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# **Sustainable Development: Challenge or Chimera?**

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**IOB**

Institute of Development Policy and Management  
University of Antwerp

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# **Sustainable Development: Challenge or chimera?**

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

At the turn of the Millennium, in the year 2000, a new political momentum emerged. It was the turning year not only of decades, but also of centuries, even millennia. Though market forces and geopolitical power relations are not influenced by a mere calendar arithmetic, the end of the century created an ideal political opportunity to look both back and forward, and take a longer view. A kind of quadruple New Year's Eve feeling forced opinion leaders and politicians to wonder what had gone wrong, when, where and why, and how negative trends could be reversed.

This is what UN Secretary General Kofi Annan had asked them to do. In an insightful report, *We the Peoples: The Role of the United Nations in the Twenty First Century*, aiming to mobilize both public opinion and political leaders, he had called the arrival of the new millennium an occasion not only for celebration, but also reflection. "There is much to be grateful for ... There are also many things to deplore, and to correct". His report was a call for reflection on ruthless conflict, degradation and disruption of nature's life sustaining services, grinding poverty and striking inequality. Kofi Annan spoke about the need to ensure the survival of the human species. It was a call for action, with many concrete proposals in all domains.

On that basis Heads of State and Government, called together in a so-called Millennium Summit meeting, presented the peoples of the world a *Millennium Declaration*. It was more than a reflection. It was an action program, based on introspection. It was understood that, given the prevailing ideological struggle between the moralities of neo-liberalism and sustainability, a new consensus concerning common objectives would require a redefinition of common values. Six categories of values were endorsed:

- Freedom: the right to live in dignity, free from hunger, fear, violence, oppression or injustice, to be assured through democracy and participatory governance based on the will of the people themselves. (So, explicitly not: freedom of market powers)
- Equality of rights and opportunities, of both people and nations (rather than management based efficiency first and foremost)
- Solidarity on the basis of equity and social justice (instead of maximization of private profit in the common interest)
- Tolerance: mutual respect between people, in all their diversity of belief, culture and language, cherished as an asset of humanity (instead of cultural ranking on the basis of presumed excellence, and readiness to innovation and modernization)
- Respect for nature: prudent management of all living species and natural resources, to be passed on sustainably to other people, yet unborn (rather than the survival of the fittest).
- Shared responsibilities for managing global development, and threats to peace and security (and thus not, implicitly, the rightfulness of the use of violence to defend specific interests or for the sake of national or homeland security)

So, at the beginning of the new Millennium two clarion calls were heard: the "We the Peoples" plea – a wake-up call – and the Millennium Declaration, a call to arms and action.

The Millennium Declaration seemingly brought an end to the ideological confrontation between neo-liberal philosophies and sustainability ethics, in favor of the latter. The

message was: 'the rising tide does not lift all boats; markets misjudge and distort real welfare; growth does not trickle down, and market-led growth can forge violence and destroy life chances of future generations'. This message, together with the agreed values, produced a program for common action.

The declaration anyway carried the language and style of such a program. The authors and signatories repeatedly used the terms: "we resolve", and "we will spare no effort", words which so often had been avoided by leaders bearing political responsibility. The new text demonstrated both shame and commitment.

It also demonstrated an awareness of the whole. In the years following the adoption of the Millennium Declaration most attention has been given to the paragraphs concerning the Millennium Development Goals, selected in order to cut world poverty in half, in a period of fifteen years. However, the objectives of the Millennium Declaration as a whole reached beyond poverty abatement. Those other objectives - for instance: halting climate change, desertification, and biosphere degradation; stopping unsustainable exploitation of water resources; peaceful resolution of disputes; ending illicit arms trade; ensuring human rights of migrants, minorities and vulnerable groups; freeing the entire human race from want; establishing transparent international financial system - were crucial. They are important by themselves, and represent essential conditions for sustainable poverty reduction.

While since 1945 many of the world's people had experienced economic growth and progress, many others had stayed behind. They had been deprived of opportunities to share and enjoy the fruits of growth; many even had been excluded from reaping those fruits. The persistence of poverty amidst ever-increasing global wealth was not only the result of erroneous policies, based on the assumption that in the end, despite temporary lags, everybody would benefit from growth. The exclusion of people was to a large extent due to systemic failures, more than policy failures. Economic and political systems of countries were inherently flawed, unjust, biased against unprivileged people, who are powerless and poor. These systems are still flawed, and so is the global market system. Poor people are bound to remain poor because they are being denied fair access to the means necessary to empower themselves: capital, information, knowledge, credit, technology, water, a fertile soil, affordable energy, a safe habitat, and other necessary resources. Poverty is the result of a system that nurtures perverse power relations amongst people.

In the course of the fifteen year period during which the Millennium Development Goals would have to be accomplished, the criticism of these goals has increased. Surprisingly, stronger criticism has been directed at the MDGs as such, and the failure to fully meet them, than against the betrayal of commitments laid down in the Millennium Declaration as a whole. In my view criticism of the MDGs is justified, but excessive. The nonobservance of the other commitments is more serious, and the silence is alarming.

The MDGs were political goals. As all other goals they were the result of a political process, which included more or less objective needs assessments and cost-benefit analysis, and thus also compromises. Goals are never beyond dispute. However, for a number of reasons the MDGs were better goals than any other target of global development policy since 1945.

The first reason is that the MDGs did directly concern individual people's welfare, not the state of a national economy. For the first time since 1945 world consensus had been reached to aim at an improvement of the level of living of people directly, irrespective of economic growth. Poverty reduction would no longer have to depend on the rate of economic

growth as a superior target, or on the acceptance of notions such as ‘broad based growth’, or ‘inclusive growth’, or ‘growth cum distribution’. Such notions are analytically helpful. However, in the Millennium Declaration a more radical step had been made: economic growth is a second order priority. Economic growth is not an exogenous target, but an endogenous variable. The rate of economic growth is subordinate to improving the living conditions of ever more people, in particular the poor.

Second, the MDGs define such an improvement in life circumstances of poor people no longer first and foremost in economic terms. They define people’s welfare not only irrespective of national economic growth, but also as not primarily determined by an individual person’s income. Income is important, but it does not represent welfare. It does so to a certain extent only. That is why the seven national MDGs distinguish nine dimensions of poverty: (1) income poverty and (2) the rate of employment, (3) hunger and malnutrition, (4) access to primary education and literacy, (5) access of women to education and gainful employment, (6) child mortality, (7) maternal health, (8) prevalence of HIV/AIDs and death rates due to malaria and tuberculosis, and (9) access to drinking water and sanitation. Other dimensions and indicators of poverty could have been selected, but it cannot be denied that the set as a whole offers a truthful picture of people’s welfare, its level, composition and shortcomings.

Third, the MDGs were quite ambitious. For the various dimensions and indicators of poverty quantitative goals were set, which on average aimed at halving poverty in fifteen years. If the ambition would not go beyond the first half of the world’s poor, permanently disregarding the other half, this would have been disappointing. However, the Millennium Declaration clearly stated that the ultimate aim was to ‘free the entire human race from want’. This can only be read as an aim to fully eradicate poverty. Halving poverty within a period of fifteen years had never before been accomplished. So, it definitely is an ambitious target. Moreover, it is the first phase. A second – and perhaps third – will follow.

However, in one respect the MDGs were not ambitious at all. The first MDG aimed to reduce by half the proportion of people living on less than per capita one dollar a day. This indicator is a shame. Despite well-known differences between poverty lines in different countries and different ways to estimate subsistence levels: nowhere can people enjoy a decent life at a dollar a day (or, at the updated level of \$1.25, and later somewhat below \$2.0) and expect that this will provide them with the resources to sustain that level. The indicator has clearly been chosen in order to ensure that the goal would be met. The selection of the other goals demonstrated more ambition. They better reflect the quality of life. Though income growth would contribute to their attainment, the MDG action program did not make realization of the other MDGs dependent on the dollar a day income growth performance. One could even say, following the argument above, that the opposite is true: income growth targets should be derived from the other goals. Income targets should stand for the resources necessary to meet a person’s basic needs with regard to education, health, shelter, drinking water and sanitation, and to improve his or her living conditions sustainably. In all countries on a per capita basis this definitely would require more than a few dollars a day.

Fourth, meeting the MDGs was seen as obliging each country to allocate resources at its disposal towards poverty reduction. Budgetary resources, natural resources, energy resources, capital, land, research and technology, infrastructural investment, and other domestic resources can be used for many purposes – growth, modernization, national security, and other priorities – but from now on poverty reduction should come first. Mobilizing domestic resources

for poverty reduction should not be made dependent on receiving foreign aid. Poverty reduction is each individual country's obligation, irrespective of the aid received. This is the message of the Millennium Declaration and the MDGs. By endorsing MDG 8 the other countries have committed themselves to join a global partnership for development, and to support the poorer countries. But the latter would not be absolved from their obligation towards the other MDGs if foreign aid would not come about. The Millennium Declaration does not stipulate that countries would only be obliged to use domestic resources in order to meet the MDGs if and when they would receive adequate support from outside. On the contrary, from 2000 onwards all countries must give a first call for the abatement of poverty. Each country should consider other objectives as second priority goals, after poverty reduction.

Fifth, this commitment has been expressed in unconditional terms. We saw above that the philosophy behind the Millennium Declaration implies that neither low economic growth, nor inadequate foreign assistance can be considered an excuse to be remiss. This applies to other possible excuses as well. Governments, when asked why poverty persists, may be inclined to point at, for instance, adverse terms of trade, or climate change, desertification, and civil war. However, governments, having signed the Millennium Declaration, have no excuse whatsoever for renouncing the pledge to spare no effort to meet the MDGs. On the contrary: especially in situations of declining export incomes, climate change, soil depletion, drought or armed domestic conflict, the poor are the most vulnerable. They will suffer first. The worse the circumstances, the more the weakest and poorest population strata should be taken care of. In such situations it is all the more important to give priority, first and foremost, to poverty reduction and to protection of the poorest and most vulnerable people. Also in this respect the Millennium Declaration meant a clean sweep, a radical overhaul of the paradigms which had guided policymakers and regimes during the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Sixth, the MDGs concern all countries. They were set for the world as a whole, not only for so-called developing countries, but for all other countries as well. This does not only mean that other countries must commit themselves to meet MDG 8, which requires cooperation to establish a global partnership in trade and finance to the benefit of their weaker partners. Because the MDGs are an essential ingredient of the Millennium Declaration, and because both this Declaration and the Goals have been designed with a global reach, also Northern countries are obliged to spare no efforts to reduce poverty. For governments of these countries, in particular the economies in the West, this implied that economic policies should at least not result in an increase of poverty amongst their citizens. As Kofi Annan had written in his *We the Peoples*: "The central challenge we face today is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the world's people". These very words were also brought into the Millennium Declaration. In the following sentence governments committed themselves to changing the character of globalization, because "at present its benefits are very unevenly shared, while its costs are unevenly distributed". Because on the world market national frontiers are fading away, alongside people in the South, also people in the North can suffer the costs, instead of enjoying the benefits. Globalization is another reason to interpret the MDGs as truly global targets, rather than just another set of 20<sup>th</sup> century traditional development assistance goals.

Seventh, and finally, the Millennium Development Goals, as they had been defined and elaborated in international policy documents – notably in the UNDP Human Development Report 2003 – are the same for all countries, but only as far as they are goals. How to reach the goals, with what type of policy instruments, has been left to each individual country. The new consensus implied that countries would be held accountable for accomplishing the goals, but



the choice of the instruments would remain at their discretion. Is this a weakness? No, it is a strong point. In the past too often international policy coordination for development had resulted in uniform models, for all countries alike, irrespective of specific circumstances. This had led to straight jacket approaches, such as Bretton Woods inspired adjustment policies and Poverty Reduction Strategies. These had been criticized, rightly so, because differences between specific situations and conditions of countries were hardly taken into consideration. Moreover, these approaches were more or less imposed from outside. They had to be implemented, under penalty of withdrawal of foreign support. The Millennium Declaration and the MDGs implied a farewell to all of this.

These are seven strong points and virtues of an approach which, to the letter of the text, implied a breakthrough. Whether all political leaders were indeed aware of the consequences of what they had subscribed to is another matter. However, such was the spirit at the turn of the millennia; this is how those agreed wordings were meant, and how they should be read.

## **2. Post 2000**

About a decade later we had to admit that, apart from the MDGs, the Millennium Declaration had become a dead letter. Nobody talked about the Declaration anymore. The MDGs have been discussed widely, but the discussion took place in technical, a-political terms. The spirit which prevailed at the turn of the centuries has died. The values and principles which had been written down in the high-pitched declaration and action program for the new Millennium have been eroded deeply.

The brutal attack on New York in 2001 brought a final end to the optimism of the early post 1989 years, which had perked up again a decade later. The fear for widespread terrorism led to a general embrace of the value of security. In the view of opinion leaders and policy makers, security became a condition which should be achieved before anything else. As long as security would not be guaranteed, the other values could not be realized. Security increasingly was defined in terms of national security and home security. According to this line of reasoning security could be assured also by attacking possible enemies. Soon after the beginning of the new century the preemptive strike became accepted as a legitimate step in a policy to defend a group, tribe or country. Violence and counter violence increased. War has become an option again.

The response to terrorism after the turn of the centuries undermined procedures and principles of the United Nations. The topical value of the principles of the United Nations was considered of less significance. Bypassing decision making procedures within the system became easy. Because big powers gave the example, small countries could do the same and get away with it. Fifteen years of violence have followed: first in Iraq and Afghanistan, later also elsewhere, for instance in Pakistan, Syria, Yemen and Libya. In other countries, such as Sudan, Congo, and Somalia and between Israel and Palestine violence, which had been rampant already, continued and intensified - unchecked. In nearly all other African countries new instabilities and violence emerged: Nigeria, Mali, Ivory Coast, Mauretania, Guinea Bissau, the Central African Republic, and Chad. In other countries regimes in power sought to oppress opposition with dictatorial means, brutally violating human rights: Egypt, Turkey, Azerbaijan, Eritrea, Zimbabwe, and Venezuela. Other countries – in the Caucasus and in Central America, and Mexico – became the victim of international violent crime that corrupts regimes and erodes

democracy and human rights.

Domestic and international conflicts have become more and more complex. Conflicts which had manifested themselves as mainly economic, political, religious, tribal, ethnic, cultural, or sectarian, soon got many of these characteristics simultaneously. Managing complex conflicts within a country became increasingly difficult the longer the conflict lasted. Globalization resulted in blurring the distinction between domestic and international conflicts. Sooner and easier than before, conflicts originating in one specific country could spread to other parts of the world. Diasporas and the confrontation between radical wings of Islam and Western cultures played their roles, as did the shadow banks, arms trade, and transnational commercial interests that accompanied them.

Geopolitics played a role as well. Recently the tension between countries of East and West sharply increased. The positive spirit of cooperation that characterized the years following the end of the Cold War no longer holds between, on the one hand, Russia and the other countries of the former Soviet Union, and, on the other hand, Europe and the United States. Confrontation is on the rise. Countries are building up arms. A possible use of nuclear arms is no longer categorically excluded. Political disputes within Europe can again lead to military confrontations, like in Ukraine and the Crimea. So far, the worsening climate between East West has not led to new confrontations in other parts of the world that echo the struggle for spheres of influence during the Cold War. However, it has resulted in a paralysis of global UN based diplomacy. The escalation of violence throughout the Middle East, which is endangering peace in Europe, Africa and Asia, would urgently require common action on the basis of principles which had been confirmed in the Millennium Declaration. However, also in this respect world political leaders seem to be unable or unwilling to stem the tide.

All these events reflected regress rather than the progress foreseen in the Millennium Declaration. Similar U-turns took place in other fields. The Kyoto Protocol, meant to check climate change, got buried after ratification. The financial crisis of 2008 onwards was a victory for private commercial motivations - profit and greed - over public, social and human values. Globalization, far from becoming a positive force for all the world's people, resulted in even greater inequality of the sharing of its benefits and costs. Since the beginning of the new century capitalism has become more brutal than before. While capital continues to accumulate very unequally, in the past it sought profitable investment opportunities in the real economy, which could result in an increase of material welfare and employment – though, again, unequally distributed. Nowadays global capital is circulating mainly in the financial sphere, seeking to make money with money through speculative short term transactions, destabilizing economies and nations. In the system of financial capitalism land, buildings, houses, real estate in general, resources, commodities, and even food, are losing significance as assets in the real economy, meant to increase production and welfare. Instead they become mere financial assets, meant to be traded and exchanged for other financial commodities.

Elsewhere I have described the nineteen eighties as a decade of standstill and paralysis, and the nineties as a period of progress towards sustainable development, be it too slight and too slow. During those years we seemed to run into the right direction, but we were running behind facts, in particular the facts created by globalization. Since the beginning of the new century, however, we have been running in the opposite direction, increasing the gap between promises and practices wider than ever.

The most worrying are not the economic, political and environmental risks and

threats to world stability and welfare mentioned above. The most worrying fact is the gradual dismantling of the international institutions that had been created to address such dangers. After 2001, the year in which the US invaded Iraq, thereby bypassing the Security Council, the multilateral system has become weaker and weaker. Once agreed international values and principles have been eroded. UN institutions have lost authority as well as resources. UN procedures are being circumvented, resolutions have become hollow paragraphs, decisions empty words, without sanctions on violation or non-implementation. Throughout the world people have lost confidence in political leaders, in international institutions and procedures, and also in the capability of a global democratic public system as countervailing force to both national powers and transnational commercial interests. Future risks are at least as great as during the first half of the twentieth century: world social and economic inequalities, instabilities and crises; mass poverties; scarcity of resources; climate change; violent confrontation within and between countries; another world war, and self-annihilation due to the use of weapons of mass destruction. The system of the United Nations had been established in order to jointly address these and other dangers. Using that system, applying agreed procedures on the basis of common values, and acting collectively, the world community has been able to defy many dangers. It did not always result in solutions, but de-escalation was often accomplished. Post 2015 this is even more necessary than post 1945.

### **3. Post 2015**

Not everything has gone wrong. Within the UN there were some positive developments. One of those was the acceptance, by consensus, of the principle of the Responsibility to Protect (R2P), laid down in Resolutions of the UN General Assembly and the Security Council in 2005. The principle is meant to be applied when in situations of conflict violence is used against civilians. Though implementation so far has been disappointing, the principle can serve as a yardstick and as a basis for appeal against, for instance, mass violation of human rights of minorities. Its use could also be extended to other fields. It could, for instance, help to protect vulnerable groups that fall victim to harsh economic policies, to structural ecological and environmental deterioration, and to natural and manmade disasters. It thus could serve as a meaningful complement of the Millennium Development Goals, mentioned above.

The endorsement, at the highest possible political level, of the Millennium Development Goals was a breakthrough. However, during the fifteen years' term allotted to these goals, they have not been met throughout, anyway not all of them, not in all countries, and not fully.

Yet, greater progress has been achieved than sceptics had expected. In many countries both governments and other stakeholders have committed themselves to the goals. Monitoring systems were developed and reasons for success and failure were studied in a systematic fashion. This has provided a good basis for the follow up of the Millennium Goals, for a second period of fifteen years: the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development Agenda, which includes seventeen new goals: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

Though the Millennium Declaration had been a clarion-call, the voices behind the new Agenda should be even louder and sound further. Though the Millennium Declaration was broad and comprehensive, calling for policy change in many fields and directions, in practice the political attention has been narrowed to the MDGs. These were very important, because until the end of the previous century poverty reduction had been neglected. It had been allotted a second order priority, after economic growth. Poverty reduction is a necessary, but not suf-

ficient, condition to guarantee global sustainable development and peace. Moreover, as mentioned above, even though after the year 2000 the MDGs were given a first priority, in practice policies fell short of meeting these goals.

So, for the implementation of the new generation of goals, the SDGs, it is essential that a global guarantee be established to protect people and the earth against all forces which lead to exploitation of people and nature, and which deny present and future people the possibility to survive and live a decent life on this earth. It should be a long term guarantee, beyond 2030. It should consist not only of safety nets for victims and compensation for damage, but also of systemic change, in order to prevent further damage, recurrence of violence, more harsh exploitation and pauperisation. Protection implies prevention, and prevention requires reform.

Which criteria should be met in order to render the agenda for the coming period more effective than the agenda's so far? I would like to highlight seven priorities.

#### 4. ENDING POVERTY

Cutting poverty in half is not enough. Neither would be an effort to cutting remaining world poverty in half. A step by step approach is no longer acceptable. Ending poverty is crucial, for ethical as well as rational reasons. The world cannot afford to postpone addressing the political dangers resulting from disillusionment and desperation of people, who feel themselves excluded from the global system – the market, the community, the law and the structures of decision making – and who have lost prospects and hope.

So, eradicating rather than reducing poverty requires, to begin with, the full implementation of the MDGs as soon as possible after the initial deadline of 2015. This is the **first** priority. **Second**, in doing so, a number of lessons learned during the previous period should be put into practice. The new SDGs have been defined and endorsed. From now on the focus should be on ways and means to secure their implementation. Vandemoortele, one of the members of the team which had designed the MDGs, has criticized policies leading to 'dollarization' and 'donorization' (his terminology) of the MDGs. Money and donors got the upper hand. In policy making much attention has been given to MDG 1 (halving the proportion of people whose income is less than \$1.25 a day) at the expense of other goals. In international deliberations MDG 8 (develop a global partnership for development) stood central, which fostered the wrong idea that the goals first and foremost would require action by foreign partners, rather than the countries themselves. Neither the Millennium Declaration itself, nor the elucidation of the concepts of poverty and human development on the basis of the experience in previous decades, would justify this.

In popular conversations and political disputes there is always a tendency to discuss proxies: income rather than welfare, growth rather than development, and aid rather than cooperation. While proxies can be measured, quantified, and ordered, the categories they stand for represent the value that people attach to the way in which a policy is being carried out, and the contents of the achievements. Up to a point all MDGs, SDGs and their sub targets are proxies for human welfare. However, assessments of the goals should not only focus on quantitative and measurable indicators, but especially on the quality of process and progress.

For instance, achieving universal primary education means not only that all children are completing school, but also that the quality of their teachers, and the education they receive, are up to standard. Progress towards greater welfare not only means that fewer people stay poor, but also that more people will be empowered and can decide themselves what they want to achieve, and how. Development is not a numbers game. The Millennium Declaration did not proclaim a numbers exercise. From the very outset the goals were described in terms

of social processes and human agency. However, in the course of policy-making towards their fulfilment, they have become numerical objects of management. So, the second priority implies that policies to attack poverty should consider quality as essential.

This should not only apply to the yet unfilled part of the MDGs, but also to the policies to be designed in order to lift the other half of the world's poor out of unworthy and inhuman circumstances. Next to intensifying efforts to meet the original goals - halving poverty as soon as possible after the initial deadline - the **third** priority should be to cut the other half of poverty to nil, with a new deadline.

In the Global 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development this has been agreed in very clear terms. However, meeting that goal will be even more difficult. There are reasons why people belong to a poorer second half of the world's poor and why they can be reached less easily, or not at all, with the help of traditional policy instruments. Many of those people cannot be reached with the help of market instruments, because they don't have access to the market. Many cannot be reached with the help of public instruments of the state either, because state authorities are not interested, or have a bias against the communities to which these people belong.

From their side people may have completely lost confidence in public authorities, and in supposedly democratic procedures. So, there is a role for civil society, nongovernmental organisations, decentralized communities, community based institutions and people's movements. Policies addressing this so-called second half of the world's poverty should be based on a thorough analysis of the origins and causes of poverty of specific groups of people: different regions within a country; distinct age groups of men and women; specific cultural, ethnic or national minorities, tribes and indigenous groups; special categories of the rural population and of urban slums, and so on. The poorer people are, the farther they are beyond the reach of the market and the state; the more they have been excluded - or feel excluded - by both the market and the state, the greater the need to tailor anti-poverty policies to the specific circumstances of those people.

This cannot be accomplished without setting a **fourth** priority goal: reduce inequalities between people. Poverty eradication is not possible as long as inequalities persist, or increase. Economic inequality is often defended with the argument that this leads to higher growth, from which also the poor can benefit. This is a fallacy. Inequality would only be in the interest of society as a whole if and when more people would be lifted out of poverty than under conditions of a more equal distribution of income. Growth does not trickle down. The fruits of growth will not be distributed equally and fairly. In particular, the poorest of the poor will not benefit from higher growth under conditions of inequality. An unequal distribution of income, wealth, capital, resources and other means to increase welfare implies inequality of power. This includes the power to keep other people poor, to oppress them, to deny them access to the market and to silence their voices. In many countries, democracy, based on the principle of the inherent equality of men, and meant to ensure a level playing field for political decision making, is thwarted by the abuse of power that stems from economic inequality.

This is crucial. Not only poverty eradication, but also sustainable development demands a reduction of inequalities. The economic growth of the previous decades, if continued, together with further climate change, will lead to more scarcity of resources, and a scramble for access to resources abroad. Incessant and unbridled global financial capitalism can be expected to result in economic and political instability in many parts of the world, and increasing social

vulnerability. Any future agenda should address inter-linkages between scarcity, instability, vulnerability and inequality. If we fail to do so, people who presently live below subsistence level, or just above, will suffer even more.

In the past, systems were also characterized by inequality. In the nineteenth century capitalism led to exploitation of people, keeping them poor in the economy and down in society. In the twentieth century this was altered by decolonisation, build-up of welfare states, spread of democracy, and extension of public services. However, globalization and market neo-liberalism led to new inequalities: excluding people from participation in the market and depriving them of the means to get access to the system – to finance, technology and resources. Exclusion followed exploitation: from keeping people down to keeping them out. The most recent phase of capitalism is also most brutal now. As argued by Saskia Sassen, financial capitalism leads to expulsion. It is pushing people out, while occupying the resources they were using to earn a livelihood. The system takes away their land, homes, and habitat. It is depriving them of jobs, employment opportunities, worker's rights, social rights and welfare services. Small farmers and petty business owners are being driven to the margin of the market, and across. From exclusion to expulsion; from a culture of stay away to go away.

## 5. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT FOR ALL

This brings us to a **fifth** priority: guaranteeing sustainability, not only in order to serve the interests of future generations, but also because it will not be possible to eradicate poverty in a non-sustainable environment. The threats are known: human-induced climate change; overuse of freshwater resources; loss of biodiversity and ecological balance; deforestation; desertification; degradation of land fertility; pollution (nitrogen, phosphorous, aerosols and chemical pollutants) of land, water and the atmosphere, resulting from industry, agriculture, and the reliance on fossil fuels, and ocean acidification. These and other phenomena endanger food security, health, and habitat of many people, and for quite a few even survival. Material economic growth in combination with population growth is mortgaging Earth's non-renewable resources.

Those resources are by definition scarce, not only in absolute, physical terms, but also in relative terms. The costs are high and prices will go up. Technological innovation can help postpone depletion, but this requires capital, and also capital is scarce. Allocating capital addressing to, for instance, climate change, and depletion of groundwater, is competing with allocations in other directions, offering fast profit earning opportunities. Moreover, the need to change the course of consumption, production and investment does not force itself easily upon people who belong to the richer and middle classes, with ample purchasing power and access to capital. For yet quite some time, scarce resources will remain affordable to them. However, the poor will be the first to be excluded, either because they cannot pay the price, or because of physical exclusion and expulsion by richer and stronger countries, firms and populations. Wealthier and powerful classes and their institutions can protect themselves through grab, occupation and predation of living space and resources. Eradication of poverty and inequality will not be possible as long as scarce resources are dealt with in a non-sustainable manner.

Guaranteeing sustainable use of scarce resources and eradicating poverty requires a major reform of national and global economic systems. This is a **sixth** priority. The market mechanisms will not by themselves internalize so-called external effects: costs and benefits for the community as a whole, beyond those of the market partners. The market will not take into consideration the interests and needs of future generations. People yet unborn do not have a

possibility to raise their voice and to exercise demand. Neither will this mechanism ensure that poor people with inadequate purchasing power, capabilities and resources, will be given full access. The market is not the solution. On the contrary, it is the problem.

The need to reform does also apply to systems of political decision making. This is a **seventh** priority. Any agenda dealing with sustainability and welfare goals should not only deal with objectives, targets, policies and instruments, but also with institutions, decision procedures, binding commitments, rules of law, compliance regulations, and sanctions. They should be based on once agreed values and principles, those implied in the UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights, and also those laid down in Agenda 21 and the Millennium Declaration. They may have to be further reviewed, updated and actualized, but once reconfirmed they should not serve as a mantra, disguising non-action, or as a smokescreen for reverse movement.

Reform of the system has been proposed many times. In the seventies the proposals of the joint group of developing countries G77 to establish a New International Economic Order did not fall on fertile ground. Reform of the UN itself met with resistance from the early constituents. New institutions have been created, outside the realm of the UN, in order to give more weight to emerging economies and new powers, or to simply avoid rules and value based decision procedures which once had been agreed by consensus and laid down in international law. This is, for instance, the case with the G7, competing with UN bodies such as ECOSOC and the Security Council, and with the proposed Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP), bypassing the WTO. Such institutions are clubs of likeminded governments, self-appointed, arbitrarily excluding other countries, disregarding once agreed principles and procedures. They may seem efficient, because there is less dissent within such a club than in a body which is more representative for the world community as a whole, but by not reflecting other possible views they lose legitimacy. Other governments and their peoples may conceive such a club as the embodiment of betrayal of their aspirations.

## **6. IMPLEMENTATION**

The 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development offers a new opportunity to take steps towards systemic change. The Agenda includes seventeen new goals, and a huge number of targets (sub-goals) and indicators in order to measure and value their implementation. The selection and definition of the SDGs differs from those for the MDGs, as they are more bottom up, participatory and transparent. The MDGs had been criticized for being the result of a top down approach. This criticism was partly justified, partly unfair. One could say that for decades people in many countries had protested, bottom up, against the workings of the national and international political and economic systems which had led to their exploitation and exclusion. To a certain extent the Millennium Declaration was a belated top down response to bottom up activism. It had been people's groups – for instance women's organisations; labour unions; national, ethnic, cultural, and religious minorities; indigenous peoples; environmental ngo's, community organisations; human rights activists and anti-globalists – which had laid the ground for an alternative approach to an economic development policy which gave priority to capital, profit and material goods over and above people, society, nature, environment, ecology and the protection of the earth. But a decade later the SDGs have been designed in a different fashion. Throughout the world groups were enabled to display their views, desires, and expectations. They could present their objectives and explain the bottlenecks they have to overcome and the constraints they have to meet. In their deliberations new informa-

tion and communication technology was used. Never before United Nations deliberations had been so transparent and participatory. A new momentum has been created, a precedent. People now can point to the experience that it does make sense to participate in discussions which are meant to lead to consensus results, and which they can influence. The adoption of the Agenda by politicians can renew people's confidence in the system of the United Nations. The system has won back some authority. The UN would be wise building on this experience. The consultation procedure which has been followed when drafting the SDGs should not be for once and all. It can be applied in other areas of UN competence.

It should anyway be applied during the process of implementation of the SDGs. This is in first instance the responsibility of national governments. All countries should define a national agenda for sustainable development, in line with the Global Agenda. However, the international community should see to it that governments will not lean backwards. Moreover, countries have different sustainability problems, for reasons of geography and history. Countries will have different priorities and different policy options. The choice of a specific policy will have effects across national frontiers. Countries will have to cooperate in order to address cross-border issues. The international community has to monitor all this. An international system of guidance and support, but also sanctions on non-compliance, should be established. Existing bodies within the United Nations should be strengthened and reformed to this end.

The Global Agenda for Sustainable Development has been criticized because of the large number of goals: 17 SDGs, against 8 MDGs. However, the number is justified: the sustainability agenda which includes a poverty agenda is by nature broader than poverty agenda. And the number of seventeen is manageable. In most countries governmental machinery does consist of about 12 to 20 ministerial departments. That is feasible, as long as there is a cabinet within which the leaders of those departments, which are politically accountable, sit together, consult each other and jointly take decisions, whenever there are cross-departmental interests and consequences. For the international community this is not different. It can work, as long as at high level coordination in a common body has been ensured.

Elsewhere I have made a number of suggestions for reform of the UN in order to render the system more effective in the fields of development, peace and environment. There is no lack of proposals for reform. There is lack of willingness to act. I already mentioned initiatives in the opposite direction, outside the realm of world consensus based international law. Recent decisions, taken in the same year during which the Global Agenda was completed, are also quite disappointing. Let me mention three major disappointments, after the welcome adoption of the Global Agenda.

One of them is the scandalous way in which Northern countries, and in particular the member states of the European Union, are dealing with the present refugee crisis. The high number of refugees, presently 65 million, higher than ever before, is the result of perverse development: war, oppression, discrimination, violation of human rights, poverty, inequality, and deterioration of the habitat and of living conditions. In short: this crisis is the result of a widening deficit of sustainability. However, instead of addressing this crisis on the basis of the once agreed principles of the Millennium Declaration - freedom, dignity, equal rights, solidarity, respect for diversity, and shared responsibility - refugees and displaced people are being denied access to security.

The second disappointment is the outcome of the Paris summit conference on climate (CoP 21: the 21<sup>st</sup> Conference of the Parties to the UN Framework Convention on Climate



Change, December 2015). The decisions taken at that summit have been cheered. However, the outcome is a step backwards as compared to the Kyoto Protocol (a treaty extending UNFCCC), which had been operational since 2005. Country parties to that protocol had committed themselves on the basis of binding international law, with sanctions on non-compliance, to reduce their emissions of greenhouse gases with a specified amount. CoP 21, however, does not go further than obliging country parties to draft and submit transparent national plans to further reduce their emissions, which reductions are left to the countries themselves. The Paris summit has brought us back to the situation following UNCED 1992: voluntary measures and good intentions.

This does not augur well for a serious implementation of the 2030 Global Agenda for Sustainable Development. The halting of climate change and temperature increases is essential for meeting targets with regard water, forests, biodiversity, ocean life, agriculture, food security, health and human habitat. So is another factor: the availability of capital for investments not only to reduce poverty, enhance food security, improve public health and basic education, and broaden the access to drinking water and sanitation, which stood central in the period 2000-2015, but also to invest in an energy transition from fossil fuels to renewable energy, in sustainable infrastructures, industries, transportation, production and land use systems. This will require more finance than ever before, not only foreign aid, but also domestic resources. Aid has gone down, however. This means that countries will have to reorient their budgets drastically: setting new priorities and increasing domestic taxation. However, at the International Conference on Financing for Development (Addis Ababa, July 2015) in order to agree on a global framework for financing development post 2015 and ensure that enough resources would be available for the implementation of the new Global Agenda, nil commitments were made to increase assistance for countries which are too poor to fully implement the agenda by themselves. Moreover, countries requesting changes in international taxation regimes which would enhance the transparency of international capital flows, and enable them to raise profit and wealth taxes, and stop speculative financial transactions and capital flight, came away empty-handed. This is the third major disappointment, which does not augur well for an effective implementation of the Global Agenda

Capital and climate. Both are essential. Neither can be left to the market. The ball is in the corner of the politicians now. Goal nr 17 of the Global Agenda is to revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development. This goes far beyond aid. Obstacles to development resulting from an unsustainable environment, such as climate change, cannot be overcome by merely increasing aid. Aid can foster adjustment to obstacles on the road to development. Aid can also help the victims of these obstacles. But softening the effects of obstacles is not enough. The obstacles themselves must be removed. A new global partnership for development should first and foremost contain policies to dismantle the obstacles for sustainable development and poverty reduction. This should be the main focus of future international cooperation for sustainable development: to change the character of globalisation, avoid its negative consequences and see to it that people yet unborn will have the same prospects of a better life as present generations want for themselves.

This requires major reforms, economic, political, institutional and legal, based on values, the post 1945 ones with regard to human rights, and the post 2015 ones with regard to sustainable human development. Indeed, the ball is in the corner of political leaders with the power to translate commitments into law. But world civil society should not withdraw into backyard corridors. The agenda is too important to be left to politicians and governments alone.

Since the change of the millennia, despite the commitments which had been laid down in the Millennium Declaration, political practice has been dominated by the concept of security rather than sustainability. Security is based on exclusion: nations and people consider their security endangered by others. Other nations and people feel likewise. These feelings incite to reciprocal action that confirms feelings of insecurity everywhere. A vicious circle of insecurity is the result.

Sustainability, on the other hand, is inclusive. Sustainability requires an awareness of common security: nations and people can consider themselves secure when also others feel themselves secure. In this scenario, nobody has a reason to fear being attacked. Such mutual feelings of trust create a virtuous circle of security.

Such a virtuous circle is the basis for building a just, sustainable, participatory and peaceful global society in the 21st century, as had already been envisaged in publications of the World Council of Churches in the 1970s and in the Earth Charter, long before the adoption of the Millennium Declaration. As against previous agenda's, which were simply titled "*Agenda for ...*" or "*Declaration*", the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development has been given an ambitious title: "*Transforming Our World*". This title of a document adopted by Heads of State and Heads of Government sounds like a pledge. A pledge to transform is welcome, because business as usual will not lead to a sustainable world. The fact that political leaders at the highest level, gathering together on behalf of 'We the Peoples' declare this 'our world', belonging to all of us, without exception, does offer some hope of fulfilment.

Will sustainable development once become a reality, or a chimera? My dictionary provides two meanings of a chimera: a nightmare and an illusion. Some powers will perceive sustainable development as a nightmare, a threat to vested interests. They will do everything to postpone transformation and water down the pledge. Others - cynics - will look at the SDGs as just another example of unmet expectations, an illusion, a fata morgana. However, we cannot afford to perceive sustainable development in either of these ways. Sustainable development may threaten income and wealth of those who disproportionately reap the fruits of the status quo, but the perverse development processes of today threaten the very living conditions of yet unborn generations. So, we have to make sustainable development a reality, not an illusion, not a fake concept, not a goal beyond reach, but a true translation of the lofty principles of the Millennium Declaration. It is high time to meet that challenge.

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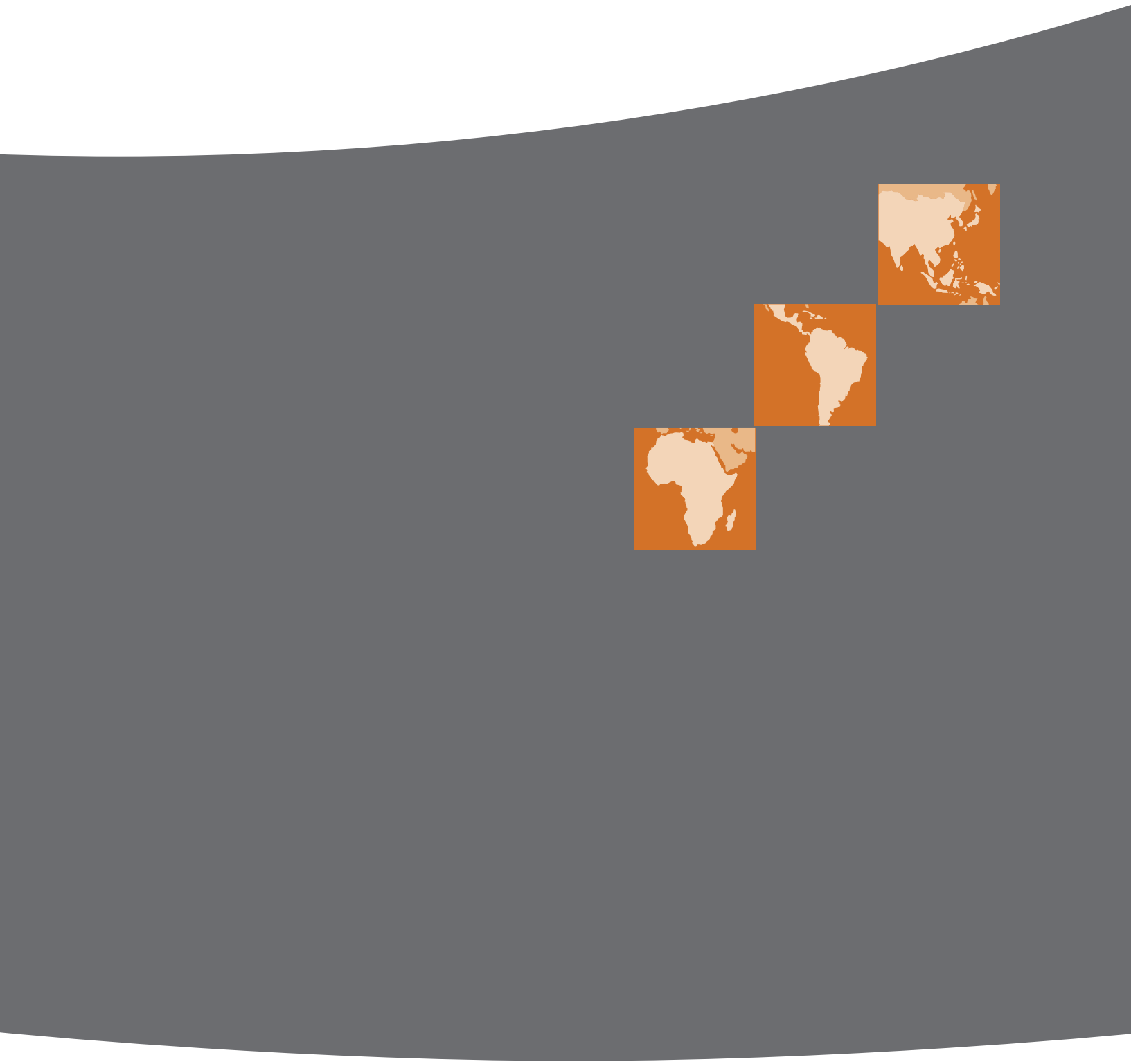
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