

Sustainable Decisions on Sustainable Development?

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Media Centre – G7 Summit. Development is a central theme on the agenda of the 2015 Group of Seven (G7) summit in Schloss Elmau, Germany. The prominent place of development on the agenda has been driven by many factors, but four factors stand out.

First, the G7 has noted that there is a looming deadline for the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) – i.e. the eight aspirational targets formulated in 2002 concerned with halving extreme poverty, halting the spread of HIV/AIDS and providing universal primary education, all by the target date of September 2015.

Second, the G7 is acutely aware that the recent list of recommended [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (SDGs) developed by the Open Working Group (OWG) – adopted on September 27th 2014 by the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) – is currently under UN negotiations and due to be finalised in November 2015.

Third, the G7 leaders know that there are a series of UN conferences (most importantly the [Finance for Development Meeting](#) in Addis Ababa in July 2015 and the [Framework Convention on Climate Change](#) in Paris in November 2015) where key development financing issues will be debated and where a steer regarding G7 commitments will be useful.

Fourth, there is also an apparent recognition by G7 leaders that ‘development as usual’ has not been able to meet the development goals or advance a consistent global pro-poor agenda. In this respect, the G7 development agenda has been consciously linked to efforts to [carry on the work](#) of the MDGs and to better foster the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development.

Why is more leadership on development important?

In many ways, the seeds for making sustainable development an agenda priority were laid at the last G7 summit in [Brussels](#) 2014. There, G7 leaders committed to focus their discussions on sustainable development and prosperity as ‘a foundational commitment that unites our people and our countries.’ In terms of accountability, the leaders have also committed to ‘provide a report in 2015 on progress toward [the SDGs] attainment.’

G7 discussions related to sustainable development challenges and the post-2015 development agenda sought to demonstrate leadership without dictating results. They based their renewed efforts toward the SDGs on the significant and positive outcomes that the MDGs had on many people’s lives. For instance, global poverty has been halved five years ahead of the 2015 deadline. Ninety per cent of children in developing regions now enjoy primary education, and disparities between boys and girls in enrolment have narrowed. Moreover, [under MDG5](#), there has been a staggering 45% drop in global maternal deaths between 1990 and 2013, and a decrease from 380 to 210 deaths per 100,000 in relation to live births. Similarly, [under MDG6](#), between 2000 and 2012, the substantial increase in malaria interventions averted an estimated 3.3 million deaths, 90% of which included children under age 5 in sub-Saharan Africa. Furthermore, the efforts to combat tuberculosis have saved an estimated 22 million lives worldwide since

1995, while access to antiretroviral therapy (ART) for HIV-infected people has increased dramatically, with a total of 9.5 million people in developing regions receiving treatment in 2012.

Despite these efforts and the intensified calls made by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) 2014 [Report](#) that ‘stakeholders intensify and focus their efforts on the areas where advancement has been too slow and has not reached all,’ it is clear that the MDGs will not be met by the 2015 deadline. As such, a new development framework was deemed necessary in the form of the SDGs, with an agenda in which the G7 leaders recognise a [responsibility](#) for completing the ‘unfinished business of the Millennium Development Goals.’

However, when designing these new goals, a general expectation of development advocates was that the SDGs will have had the governance structures in place in order to be able to outperform the MDGs, or at least, that the OWG discussions would explicitly incorporate the lessons offered by the failures and shortcomings of the MDG experience. This sentiment of ‘learning from past mistakes’ is [echoed](#) by the UN Secretary-General, Ban Ki-moon, in that ‘our efforts to achieve the MDGs are a critical building block towards establishing a stable foundation for our development efforts beyond 2015.’

Yet, as will be discussed below, the OWG’s recommendations exclude discussion on governance mechanisms and compliance structures that would ensure the SDGs achieve their stated *telos* of reaching a sustainable end of extreme poverty by ‘[getting to zero](#)’ within a generation (i.e. in just 15 years by 2030). A further challenge is that the SDGs are designed to address everyone on the planet and to offer a holistic vision of human flourishing that is inclusive of the myriad concerns of sustainability. In this sense, the target areas proposed by the OWG spread from animal poaching through ocean acidification to traffic accidents, and child stunting. Thus, the SDGs have a more ambitious mandate to achieve than the MDGs, yet the time span of 15 years remains the same.

In terms of fulfilling these goals, the G7 countries are key actors in international economic relations, and as such they carry great responsibility for creating reliable, sustainable and viable global economic conditions that can facilitate the fulfilment of the SDGs and foster an environment in which compliance can be achieved. Dynamic and sustainable growth in industrialised, newly industrialising and developing countries is easier to achieve if those countries have agreed on basic issues around economic development, cross-border trade and effective, prudent financial market architecture.

Specifically related to the SDGs, prior to the 2015 summit, the G7 had formally committed under [Point 13](#) of the Brussels Declaration:

‘to work with all partners to agree an ambitious and universal post-2015 agenda, anchored in a single set of clear and measurable goals.[...]It should be centred on people and focused both on the eradication of extreme poverty, promoting development and on balancing the environmental, economic and social dimensions of sustainable development, including climate change. It should also promote peace and security, democratic

governance, the rule of law, gender equality and human rights for all. We are committed to build a global partnership with shared responsibility and mutual accountability to ensure its implementation. We await the synthesis report of the United Nations Secretary General in the second half of 2014. We welcome the African Union's common position.'

What lingering problems need to be overcome in the SDGs?

The OWG's list of SDGs presents three important problems that have not been directly addressed either by past G7 commitments or through other on-going SDG deliberations. Furthermore, as will be highlighted in the next section, the G7 has continued to side-step these issues again at Schloss Elmau.

The first lingering problem in transitioning from the MDGs to the SDGs is that the list of goals has increased from 8 under the MDGs to a staggering 17 under the SDGs. In addition, the number of potential targets is currently set at 169, a figure which raises immediate concerns in terms of the SDGs being potentially overambitious in the face of MDG failures. Again, given the difficulties of reaching the MDGs, and the problems of reaching quantifiable targets, there should be concern as to whether the SDGs represent clarity of purpose, realistic targets and opportunities for measurable success.

Second, as with the MDGs, there are no quantifiable or delineated governance targets or suggested mechanisms outlining procedures for how to reach the SDGs. Although the SDGs call for increased funding across all the development sectors and the concept of development 'partnership' is again stressed as a normative aim, like the MDGs, these remain underspecified suggesting that the failures of global governance associated with the MDGs are primed to continue until 2030. For instance, clear governance targets could have included ways to make crucial coordination determinations about whether one or more organisations should be in charge of overseeing the process, to specify meeting dates to get partners together, and ensure better planning of resources and capabilities to guarantee partners stay on track to achieving the goals. It is here (as was done at the 2000 G8 summit in Japan when the seeds for the establishment of the Global Fund were agreed) where G7 leadership to create better governance mechanisms would be welcome.

Third, as with the MDGs, at the moment there is a lack of compliance mechanisms within the SDGs. Namely, there are limited moral, and zero legal, requirements that clearly outline duties and responsibilities as well as delineate mechanisms that can generate compliance from all parties. This signals a concern that the SDGs are yet again full of normative rhetoric, but light on procedure, which has serious potential for continued development failures in the run up to 2030. Since the MDG agreement is voluntary and there is no binding legal mechanism underpinning it in terms of compliance, governments have the option to cut back the funding allocated to development assistance despite their promises. As historical evidence suggests, this is what happened during the financial crisis, when the Group of Eight (G8) fell short by approximately [\\$20 billion](#) from its official development assistance commitments for 2010. This lack of financial support paired with the [unstable financial landscape](#) of the crisis (i.e. rising prices, corruption, unstable gas prices, stunted growth, falling tax bases) had a negative overall effect on achieving the MDGs and suggests that the

voluntary nature of the MDGs paired with a lack of compliance mechanisms had a profound effect on its overall and long-term success. Here again, the G7 had an opportunity to raise its game and to soundly push the SDGs forward with firm pledges and committed follow-through.

The 2015 G7 and sustainable decisions for sustainable development

In regards to sustainable development, the outcome of the G7 discussions could be described as something of a 'lacklustre performance'. In terms of the SDGs, the G7 at Schloss Elmau mainly focused on the development area associated with SDG2, side stepping a direct engagement with the other 16 goals as well as not taking a lead on starting to respond to current SDG governance shortcomings.

In response to the three problems identified above, i.e. the issue of too many unrealistic targets, the absence of delineated quantifiable targets and the failure to implement compliance mechanisms, it is difficult to say that the G7 discussions dealt directly on these issues. This is because several of the G7 commitments relate to development writ large, but on the whole, were not tied directly to on-going SDG efforts. In this way, the G7 has done little to steer the debate in relation to bolder governance for development or on how to manage follow-through on making sure the SDGs are met.

Nevertheless, it is welcome that the [Leaders' Declaration](#) reaffirmed their commitment 'to achieving an ambitious, people-centred, planet-sensitive and universally applicable Post-2015 Agenda for Sustainable Development that integrates the three dimensions of sustainable development – environmental, economic and social – in a balanced manner.' In this way, in terms of normative commitment, it is clear that the G7 recognises the complexity of meeting the SDGs and that meeting these targets will require some serious form of global cooperation and follow-through.

As suggested above, the most concrete outcome of the Summit related only to SDG2, which calls for action to 'end hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture'. In this regard, the [Annex to the Leaders' Declaration](#) states that the G7 nations 'commit to working with our partners to mobilize the resources necessary to aim to lift 500 million people in developing countries out of hunger and malnutrition by 2030'. This focus on eradicating hunger can be understood as a major difference from the MDGs where hunger and poverty were lumped together in MDG1 (the SDGs now treat the issue of poverty separately from food and nutrition security). It is also different from the MDGs in that the G7 has offered a clear leadership role by linking explicit targets to their commitment and by declaring that they will meet those targets within a specific time frame. As a result, the actions of the G7 at Schloss Elmau show some promise that the SDGs will find G7 support during the negotiations in New York and elsewhere, at least, in terms of commitments to end hunger.

However, if we were looking for clear financial commitments to steer the debate on the SDGs and to indicate a firm commitment on compliance with the targets formulated by the OWG recommendations, then the G7 Summit outcome did not generate this opportunity. As [Oxfam](#) states, 'the G7 leaders have copped out of delivering any real change for more than one billion people who live in poverty and offering a smattering of largely unfunded initiatives to tackle huge global challenges of hunger, inequality and disease'. Where there might be traction is in the fact that there seems to be prospects that the upcoming finance conference in Addis Adaba will take cues from this G7

position on hunger, which will [provide](#) representatives an opportunity to reach more robust commitments and outcomes for financing the rest of the post-2015 development agenda.

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