

The United Nations Agenda for Sustainable Development

Massimo Livi Bacci | January 4, 2016



The United Nations Sustainable Development Summit was held in New York on 25-27 September 2015. The 193-member UN General Assembly formally adopted the ambitious agenda “Transforming Our World: 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” that consists of a Declaration, 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) and 169 targets, a section on “Means of Implementation and Renewed Global Partnership”, and a framework for review and follow-up. The approved Agenda is the culmination of a three-year process of consultations between international organizations, governments, public and private institutions, NGOs, and of an informal agreement among Member States reached by ‘consensus’ (in diplomatic parlance, this means a sort of unanimity) in August 2015: “This momentous agenda will serve as the launch pad for action by the international community and by national governments to promote shared prosperity and well-being for all over the next 15 years”.

The 2030 Agenda builds on the solemn Millennium Declaration, approved by Heads of State in 2000, which agreed on eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be reached by the year 2015. The MDGs focused on poverty and hunger, education, women’s empowerment, child mortality, maternal health, disease, environment, and a new partnership for development, to be implemented through 16 ‘targets’ to be reached by 2015. These targets have been only partially met or approximated during the past fifteen years, and are now being relaunched in the more ambitious context of the 2030 Agenda. The 17 goals of the agenda are not prescriptive (and who has the authority to prescribe?), but only a blueprint for action, a call to arms: if the goals are approached or reached, governments deserve praise; if not, they deserve blame, but nothing more than that!

A worthy sermon...but is anybody listening?

The preamble to the SDG declaration is high-flying and magniloquent.

This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. We recognize that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable

*requirement for sustainable development. All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We [Heads of State] are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path.*¹

Appeals, exhortations, and incitements may be useful means for inspiring and directing the institutions' actions to the common good. But their efficacy depends crucially on the prestige of those who voice them and on the credibility of the proposed objectives. Unfortunately, both these virtues are seriously wanting. The prestige of an Assembly of Heads of State is quite low. How can one feel confident about commitments made by Heads of State who are dictators, or are maintained in power by tyrannical regimes that notoriously violate basic human rights and sometimes have blood on their hands? What moral weight will their exhortations carry?

As for the credibility of the proposed goals and targets, this is also dubious as I next argue.

The multiplication of goals and targets

The 2000 Millennium Declaration was broken down into 8 general Goals and 16 specific Targets that were quantified by 48 statistical Indicators, all of them relevant for measuring the pace of development. Maybe not an exhaustive control panel, but a clear and identifiable one. In 2015, the Heads of State have given birth to a far more numerous offspring: the Goals have more than doubled in number (they are now 17), the Targets have increased more than tenfold (to 169), and the quantitative Indicators – the majority of which require data that are as yet, simply non-existent – have grown more than six-fold (304). These indicators range from the science fictional (indicator n. 17.19.2, “Gross National Happiness”) to the irrelevant (indicator n. 4.7.2, “Percentage of 13-year old students endorsing values and attitudes promoting equality, trust and participation in governance”, not excluding a large platoon of indicators that are impossible to measure (indicator 5.6.1, “Percentage of women and girls who make decisions about their own sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights by age, location, income, disability and other characteristics relevant to each country”). It is really doubtful that such a large range of goals, targets and indicators, with no priorities, can be translated into motivations, blueprints for action and guidelines able to mobilize consciences, policies and resources. Unfortunately it is a jumble that mirrors the baroque and bureaucratic procedures of the international organizations: it embraces the demands of numerous and various stakeholders without selecting or prioritizing them.

Let me say here, in order not to be misunderstood, that actually reaching each one of the 17 Goals would be a very good thing. Nobody can possibly be against the elimination of hunger and poverty, or object to fair health or quality education for all, or to inclusive and sustainable economic growth or to the reduction of inequalities, to mention just a few of the Agenda's objectives. Each one of the 17 Goals reflects noble and desirable, even if abstract, ends: including the abstruse Goal 16 (“Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels”). But all these commendable intentions seriously risk being not worth the paper on which they are written, or the cost of the numberless conferences, consultations, high-level meetings that have crowded the international agenda during the past three years.

Statisticians' skepticism

According to the 2030 Agenda, the course of development in each one of the 200-odd

countries that have signed up to the document will be monitored and verified using 304 indicators. Their feasibility has been assessed by the UNSC (United Nations Statistical Commission, a body representing the national statistical offices that will have to calculate the indicators).² The assessment of UNSC is rather merciless, as the following synthesis demonstrates: of the 298 indicators examined, 50 have been evaluated as “feasible, suitable and very relevant”, and another 67 as “feasible with great effort, but suitable and very relevant”. This is where the real problem begins: 86 indicators have been judged “feasible only with great effort, in need for further discussion and somewhat relevant”, and the remaining 95 indicators (almost one third of the total) are “difficult even with great effort, of uncertain suitability and somewhat relevant”. Given the cautious parlance of the United Nations, the UNSC’s opinion is far from enthusiastic!

What about population?

The population conferences promoted by the United Nations in 1974, 1984 and 1994 were overshadowed by the issue of the unsustainability of rapid population growth, at global level and in the less developed countries in particular. For diplomatic reasons, this central worry was not explicitly put on the table, but emerged in the discussions and in the documents whenever they dealt with the various aspects of population change. In the post-2015 Agenda, demographic issues have all but disappeared, notwithstanding the very rapid population growth of the African continent, the very low fertility of East Asia and Europe, the international migration flows without order or rules, the unchecked human penetration of fragile or pristine areas, or the fact that population growth is implicated in global warming. These are all important demographic phenomena that threaten the sustainability mantra that is the leitmotif of the 2030 Agenda. One might say that Goal 3, “ensure healthy lives and promote wellbeing for all at all ages”, which includes a series of targets on the incidence of the major pathologies, the health of children and their mothers, infant mortality and so on, is demographic, as is Goal 5, “achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls” with its rather generic target 5.6, “achieve universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights”. And on international migration we may commend target 10.7, “facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people...”, even if it is too generic and ambiguous (who is going to facilitate? What does “responsible migration” mean?) and impossible to achieve without an embryo of international governance of flows. But there is little else on population in the Agenda, confirming the conclusion that population, as far as the official international community is concerned, has become irrelevant for the sustainability of development, notwithstanding the evidence to the contrary.

Footnote

¹[Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), retrieved December 5, 2015.

²[United Nations](#)