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Universal SDGs – implementing the goals in rich countries

The 2030 Agenda is about more than empowering developing countries on a path to sustainable development. Achieving a sustainable future for all will also require fundamental changes in the way developed countries operate

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At the UN summit meeting in September 2015, world leaders adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as the core element of a new 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. They declared:

“These are universal goals and targets which involve the entire world, developed

and developing countries alike. They are integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development.”

The principle of universality recognises that none of us can achieve long-term, sustainable and equitable success alone in the new world order. The world is a complex and interconnected place with equally complex and interconnected challenges. That means that we must

▲ Residents, activists, friends and family members of victims of gun violence march through Chicago carrying nearly 800 wooden crosses bearing the names of people murdered in the city in 2016

overcome traditional barriers, work with new partners in new ways and be willing to make decisions for the long term that transcend the interests of individual nation states and stakeholders.

In earlier times, development was often conceived as one-way progress from the

poorer conditions of the less developed countries to the ‘more advanced’ state of the more prosperous, developed countries. The development agenda was ‘simply’ about how to help the least developed and the still developing countries to accelerate their transition towards the happier state of those supposedly well-developed countries.

Finding new pathways

But what if the ways of life and the economies of the developed countries are evolving in ways that do not constitute a desirable or sustainable model? What if those advanced economies are the very ones that are already placing the most excessive burdens on the planet’s ecosystems and natural resources, while causing the worst pollution?

What if the basic economic model underpinning the so-called advanced economies of the world is itself unsustainable, in that it equates progress with never-ending growth of GDP and of material production and consumption? What if the basic structures of today’s businesses operating in the global market inevitably feed that engine of consumption and produce ever-widening inequalities?

What if the governance and accountability structures developed in Western democracies and exported elsewhere favour short-termism and do not encourage (or even allow) decision-making for the long term?

Rich, developed countries are currently struggling to get the measure of these new challenges. They are grappling with how to reshape their own economies and societies to take account of the unavoidable reality of the planetary boundary that surrounds us all.

The SDGs have an important part to play in helping to bring about the necessary changes. They offer an inspiring, common vision of the more sustainable future we all want. The details of the goals and targets pinpoint many of the specific issues that need to be addressed and the changes that need to be made.

The SDGs also embody a pact between developing and developed countries. While developing countries need to find new

pathways that avoid the historical pitfalls of past development patterns, developed countries need to reduce the negative impacts of their current socio-economic systems and their unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. The two transformations are interconnected and need to be undertaken in parallel and in partnership.

The SDGs point us towards a more sustainable future. A future in which scarce

common and individual wellbeing that we can all aspire to and work towards without damaging the planet around us.

We need an evolution of intellectual, moral and political thinking that will raise equity, fairness and long-termism over short-term self-interest and inequality, and counter rising trends of isolationism and tribalism. We need a new industrial revolution to create the technologies of

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and finite resources are used prudently and reused and recycled wherever possible. A world in which carbon emissions are reduced to levels that do not threaten catastrophic climate change. A world in which food and other basic resources are distributed and consumed fairly, instead of the present pattern of over-consumption and waste in some places coexisting with hunger and shortage in others. A world in which poverty can truly be eradicated everywhere, rather than merely shifted from one place to another.

Multiple needs

Three specific ‘goals for the rich’ are particularly important for sustainable development worldwide, but require developed countries to take urgent action if sustainability is to be realised. These are the goals to:

- reduce inequality within and among countries (SDG 10);
- ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns (SDG 12), and sustainable use of energy (SDG 7);
- strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for development (SDG 17).

Action is needed on many fronts. We need new economic and social paradigms. Growth of material consumption and GDP will no longer do as the metric of success for society. We need new concepts of both

the future that can provide the goods and services that people need in a much less resource-intensive and polluting way. We need to encourage long-life products, reuse and recycling.

We need national sustainable development strategies involving all parts of society to coordinate national progress across the whole range of the SDGs. We need extensive national conversations with the public and all stakeholders to secure widespread support and consent. And we need functional, well-resourced multi-stakeholder initiatives that can create a sum greater than the parts.

We need partnerships with businesses, consumers and stakeholders to identify and encourage the emergence of the sustainable new technologies of the future and to phase out the unsustainable practices of the past – including the phasing out of environmentally damaging subsidies.

We need tax structures that incentivise more sustainable production and consumption, discourage unsustainable practices and promote investment in sustainable sectors and away from unsustainable sectors.

We need a plan for domestic resource mobilisation to finance the sustainability transformation and the implementation of the SDGs. Sustainability needs to be at the heart of the process for setting public budgets, and of the operations of the finance and capital markets.



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▲ A family beg on the street in Athens, Greece. Greece has been struggling with a government-debt crisis since late 2009. Efforts to manage international debts and remain within the Eurozone have led to prolonged recession, wage cuts and intense hardship

We need institutional structures that support forward-thinking research and analysis of sustainability issues.

And we need fully funded, politically neutral public awareness and public education campaigns around the world that speak to people in their own language. We need words to explain what the SDGs are, why they are important and how we can build capacity to help achieve them.

Powerful, positive vision

Some countries in the world are already making bold moves to create the structures to support this revolution. Germany, Finland and Colombia are among the leaders. Some developing countries are also currently outpacing developed nations in terms of their innovative and comprehensive plans for SDG delivery. International cooperation needs to become more multi-directional, recognising that developing countries now have much to teach so-called developed countries on sustainability, as well as needing support for their own development.

The UK has previously been one of the leaders in the sustainability transition, developing good governance practices, pioneering new renewable technologies, shaping new concepts of corporate social responsibility, greening agricultural policies and rethinking development assistance objectives. Until recently, the UK has also been one of the leading supporters and advocates of a strong EU sustainability policy and stance in the world.

But a number of stakeholders in the UK have become concerned that the UK's position has now changed, so have come together to form a new multi-stakeholder alliance: UK Stakeholders for Sustainable Development (UKSSD). The alliance is intended to focus on domestic implementation of the SDGs through enhanced multi-stakeholder coordination and action. UKSSD held its second national conference on 1 March 2017 in London, and is developing a further programme of work and activities (see www.ukssd.co.uk for further details).

Such multi-stakeholder initiatives are vital to a universal and integrated approach to sustainable development and must be encouraged or established where no such mechanism exists.

The universal nature of the SDGs and their comprehensive scope are both a challenge and a strength. The task of full global implementation is a daunting one. But the powerful and positive vision of a more sustainable world, and the urgent need to move more rapidly towards it, should provide a strong incentive to people and stakeholders of all kinds to join forces in this endeavour.

When united in this cause, the strength to achieve the SDGs must surely follow. But regardless of full success, there is both utility and nobility in the attempt. ●