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Breaking the cycle of poverty

The MDGs made substantial progress on reducing global poverty and inequality, but left much still to achieve. What lessons can the international community take forward to ensure that the new SDGs and their myriad targets become a reality?

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are universal: a recognition that sustainability and the eradication of poverty are challenges for all countries in all parts of the world. But if the challenges

are universal, so too are the lessons of experience, achievement and failures. A change of mindset will be needed – and some humility.

No longer will the more developed countries be able to dispense wisdom and instructions to poorer countries about what they ought to be doing. Now all countries are in it together; they must learn from

▲ A homeless encampment near LAX airport in Los Angeles, USA. The SDGs recognise that poverty is a universal scourge and one that developed countries have failed to remedy

each other what has worked and what has not.

A first lesson is that breaking the cycle of poverty is far from easy. Which of the richer countries have done it? Not the

UK, in spite of more than 200 years of growth and ‘development’. Nor the US, France, Germany or Russia. Arguably Norway, Sweden and Finland *have* broken the cycle of poverty in their countries. So too, conceivably, has Japan, especially for its older citizens, with almost a third of the population now over 60.

A second lesson is that a diversity of interrelated actions is needed. Key elements involve: employment generation towards employment for all; universal education that leaves no one behind (and prepares every young person for useful work); universal

developing countries has fallen from about 23 per cent in 1990–92 to an estimate of less than 13 per cent today. Most of this progress has taken place since 2000.

These are encouraging statistics. Setting global goals can help provide focus and often commitment. And the fact that governments collectively agreed them at the UN is, by historical standards, an important achievement – a major advance over the nationalist focus of international rivalries in the centuries before the UN was created.

Nonetheless, some major changes are needed to break the cycle of poverty. First,

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health coverage; and strong and effective social services, able to respond to all with special needs (i.e. those who fail or slip along the way of life or have the bad luck to grow up in circumstances that fail to develop their capacities).

These actions must also encompass gender equity and an adequate system of pensions and care for older people. Humans do not live on bread alone; we need strong communities, not merely efficient government. Even to list these elements shows that they are a tall order – though a few countries have achieved enough of them to show that their realisation is possible.

How positive were the achievements of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the path-breaking goals set at the Millennium Summit? The official 2015 UN MDG report has some encouraging statistics: worldwide, using the former extreme poverty line of \$1.25 a day, the proportion of people below it fell from nearly half in 1990 to an estimated 14 per cent in 2015, with numbers declining in that period from about 1.9 billion to an estimate of just under 850 million. And the proportion of undernourished people in

a-dollar-a-day measures of poverty are inadequate. We need multi-dimensional measures of poverty for defining the challenge, framing the required actions and monitoring progress. Second, the important progress reported on the MDGs for education and health, gender equality and child mortality must be built upon, but with a more integrated approach in all countries – developing and developed.

Shifting goals

The SDGs go some way to meeting the inadequacies of the MDGs, especially because they are much more comprehensive. On the other hand, some commentators have criticised the SDGs for their very large number of goals and targets.

More important in my view is to recognise two virtuous elements of the process that gave rise to this number: first, the more than two-year process of consultation in countries, regions and globally that was involved in setting the goals and targets. This was probably the most all-embracing decision-making process ever undertaken by the UN. Second, the SDGs explicitly recognise that the process



of prioritisation and implementation must be decentralised to country level, with the involvement of civil society as well as governments in setting priorities and carrying them forward.

There must also be periodic reviews and reporting – nationally, regionally and internationally. Although this obviously adds many complications to the way forward, these complications are required if the goals are to be more than a top-down effort and instead be genuinely and politically transformative.

The SDGs themselves involve some contradictions in this vision. As Jan Vandemoortele, one of the architects of the MDGs, has shown, the new goals shift between eradicating poverty and reducing it. And the links with the reduction of inequality



democratic countries, especially those run by kleptocratic elites, and in dictatorships, the task will be almost impossible. But that is the nature of the situation. The most the international community can usually do is to substantially weaken the political and economic props that help such governments to remain in power and leave it to civil society to press for fundamental changes. This is neither easy nor without risks.

There are, however, three actions that the UN can and should take. First, globally, regionally and in all countries, the UN can report on progress, or lack of it, thereby strengthening awareness of country progress towards the SDGs. Second, the UN has in all countries – and regions – convening power to bring groups together. It can marshal representatives of government and civil society to review achievements, mobilise action and sustain progress, with special attention on the experiences of success. Third, the UN can provide a variety of forms of direct support: for action, monitoring and sharing experiences of what has worked in other places.

Such UN activities are relevant everywhere – even in countries where and when political support seems lacking. Where there are strong and competent governments, the UN can help to make and strengthen connections between national decision-making and monitoring, and the regional and international bodies involved in mobilising for sustainability – and monitoring progress towards these.

For poorer countries, especially least-developed, landlocked and small island states, resources from donor countries can play an essential part in supporting the governments, as well as the UN agencies active in these countries. International non-governmental organisations also have a role as partners with national civil society organisations. They can provide support and encouragement for national civil society groups, sometimes with experience in mobilising action for policy change and more rapid implementation.

The SDGs and their decentralised agenda for country-level action raises new challenges for all countries, but the prize for humanity is great. ●

– now widely recognised to be an integral component of long-term, sustainable poverty reduction – are only vaguely treated in Goal 10. All these issues must be pursued, country by country, in the process of setting priorities and implementing them.

Are governments ready for these next steps? And will civil society – or rather civil societies and the great variety of non-governmental organisations and people that comprise them – be ready to take up the tasks laid out in the SDGs? Certainly, this is the greatest challenge, as the onus shifts from the top-down process of the MDGs to one where the UN needs to engage with governments and civil society in initiating a much longer process to define long-term priorities, decide on the next steps and get priority actions underway.

▲ Migrant workers in Jiaxing, China. China's massive economic growth over the last two decades lifted many out of poverty. However, it also created huge inequalities that must be addressed if further progress is to be made

Internationally, UN agencies, especially the country representatives of the UN funds and specialised agencies, will need to develop a new form of collaborative interaction with governments and civil society. For some agencies, this will not be totally new but the breadth of the challenge will require new flexibilities and new responses – difficult at a time of scarce UN resources and more limited core funding. In committed and democratic developing countries, the new tasks are feasible, especially in countries where governments have adopted and adapted the SDGs as part of their national policy. In less