

# Where are Human Rights and Good Governance in the New Sustainable Development Goals?

Back in September 2000, 192 states assembled at the United Nations to adopt the Millennium Declaration, a framework for accelerating the development and security of poorer countries. However, while the importance of human rights and good governance for development featured prominently in chapter V and the preamble of the declaration, these principles did not ultimately become part of the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that flowed from the Millennium Declaration. Today, the international development community risks repeating the same mistakes and even sliding backwards in their commitment to human rights in the ongoing negotiations over the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the eventual successor framework to the MDGs.

The lack of attention to human rights and good governance in the current proposal for the Sustainable Development Goals and the course of the ongoing negotiations are cause for concern. While the negotiation process on the post-2015 vision is an intensely political exercise infused by differing worldviews and value conceptions,<sup>1</sup> without firmly embedding principles of good governance and respect for human rights in the post-2015 development framework, the SDGs will fall short on the ambitions to truly achieve equitable growth and inclusive development.

We suggest three steps to ensure that human rights and good governance are firmly embedded in the new framework. First, governments must reverse their timid positions on human rights and honor existing human rights obligations. Second, the SDGs should include human rights and good governance principles in the fiercely debated “means of implementation.” Finally, following the negotiation phase, the implementation phase must actively monitor progress, or lack thereof, of human rights and good governance efforts.

## **More Commitment to Human Rights in the SDGs is Necessary**

The Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals was made public in July 2014 after 14 months of intergovernmental discussions and input from numerous other groups, including civil society and the private sector.<sup>2</sup> With 17 goals and 169 targets, it is an ambitious document. But it is silent on the importance of human rights and good governance, with only a passing reference to human rights in paragraph 7 of the draft preamble.<sup>3</sup>

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This is a step backward from previous proposals made by, for example, the United Nations Secretary-General, the MDG Task Force, the Secretary-General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the Office of the United Nations High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), the Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights as well as countless human rights advocates across the world. In varying degrees, each of these have argued for making human rights the foundation of the SDGs – as opposed to the token reference that human rights received in the Open Working Group's proposal. Among the most vocal critics of the current proposal is the United Nations Special Rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights, Philip Alston, who argues that the “almost complete omission of substantive references to human rights in the draft is a throwback to the United Nations development decade strategies of the 1960s and 1970s.”<sup>4</sup>

Given the importance of the Open Working Group's proposal as a reference point for further negotiations and the finalization of the SDGs, this is a worrying situation that does not reflect the many existing human rights obligations established by international treaties. To uphold the centrality of the human rights position for the post-2015 development framework, policymakers must adopt an approach premised on the need for greater engagement between the human rights community and the development community. Further, only a judicious blend of elements from the human rights framework, the pro-poor development context and the previous MDGs offers a way of reaching meaningful Sustainable Development Goals and achieving fair, equitable and efficient development over the longer-term.

## **Human Rights and Good Governance Must Underpin the "Means of Implementation"**

Human rights are also tightly connected with good governance. Human rights are people centered while good governance, such as democratic and responsive institutions, the rule of law and anti-corruption, are minimum standards for political institutions that respond to the rights and need of a country's population.<sup>5</sup> All tools, policies and approaches to support the implementation of the SDGs must take these into account.

In addition to the specific means of implementation included for each goal, there are 19 different means included in goal 17 ranging from public and private finance, technology transfer, capacity-building as well as means for addressing systemic issues such as creating a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trade system. Beyond these clusters, the Open Working Group proposal further stresses the importance of multi-stakeholder partnerships and monitoring the progress on sustainable development. As such, the current proposal emphasizes the necessary technical and financial needs, but by themselves these are neither sufficient for sustainable development nor based on the views, needs and rights of citizens. Still missing, however, is any reference to human rights principles and standards of good governance – such as transparency, accountability and broad participation, particularly with underrepresented stakeholders – as central and cross-cutting means of implementation.

A rights-based approach, and one that reflects principles of good governance, must be explicitly added as a cross-cutting means of implementation. This requires all governments and development actors to acknowledge, uphold and include, for example, principles of accountability, transparency, participation and inclusion in the design and implementation of development activities. Only with explicit references to these principles can the needs of the people as well as equity and fairness in global development be assured.

## **Make Accountability a Reality Beyond 2015**

The Sustainable Development Goals offer an immense opportunity for improving the lives of millions. Sadly, without respect for human rights and principles of good governance underpinning these targets, we risk only improving the lives of a few at the expense of the many. It is thus critical that the rhetoric of accountability be backed up by credible reporting mechanisms which measure national progress towards achieving the SDGs. Progress reporting at the intergovernmental level and with participation by civil society should include a process evaluation which, among other things, should assess whether SDG implementation in a country was informed by human rights treaties and instruments as well as the principles of good governance, inclusive participation and the rule of law.<sup>6</sup> Importantly, this monitoring requires independent actors, including civil society organizations, at the grassroots level.

To achieve this, the development community must turn towards the human rights community and make better use of existing human rights data in the assessment of how the Sustainable Development Goals can translate from declaration to action.

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### **About the African Civil Society Circle**

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## End Notes

1. This is evident even within the G-77 Group of developing countries. Brazil, a member of the G77, has for example initially advocated for an exclusion of governance issues in the OWG draft document. Others advocated for an inclusion. South Africa, who currently chairs the G77 group, noted in summer 2014 that “Given the complexity of human development and the high economic stakes for all countries, apart from agreement on the Means of Implementation and a few general principles, reaching consensus within the Group on proposed Goals and targets proved to be impossible.” (<http://www.dfa.gov.za/docs/speeches/2014/land0725.html>).
2. UN (2014) Open Working Group Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals. Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals. A/68/970
3. The recent draft of synthesis report by the UN Secretary General is slightly more vocal on the importance of human rights. UN (2014) The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet. Synthesis Report of the Secretary-General On the Post-2015 Agenda. Advance unedited.
4. UN (2014) Report of the Special Rapporteur on Extreme Poverty and Human Rights. A/69/297.
5. UN (2000) The role of good governance in the promotion of human rights. Commission on Human Rights resolution 2000/64. The Heads of State and Government of the African Union also stressed that “good political and socio-economic governance” as well as human rights are important enablers of development. AU (2014) Common African Position (CAP) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.
6. UN (2005) Standards for Evaluation in the UN System. United Nations Evaluation Group. UNEG/FN/Standards(2005).