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Post-2015
perspectives

Post-2015 – why another approach is needed

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- Will the new development agenda make a real difference? No, not necessarily writes Jan Vandemoortele. Only strong leadership on the part of the UN Secretariat can prevent an overloaded and fuzzy development agenda. More consultations and intergovernmental negotiations alone will not make it.

- Dag Hammarskjöld put forward two concepts of the United Nations as an organisation: as 'static conference machinery' or as a 'dynamic instrument for an organised world community'. So far, the post-2015 strategy has focused on the former. Many are now expecting signals that leadership is on the way. It is late, yet not too late.



The quest for an international agreement on the successor arrangement for the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) looks increasingly daunting. The release of the high-level panel's report has not fundamentally altered the debate. The two-pronged post-2015 strategy – with its dual focus on targets (not on narrative) and on consultations (not on leadership) – should be revisited.

MDG history

It is often overlooked that the MDGs originated from a singular set of agreements that were made in a unique international context. In the wake of the fall of the Berlin wall in 1989, the UN was able – and allowed – to organise a series of world summits and international conferences on key aspects of human development. Within a year of the end to the East-West stalemate, two such gatherings took place – in Jomtien, Thailand (on education) and in New York (on children). They were followed by other global gatherings in places such as Rio de Janeiro (environment), Vienna (human rights), Cairo (population), Copenhagen (social development), Beijing (gender equality), Rome (food security) and Istanbul (human settlements). Each summit resulted in the adoption of a declaration, which typically included a general narrative and a set of time-bound targets.

To mark the new millennium, the UN organised yet another summit. As was customary, it led to the adoption of a declaration, the Millennium Declaration, which can be considered the culmination of all declarations in that it recapitulated the major commitments made at the previous gatherings of the 1990s. As all preceding declarations, it captured the public's attention for a while but then receded into obscurity. For some time, the Millennium Declaration was quoted in newspaper articles and other media reports. But after a few months, the attention started to fade. In order to rescue the document from oblivion, a small group of UN staff selected 18 targets from the Millennium Declaration and put them – verbatim – into a freestanding category. They grouped the targets into eight goals and added 48 indicators for the purpose of global monitoring. The set was called the 'Millennium Development Goals'.

The point to remember is that the MDGs came at the end of a lengthy process of sectoral negotiations, which took place against a background of strong

multilateralism. Indeed, the bold vision that was agreed at the Millennium Summit, and which is embedded in the MDGs, was the apotheosis of activist multilateralism during the Age of the West. The widespread ratification of human right treaties and the MDGs galvanised international efforts for fostering human development in ways never seen before, not even during the 'development decades' of the 1960s and 1970s.

Wrong sequence?

Compared with this MDG story, the architects of the post-2015 agenda seem to be inverting the chronology. The sequence of events that eventually led to the MDGs in 2001 did not start with a list of global targets; it ended there. The MDGs came into being at the very end of a series of declarations. It took several world summits before the global targets were internationally accepted. Now, the strategy focuses directly on a set of targets. By doing so, it seems to be putting the cart before the horse. It is rather naïve to think that stakeholders will now readily agree on a new set of global targets, when the current context is considerably less conducive for activist multilateralism than was the case in the post-Cold War era. 'Multilateralism is being tested,' the UN Secretary-General wrote recently.

Have the protagonists in the post-2015 debate not yet woken up to the fact that the unique context of the 1990s no longer exists? By couching the post-2015 debate in terms of the Millennium Declaration, they seem to adhere to the old, and rather aid-centric, script of the 1990s. It is beyond doubt that the post-2015 era will be quite different from, and probably a touch messier than, the post-Cold War era of the 1990s. Thus, it is a moot question whether the focus of the post-2015 strategy on a list of concrete targets can yield an outcome that is 'compelling', 'easy to understand', 'measurable' and 'limited in number' – to use the list of desirable characteristics mentioned by the high-level panel.

Too much attention?

Admittedly, the focus on consultation and participation has captured the attention of governments, civil society organisations, think tanks, academics, philanthropic foundations, international



institutions and business groups – predominantly from the North. The high-level panel claims to have ‘listened directly to the voices of hundreds of thousands of people’. It adds that consultations were held with CEOs of 250 companies ‘with annual revenues exceeding \$8 trillion’. While it is not clear what these trillions of dollars have to do with genuine participation, the positive result of the strategy is that stakeholders have actively joined the debate.

However, by focusing from the outset on global targets, the strategy may have generated too much attention for its own good. Stakeholders are now according an exceptionally high level of attention to that list. The perception is that the stakes are enormous. Everyone feels that the agreed set of global targets will be pivotal, with far-reaching ripple effects. Therefore, everybody wants to influence his or her selection. It seems that the post-2015 strategy has made it exceedingly difficult to see the wood for the trees any more. A disciplined and empirical debate appears virtually impossible. An agreement on a set of global targets that is clear, concise, compelling and computable is now unattainable.

It is not unlikely, therefore, that for the sake of the semblance of an international consensus, the number of targets will continually go up. The post-2015 agenda will then become an unending wish list. The ‘illustrative’ list proposed by the high-level panel is already three times longer than the original MDGs. It also includes several fuzzy and non-measurable targets, so that future assessments risk being clouded by subjectivity. In the process, the very essence of the MDGs will be lost. A post-2015 agenda that is unending and unfocused, will suffer instant oblivion and neglect, especially by the media. Then, the world will have lost a useful – albeit imperfect – tool for galvanising efforts in the arena of human development and human rights. Those who will eventually put together a new set of global targets would do well to heed the words of Antoine de Saint-Exupéry: ‘Perfection is reached, not when there is nothing left to add, but when there is nothing left to take away.’

From targets to narrative

It is unwise, therefore, to continue to focus the debate on the selection of global targets. The attention must shift away from targets. Instead, it must be redirected towards what really matters, namely the broader

narrative of the post-2015 agenda – one that goes beyond simple targets. As in previous declarations, the narrative will combine general and specific aspects, including vision and principles, together with concrete and time-bound commitments on a wide range of relevant issues. But such commitments will not need to be limited in number, as was the case with the MDGs. The ultimate selection of the list should come later, once the narrative of the post-2015 agenda has been agreed and the 2015 declaration has been adopted. Leadership is now needed to have the selection of the global targets taken off the table, to be kept for later.

Seeking the views of diverse stakeholders – while necessary and welcome – does not substitute for leadership. At the end of the day, when all major stakeholders have been consulted, the difficult decisions and hard choices will still have to be made. Thus, more participation and more consultations will not necessarily lead to a desirable outcome; they will only make the list longer and fuzzier. Leadership is indispensable to prevent the current process from resulting in an overloaded and non-measurable agenda, which will fail to galvanise stakeholders and the public at large.

Dag Hammarskjöld put forward two concepts of the United Nations as an organisation: as ‘static conference machinery’ or as a ‘dynamic instrument for an organised world community’. So far, the post-2015 strategy has focused on the former. But intergovernmental negotiations and more consultations will not yield an outcome that is fit for purpose. The post-2015 agenda needs more; it needs leadership. The question is whether the UN Secretariat is willing and able to meet this formidable challenge. Moreover, it is not clear whether member states will allow the post-2015 agenda to be shaped by the UN Secretariat, for they increasingly insist that it must be fashioned exclusively through intergovernmental negotiations.

Since all stakeholders inevitably view a set of global targets from the angle of their own priorities and interests, more consultations and intergovernmental negotiations alone will inescapably yield a post-2015 agenda that is overloaded and fuzzy. Only strong leadership on the part of the UN Secretariat can prevent that scenario from happening. Many are expecting signals that leadership is on the way. It is late, yet not too late.



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