ORF POLICY PERSPECTIVE

Sustainable Development Goals: The Quest for a Post-2015 Agenda

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Overview

The global community is currently engaged in a wide-ranging process to define a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in 2015. The scope of the SDGs has been informed by the deliberations of the Open Working Group (OWG) on the SDGs, which produced an Outcome Document in July 2014. This will serve as the basis for inter-governmental negotiations on the post-2015 agenda.

The Observer Research Foundation, India and Saferworld, UK, with support from the UK Department for International Development, hosted a workshop in New Delhi on August 13-14, 2014 with the purpose of understanding the broad range of perspectives on the SDGs. The workshop was attended by international stakeholders from China, Brazil, Nepal, Bangladesh, Pakistan and high-level representatives of the African Union (AU).

The objective of engaging with policy stakeholders from India, the region and beyond was to identify respective priorities to help secure an inclusive agreement on the SDGs. This is of paramount importance, as the participation of the widest possible range of stakeholders in framing a new development agenda is essential if the selected goals and targets are to be legitimate and effective. The following is a summary of some of the key issues raised by the participants during the workshop.

1. The OWG Outcome Document

The OWG Outcome Document extensively covers critical issues, but risks mistaking expansiveness for ambition. The strength of the MDGs lay in their simplicity and communicability, which meant that they could be used as a framework for mobilising policy action. The current total of 17 goals and 169 targets will pose significant implementation challenges, especially in countries where institutions and capacities are still developing.

2. Universality and Diversity

While the MDGs were largely targeted at developing countries, as evidenced by the preponderance of issues affecting them, the SDGs must be universal in nature. However, a universal outcome will be less than optimal if it is not simultaneously contextual. In order to build a consensus on development, the world must move towards a less prescriptive framework based on well-established principles such as 'differentiated responsibilities', while maintaining a universal focus.

3. Means of Implementation

Specificity and clarity regarding the means of implementation of the SDGs is crucial to converting them from aspirations into actionable objectives. In turn, 'Means of Implementation' are contingent on an effective Global Partnership for Sustainable Development. This means that financial aid and technology flows from countries with a surplus to those facing a development deficit must be strengthened. The current Global Partnership for Development is based on the eighth goal of the MDGs, enhanced through the 2002 Monterrey Consensus. However, this paradigm perpetuates the 'donor-recipient' dichotomy while giving scant attention to alternative modes of development financing, which could leverage private capital towards industry and infrastructure, or towards the transfer of technology and skills.

4. Global Governance

There have been dramatic changes in the global economic landscape since 1992, when the UN Conference on Environment and Development adopted Agenda 21. However, the architecture of the Bretton Woods institutions, such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, has so far failed to adequately reflect the changing nature of the global economy. The reform of global governance institutions—for example, by implementing the collective commitments made within the G20 group in 2010—will be a precondition for the success of any new global agenda. Indeed, such reforms are critical for the legitimacy and effectiveness of the SDGs.

5.   Peace, Governance and Justice

Peace, governance and justice are key aspects of the post-2015 discussions as evidenced by the inclusion of Goal 16 in the OWG Outcome Document. These are also prioritised in the Common African Position (CAP) on the post-2015 development agenda, which represents the collective views of 54 African Member States. The CAP includes a pillar on peace and security that focuses on a preventive approach to conflict through addressing issues such as exclusion and economic and social inequalities. While the inclusion of peace, governance and justice has been robustly debated by Member States, it is clear that such issues warrant careful consideration. Constructive engagement by Member States that are apprehensive about incorporating such issues will help to ensure a balanced outcome.

6.   South-South Cooperation

For India, South-South Cooperation is the centrepiece of its development cooperation and is an increasingly prominent driver of its trade and investment flows. Indeed, since 2008, a larger share of the global South's total exports has gone to other developing countries than to countries constituting the global North. Similar trends are now being witnessed in the flows of Foreign Direct Investment (FDI), with outward flows from developing countries accounting for an ever-increasing share of total global outward FDI.

Despite the increasing salience of South-South Cooperation, the key principles and embedded values of this form of resource flows have not been articulated clearly by developing countries in the context of setting a new global agenda. The understanding within developing countries is that South-South Cooperation is premised on mutual gain and is not a substitute for North-South Cooperation. India and other stakeholders from the global South should ensure that 'Common but Differentiated Responsibilities' is incorporated as an operative principle that clearly informs the SDG agenda going forward, and is not relegated to the preamble alone.

7.   Measurement and Accountability

The OWG's focus on strengthening statistical capacities of developing countries is important for the implementation and accountability of the SDGs, and it must continue to be emphasised. At the same time, the SDGs should respect the sovereignty of nations and the diversity of different development models by allowing countries sufficient policy space to find their own pathways to meeting targets. Furthermore, they must ensure that indicators measuring progress are sensitive to variations between different contexts and levels of development. For instance, statistical data for India could include not only the impacts of natural resource use, but also metrics of distribution and access, such as per capita use of electricity, its spread and accessibility.

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