through a GA resolution directs the HLPF agenda and the rest of the UN

⁸ The fact that a vote has taken place during an HLPF session, is setting an interesting precedence. Several governments have been reluctant to give HLPF a decision making power. Some have claimed it is only a platform, others referred to it as a unit or a forum, no one calls it a body. With the vote, governments have all said – this is a body with an authority to make a decision. This is important with regard to the review of HLPF in 2019.

Since the Open Working Group, the OWG, which negotiated the SDGs, conclude their work on the 2030 agenda in August of 2015, a general criticism levelled at the 2030 agenda has been about the enormity of the agenda: too many goals and too many targets. Coherence has been an issue that the UN has returned to, and will return to, time and again. With the decision on the SDGs, the demand for inter-organisational coherence has again been moved to top of the agenda at the UN.

On May 6 this year (2016), the President of the UN General Assembly, the Permanent Representative of Denmark, Mr. Mogens Lykketorp, presented a resolution with a proposal to cluster the SDGs, which was further debated and agreed to by the GA in July the same year. This must be seen as a serious effort to make the SDG process manageable. The President of the UN General Assembly also presented the member states with a proposal to cluster the goals and based on the precedent from 2016 which gave the HLPF the theme “Leaving No One Behind” to label every year with an overarching theme. The UNGA resolution on clustering the SDGs was adopted in July 2016. In a sense, the UN member states have directed the UN to carry out implementation and reviews according to the following:

Three overarching themes:

- 2017 - Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world
- 2018 - Transformation toward sustainable and resilient societies
- 2019 - Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality;

In addition the following goals are clustered this way for reviews under these overarching themes:

- 2017: 1- No Poverty; 2- Zero Hunger; 3 – Good Health and Well Being; 5 – Gender Equality; 9 – Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, 14 – Life Below Water;
- 2018: 6 – Clean Water and Sanitation; 7 – Affordable and clean energy, 11 – Sustainable Cities and Communities; 12 – Responsible Consumption and Production; 15 – Life on Land;
- 2019:; 4 – Quality Education; 8 – Decent Work and Economic Growth, 10 – Reduced Inequalities; 13- Climate Action; 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions;

Goal 17 on partnerships will be reviewed annually.

The resolution also states that ECOSOC should align its annual themes with these themes, that countries do the same, and that this also will have consequences for the reviews and the global report on sustainable development. It further reiterates “the call to Major Groups and Stakeholders to report on their contribution to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda” (paragraph 12) and “Encourages coherence of the General Assembly and its Main Committees, the Economic and Social Council, the specialized agencies and the functional commissions of the Council (ECOSOC, my add), and other intergovernmental

bodies and forums with the work of the high-level political forum towards the follow-up and review of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, ... ” (paragraph 15)⁹

The GA – and member states - request that major groups and stakeholders participate, implement and review the goals, and encourages the UN to be coherent, and that ‘specialised agencies and functional commissions under ECOSOC’ work together in a coherent manner to promote the SDGs. So there are efforts to align the operative agendas of the UN with the SDG agenda. Could the invitation to major groups and stakeholders also be a signal that ‘Shadow Reporting’ as is done in connection with the Human Right Council procedures, might be something to be considered in the near future with the review process?

2.4 - Steps taken at UN level since the adoption of 2030 Agenda

Clearly the 2030 agenda on sustainable development not only heralds a different world, but a different world with different modalities that must be imagined and understood to implement the demands and promises embraced and identified by this agenda. As stated, the issue of coherence has been strongly activated by the 2030 agenda, and the GA effort to cluster the SDGs and give them an overarching theme is an example of this. All the 15 Specialized UN Agencies in addition to the many subsidiary and special bodies under ECOSOC’s purview are hard at work to integrate the SDGs into their programme of work. Different ideas have been floated on how to create coherence, and one which has kept re-emerging is the idea of “Task Managers” taken from the UN Commission on Sustainable Development, CSD. The ‘Task Manager’ system meant that the various bodies of the UN were given a thematic responsibility that related to the identified theme of the CSD agenda, and had to report back on this specific issue, monitor its development, develop and coordinate projects within the UN, review its progress, or lack thereof and identify gaps and progress. Employing this idea with the SDGs, FAO should have the responsibility within the UN to monitor and review Goal 2, WHO Goal 3, UNESCO Goal 4 and so on. The idea has however not received enough ‘political traction’ to be accepted.

UNEP would be in a particular situation as the ‘new’ UNEP or UN Environment as it is now called, with its UN Environment Assembly, UNEA, has been given a particular responsibility by the Rio+20 Outcome Document to oversee the environmental dimension of sustainable development. In other words, UNEP should actually be the guardian of the environment in every goal. This has unfortunately not been fully implemented yet, and according to many participants at UNEA 2 in Nairobi in May 2016, the resolution on the

⁹ A/70/L.60 Draft resolution submitted by the President of the General Assembly “Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level”, 26 July 2016

SDGs fell far short of its original mandate given by Rio (see paragraph 87- 90 of the Rio+20 Outcome document).¹⁰

Still, UNEP has made considerable efforts in aligning its future programme of work with the SDGs which is clearly shown in UNEP's Medium Term Strategy 2018 – 2021, its so-called Programme of Work, (PoW) adopted by UNEA 2 in May 2016. According to this, UNEP will work on seven focus areas. They are:

- a. Climate change;
- b. Resilience to disasters and conflicts;
- c. Healthy and productive ecosystems;
- d. Environmental governance;
- e. Chemicals, waste and air quality;
- f. Resource efficiency;
- g. Environment under review.

The Medium Term Strategy/PoW document also contains a long-term vision for each of those areas in relation to a 2030 impact.¹¹ What is of interest here is that the PoW contains a thorough analysis of the prioritised areas of work and how they are affected by being integrated into the SDGs and the 2030 agenda.

2.5 - The 2030 Sustainable Development portfolio

Inherent in the 2030 agenda is the entire 2030 Portfolio whose content sets out and identifies a policy direction for the future, identifies a number of operative sections to be implemented and also addresses a set of values upon which these proposed activities should be based. The 2030 Portfolio consists of:

- The 17 SDGs with their 169 targets
- The Addis Ababa Action Agenda
- The Paris Climate Agreement (December 2015)
- The review indicators (2016)
- The annual High Level Political Forum, HLPF
- The reviews, national, regional, global of the SDGs
- The Global Sustainable Development Report and the GEO reports
- The UN Environment Assembly, every 2 year
- The Sendai outcome document
- The Samoa Pathway and SIDS

None of the member states individually or as regional groups within the UN, nor as individual countries with domestic responsibilities, has made serious efforts to see which

¹⁰ Resolution adopted by the General Assembly on 27 July 2012, A/RES/66/288 The future we want

¹¹ Para 49 of the 2018-21 Medium Term Strategy for UNEP

consequences all these documents, rife as they are with recommendations, may have on UN operative policies or on country policies in connection with the implementation of the SDGs. And as we may criticise governments for not doing this, we may also ask what non-state actors are doing with this challenge. Or perhaps it is not correct to state that the 2030 Portfolio should be seen as a whole? It is easy to fall prey to the newly established criticism of ‘silo thinking’ and instead lump every issue together in efforts to be holistic. There is clearly a need for expertise in the areas of the 2030 agenda, and such expertise needs ‘silos’. Hence, it may be warranted to look at each of the themes under the above bullet points as separate entities as well. For instance, we see the need to treat the SIDS nations with special expertise and the Samoa pathway is of particular importance to them. But so are elements of all the other issues listed above. Perhaps it is too much to ask actors, governments and non-state actor to be aware of and integrate all these elements? Or perhaps this discussion should be a key point of debate and deliberations at HLPF. Today, this is non-existent.

2.6 - Lessons learnt from HLPF 2016

Was HLPF 2016 a success or a failure or something in between? Is the jury still out and deliberating on the verdict? There are a number of issues that are easy to see and that could be labelled as lessons from this first ‘real’ HLPF.

- A. Yet another talk shop? Too many voices said the HLPF was just a week-long side-event. Panels are of course interesting, but panels are not negotiations and why use a week for panels and merely two days on 22 country reviews?

The second decade of CSD was organised along a two year process: the first year was a review year, the second year the outcome of the reviews should be negotiated. The first such two year CSD process was 2004/2005, the second 2006/2007 and by the time the year 2011 appeared, no one believed in CSD anymore. It was referred to as a veritable ‘talk shop’. A few veterans made this comparison over coffee at this year’s HLPF, emphasising the need to get out of the ‘word-quagmire’. Perhaps when we come to 2019 and HLPF itself will be reviewed a different structure may be discussed and put in place? The resolution establishing HLPF (67/290) is strong in intent and woefully weak in structure and procedural matters. Strengthening the process and organisations will be needed if the SDG momentum is to survive.

- B. Where are the partnerships? Paragraph 8 of the GA resolution establishing HLPF and which also furnished it with necessary mandates states:

(c) “Shall provide a platform for partnerships, including through the participation of major groups and other relevant stakeholders;”¹²

The entire 2030 agenda is saturated with references to partnerships, yet the partnership issue never emerged as an important and seriously discussed topic

¹² Paragraph 8 of A/RES/67/290 adopted by the UN GA on July 9, 2013

within the 2030 context. The partnership theme was discussed in a morning session (Friday) and clear references were made to partnerships during the discussion on Means of Implementation (MOI) during the ministerial segment. But as partnerships is one of the key elements of SDG implementation everywhere – this issue needs more focus. As it is now, ECOSOC seems to take the lead on this issue, and that is fraught with severe problems as ECOSOC because of procedural rules – and political interests – does not freely engage civil society. But HLPF can.

- C. Major groups and civil society participation. The HLPF resolution, 67/290 affords more privileges and rights to major groups¹³ and civil society organisations than any other General Assembly resolution taken in the 70 year history of the UN. And one might say, true to form, the major groups were allowed to speak and participate to some extent in HLPF. The secretariat noted 116 interventions during the HLPF by major groups and stakeholders of that category, still the interaction between member states and the non-state actors are less dynamic and interactive than was the case at CSD. The sessions held in the Council Chambers effectively prevent non-government stakeholders from actively engaging with member states, and the Ministerial resolution was negotiated without allowing the participation of non-state actors. And as we all know, the Ministerial Declaration is the outcome document from HLPF and the 2030 agenda to be sent to the UNGA.
- D. The regional input. The UN had originally five regional hubs. These are of course still intact and operative, but during its 70 year history, the UN has developed a plethora of hubs and offices all over the world. This may seem a fitting organisational tool as the SDGs are universal in nature. Still the question should be asked – where is the real regional input into the SDG process? CSD never managed to give the various regions a proper position in its process on sustainable development, and as HLPF gave an entire afternoon to regional concerns (Friday) and proportionally has given more space to regions than was allotted by CSD (CSD lasted four weeks), the question remains: Should not regional input have more space? Again referring to the HLPF resolution, and its content, an entire paragraph states the importance of the regions:
- “Acknowledges the importance of the regional dimension of sustainable development, and invites the United Nations regional commissions to contribute to the work of the forum, including through annual regional meetings, with the involvement of other relevant regional entities, major groups and other relevant stakeholders, as appropriate;”¹⁴
- Critical voices have been raised at the seeming lack of interest and priority given to the SDGs and the HLPF by the UN Regional Commissions. They should also

¹³ The nine major groups as decided by UNCED and Agenda 21 and later by the UNGA, are; Women, Children and youth, NGOs, Farmers, Indigenous Peoples, Trade Unions, Local Authorities, Science and Technology and Business and Industry.

¹⁴ Paragraph 13 of A/RES/67/290 adopted by the UN GA on July 9, 2013

contribute to the forum (HLPF) and by organising well thought through regional conferences, they would contribute to focus on regional concerns and allow a larger group of civil society and other non-state actors to participate.

- E. The Voluntary National Reviews. Too many and too little – was a recurring theme among many delegates. But then they quickly excused their critical approach by adding – but still, these countries have only had half a year to do something about the SDGs. But as the reviews are to play a central role in the progress of the SDGs, the review sessions must be upgraded and not only left to the Ministerial section of the HLPF. There is obviously much work to be done to fulfil all agenda points listed in the HLPF resolution, and as has been pointed to, its realisation is far from being fulfilled.

So – was the HLPF 2016 a success? Time will show, and perhaps we need to give more time to the jury to judge.

3.0 – Where do we go from here?

3.1 – The SDGs point out of the present political quagmire

In the complex world of the 2030 agenda and the SDGs, with reviews and implementation, we easily forget the value basis of the SDGs. Always making sure these considerations are part and parcel of our attempts to build a better world is as important as to find a succinct set of easily understood and operative indicators to measure progress and identify gaps. Yet – the value basis is only referred to in grand speeches at opening or closing sessions – and even then often in passing. To what extent do we take the value basis seriously and make efforts to integrate them in a visible way?

The world of 2016 is challenged by political issues and attitudes that we thought would never again visit an enlightened society. Yet here we are facing challenges that we more often than not seem unprepared to tackle. And if we do not develop a strategy and a plan to tackle these issues today – of which the growing populism may be among the gravest - the path we want to follow up to 2030 may be littered with hurdles we may not be able to mount.

The 2030 agenda for sustainable development is called a framework pointing in the direction we would like this world to develop. The agenda is an ambitious and brave plan which represent a tool which we can use to build this path to the future. The SDGs can help us forge the strategies we need for a better future, help us forge alliances with networks all over the world that want the same. The SDGs may even be an antidote to populism. As such, the SDGs can be a force for positive change.

The relationship between ideas, knowledge and action is a complex one. We see this when we make efforts to implement the SDGs. Yet we are striving to make practical sense of what we are doing. We are in fact in the process of developing a common global narrative.

The American philosopher Susan Neiman has said: “Without a moral vocabulary we cannot act out of conviction, we act merely out of habit; and habits rarely take us far as we need to go. Nothing breeds inertia like cynicism. Absurdity breeds hopelessness without content or passion. Where outrage itself is exhausted, even despair is impossible. Language shapes our beliefs about possibility.”¹⁵

The 2030 agenda is based on a set of values and ethics that is subscribed to by all. It also provides us with a language about what is possible. It is worth our while to repeat the vision upon which the SDGs is based:

The vision inherent in the 2030 Agenda:¹⁶

7. In these Goals and targets, we are setting out a supremely ambitious and transformational vision. We envisage a world free of poverty, hunger, disease and want, where all life can thrive. We envisage a world free of fear and violence. A world with universal literacy. A world with equitable and universal access to quality education at all levels, to health care and social protection, where physical, mental and social well-being are assured. A world where we reaffirm our commitments regarding the human right to safe drinking water and sanitation and where there is improved hygiene; and where food is sufficient, safe, affordable and nutritious. A world where human habitats are safe, resilient and sustainable and where there is universal access to affordable, reliable and sustainable energy.

8. We envisage a world of universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination; of respect for race, ethnicity and cultural diversity; and of equal opportunity permitting the full realization of human potential and contributing to shared prosperity. A world which invests in its children and in which every child grows up free from violence and exploitation. A world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed. A just, equitable, tolerant, open and socially inclusive world in which the needs of the most vulnerable are met.

9. We envisage a world in which every country enjoys sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth and decent work for all. A world in which consumption and production patterns and use of all natural resources – from air to land, from rivers, lakes and aquifers to oceans and seas – are sustainable. One in which democracy, good governance and the rule of law, as well as an enabling environment at the national and international levels, are essential for sustainable

¹⁵ From: Susan Neiman: “Moral Clarity – a guidebook for grown-up idealists” The Bodley Head, Random House London, UK, 2009

¹⁶ Paragraphs 7, 8 and 9 are from the document “Transforming our world – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development“, UNGA A/RES/70/1, 21 October, 2015

development, including sustained and inclusive economic growth, social development, environmental protection and the eradication of poverty and hunger. One in which development and the application of technology are climate-sensitive, respect biodiversity and are resilient. One in which humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other living species are protected.

These are strong words, as well as giving us all a direction.

3.2 - The ethics of the 2030 agenda and SDGs

One of the toughest tasks in implementing the SDGs, in designing strategies for this implementation and for reaching out to people to get them involved, is to make sure the implementation is based on what may be termed the value basis and ethics of the SDGs. The value basis is found indirectly in the 2030 Portfolio documents (see Paragraph 2.5, page 7), and below there is an unofficial list of a set of these values. How can we integrate these elements in the implementation, monitoring and reviewing of the SDGs?

With an attention to the values implicit in the agenda, we can list the following elements that must be integrated. The 2030 agenda is

- a Peoples Agenda
- a “to-do” list for people and the planet,
- a road map to ending global poverty,
- to building a life of dignity for all,
- It is a clarion call to intensify efforts to heal our planet for the benefit of this and future generations

The SDGs are:

- integrated, interlinked and indivisible;
- people-centred and planet-sensitive;
- universal – applying to all countries while recognizing different realities and capabilities.

The focus is on the five Ps (only functional in English)

- People
- Planet
- Prosperity
- Peace
- Partnerships

The overarching goal of the 2030 agenda and the SDGs are:

- To call for building peaceful, inclusive and well-governed societies with responsive institutions as the basis for shared prosperity.

- To recognize that we cannot reach our development goals without addressing human rights and complex humanitarian issues at the same time.
- To commit all of us to enhanced multilateral cooperation through a revitalized global partnership among nations and all the world's citizens.

Does the complexity of the system exclude people from understanding and participating? If so, how do we make sure the complexity is understood? How can we challenge the different stakeholders to engage and align their approaches to the SDG values? Could we for instance challenge the private sector to change their so called “triple bottom line” from being at present: “People, planet and profit” to being “People, planet and prosperity”?

A goal for any strategy for sustainable development should in a practical and visible and even tangible way demonstrate how these values are integrated in the strategy. If this is not done in one way or another, the values will always be a rhetorical input thrown in to make the plan more grand than it is. And as all history has shown – such an approach is counterproductive in the long run.

A serious question that also needs to be asked – is: will the 2030 agenda also allow for a discussion about systemic changes? There is much talk about ‘root causes’ in the 2030 agenda, yet there is no definition of these causes. Might that be done?

3.3 - The SDGs are indivisible and interlinked

How are the SDGs interlinked and indivisible and what consequences does this have for implementation and reviewing? This question still remains unanswered, and unless this is studied and understood, we may still only be repeating the same old same old. The SDGs are said to be very different from the Millennium Development Goals, the MDGs. One of the key characteristics that sets the SDGs apart from the MDS is their so- called ‘indivisible nature . David LeBlanc at UNDESA has made efforts to understand this issue. He writes:

“Lack of integration across sectors in terms of strategies, policies and implementation has long been perceived as one of the main pitfall of previous approaches to sustainable development. Insufficient understanding and accounting of trade-offs and synergies across sectors have resulted in incoherent policies, adverse impacts of development policies focused on specific sectors on other sectors, and ultimately in diverging outcomes and trends across broad objectives for sustainable development.

....

However, many of the links among goals (the SDGs, my add) that have been documented in biophysical, economic and social dimensions are not explicitly reflected in the SDGs. Beyond the added visibility that the SDGs provide to links among thematic areas, attempts

at policy integration across various areas will have to be based on studies of the biophysical, social and economic systems.”¹⁷

When we begin prioritising the SDGs, we need to be careful about the so-called cherry-picking tendencies. Business has a tendency to pick and choose a few, and pay lip service to the rest. Many NGOs have shown the same tendency. The SDGs are an entity, and they are interrelated. The challenge is to understand this in our operative modus. We may feel we have capacity to only implement a few of the 17 in our organisation. But if we do so, there is a need to see the interconnectedness of the SDGs and how these relate to the remaining goals we do not focus on; for instance – Assume that our company or NGO will focus on and prioritise Goal 9 on infrastructure and industry; a faulty planned infrastructure can have devastating effects on biodiversity, Goal 15; on urban landscapes, Goal 11; on water and health issues, Goals 14 and 3; and have devastating consequences for gender issues, inequality and democracy – Goals 3, 5, 10 and 16. And if we now add the targets to these goals, it becomes apparent that the SDGs also provide us with a useful tool for analysing impacts and materiality issues. This discussion was sorely absent from the many plenaries at this year’s HLPF - perhaps because the narrative and language are not yet fully developed to embrace a proper SDG discourse?

A last issue of high relevance in this context is the integration of the three dimensions – the social, the economic and the environmental, the very basis of the sustainability concept. There is always a reference to this in plans and speeches, but unfortunately there are as yet not too many good examples that can show the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development and the indivisibility and the interlinked nature of the SDGs.

3.4 – Where are the partnerships?

Partnerships are no stranger to the UN which for years has struggled to find a proper institution with regulations to handle this collaborative system. The Bali Guidelines on Partnerships, developed at the preparatory meetings for the UN World Summit for Sustainable Development (WSSD) in June 2002, and further refined and adopted by the 11th session of the UN Commission for Sustainable Development (CSD) in 2003, represents the most ambitious effort to date to regulate partnerships. The HLPF/SDG process and ECOSOC are now engaged in refining and redesigning partnerships, and with this impetus, partnerships may soon appear in a new and different shape. The fact that this implementation tool is in a new formative stage, gives us a new opportunity to engage in implementation.

The UN has defined partnerships this way: “Partnerships are voluntary and collaborative relationships between various parties, both public and non-public, in which all

¹⁷ David le Blanc “Towards integration at last? The sustainable development goals as a network of targets,” DESA Working Paper No. 141, ST/ESA/2015/DWP/141, March 2015

participants agree to work together to achieve a common purpose or undertake a specific task, and to share risks, responsibilities, resources and benefits.”¹⁸

The chapter on ‘Means of Implementation’ of the 2030 Agenda asserts that the success of the entire 2030 Agenda will be judged on the success of partnership constructs and their implementation of every goal.

“The scale and ambition of the new Agenda requires a revitalized Global Partnership to ensure its implementation. We (all governments) fully commit to this ... The means of implementation targets under Goal 17 and under each Sustainable Development Goal are key to realizing our Agenda and are of equal importance with the other Goals and targets”¹⁹

What is worrying today is that the entire concept and understanding of partnerships seem to follow a traditional understanding of these constructs. To some extent the partnerships from the golden era of aid seem to direct our thoughts. Will partnerships also be part of the implementation regime in developed and rich countries? If so, how will they be developed and who will the partners in partnerships be? The private sector today is eagerly engaging in the SDGs and is exploring ways to partner with authorities nationally and internationally. Civil society appear reluctant to engage.

Partnerships in the 2030 agenda demands a reorientation of roles for all stakeholders -

- For the public/official sector: The goal is not smaller budgets or less public/official involvement, but an extended collaboration with the private sector and civil society to make implementation of the SDGs more effective
- For the private sector: Partnerships must be carried out within the framework of CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) with a clearly defined goal and a value creation that promotes the project and benefits society
- For civil society: Civil society shall in addition to lobby work and watch-dog roles, also participate actively in the design and implementation of the project
- For all stakeholders: All activities must be carried out within the framework of the three dimensions of sustainable development, CSR and good governance.

A reorientation of roles will mean that the following must be discussed and integrated in partnership projects:

- An administrative decentralisation
- Local governance based where all stakeholders are equal in influence and decision making
- The principle of good governance is a basic requirement at all levels

¹⁸ Sixty-fourth session, Item 61 of the provisional agenda, A/64/150, “Towards global partnerships, Enhanced cooperation between the United Nations and all relevant, partners, in particular the private sector”, Report of the Secretary-General

¹⁹ Paragraph 41 from the document “Transforming our world – the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development“, UNGA A/RES/70/1, 21 October, 2015

- There is a need for a novel look at economy and finance: use principles from green economy, circular economy, steady-state economy etc.
- Key and basic values from sustainable development are pronounced and integrated in all stages of any partnership project: such as polluter pays, precautionary principle etc. (the Rio 1992 principles)

There is today only intermittent discussion about partnerships and their future role in implementing the SDGs. This discussions needs to be broadened, and serious efforts made to develop a ‘partnership discourse’ that fits today and the next 14 or so years.

4.0 – Conclusion: about participation, governance and meaning

The American philosopher Susan Neiman writes commenting on the strange and seemingly uncharted political map that seem to be our political future and for which we must find a credible alternative: “We have moral needs, needs so strong they can override our instincts for self-protection...They include the need to express reverence and the need to express outrage, the need to reject euphemisms and cant and to call things by their proper names. They include the need to see our own lives as stories with meaning -- meanings we impose on the world, a crucial source of human dignity - -without which we hold our lives to be worthless. Most basically and surprisingly, we need to see the world in moral terms. These needs are grounded in a structure of reason.

“Moral inquiry and political activism start where reasons are missing. When righteous people suffer and wicked people flourish, we begin to ask why. Demands for moral clarity ring long, loud bells because it is something we are right to seek. Those who cannot find it are likely to settle for the far more dangerous simplicity or purity instead.”²⁰

The SDGs are grounded in a structure of reason. And they call for the participation of all stakeholders, governments, intergovernmental systems and NGOs and civil society. Government often ask – how can we involve civil society. The answer is surprisingly simple. If these four principles of governance are fulfilled at a minimum – people will be interested and engage: Access, participation, relevance and accountability. Are these elements fulfilled, a feeling of ownership is created.

The declaration found in the 2030 agenda document is a powerful declaration, politically bold and courageous. Paragraph 3 encapsulates much of the essence:

“We resolve, between now and 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. We resolve also to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic

²⁰ Susan Neiman «Moral Clarity», London 2009

growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities.”

The German philosopher Immanuel Kant once observed that “Truth tells us how the world is; morality how it ought to be.” Perhaps the SDGs and the 2030 agenda is a way to combine the two elements in his observation. If that be the case – we have created success on all accounts. And if success is still not here, the 2030 Agenda contains enough elements to secure success – if it is implemented.

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by

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