

The SDGs: a shopping list that matters

Kevin Watkins

Mention the words ‘sustainable development goals’ – or SDGs – outside the inner circle of UN officials, government representatives and civil society groups involved in drafting them and you are guaranteed one outcome: glazed eyes and stifled yawns. The goals are seen by many as a bureaucratic diversion from the urgent challenge of doing something practical and useful to advance sustainable development. Perhaps that’s why the philanthropic community has been so conspicuously absent from the SDG debate. But it may be time for a rethink.



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It's easy to see why the SDGs have failed to ignite philanthropic enthusiasm. An endless cycle of meetings and papers over the last four years has resulted in the UN Secretary General's Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, published on 4 December 2014. It is less of a manifesto for international action than a shopping list. The current draft of the SDGs comprises 17 goals and 169 targets ranging from the measurable to the vaguely aspirational and outright incomprehensible. Whatever your cause, there's an SDG target for you – and the package is heading for adoption at the UN General Assembly in September 2015.

Why do the SDGs matter?

Sustainable development is *the* defining challenge of our generation. A billion people live in such abject poverty that survival is a struggle. Inequality is reaching increasingly obscene proportions. Environmental threats loom large: we are now on a trajectory that will lead to 4°C warming over the course of the 21st century – an outcome that will have adverse near-term consequences for the poor and potentially catastrophic consequences for future generations. The earth's ecological systems – forests, watersheds and biodiversity – are under growing stress. The question behind the SDG facade is this: as we head towards a global population of 9 billion, can we simultaneously eradicate poverty, curtail inequality and expand opportunity without irreparably damaging the ecosystem?

The SDGs matter in part because they define a shared global ambition and they set some high bars for achievement. Over the period to 2030 the goals envisage the

eradication of extreme poverty, the elimination of avoidable child death and hunger, the provision of good-quality universal secondary education, universal access to clean water and sanitation, and access to affordable energy for all. Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the new goals integrate the development and environmental agendas. They extend from climate change to the sustainable management of ecological resources, and the development of safe and sustainable cities. Gender equity figures prominently. The SDGs also explicitly aim at reducing inequality between and within countries. There is even a target for greater equity in income distribution. The SDGs call on governments to 'progressively achieve and sustain income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average'. China, the US, Zambia, Thailand, India and the UK would all fail this test with flying colours.

In a fundamental sense the SDGs signal a change in direction. However clumsily contrived, they try to address in an integrated fashion the challenges confronting the ecosphere, the world economy and national social systems.

Why should philanthropic organizations care?

There are two compelling reasons for philanthropic organizations to engage in the SDG debate. The first is self-interest. Like them or loathe them, the way that the SDGs are interpreted and applied will influence the policy environment. As an industry that puts some \$59 billion annually into financing for development, philanthropists must take seriously a process that could have a major bearing on its operating environment.

The second reason is about opportunity. Even the most fervent SDG optimist would probably acknowledge that goals, targets and intergovernmental processes do not change the world. What they can do is create the conditions to do so.

The MDG experience is instructive. Some maintain that the 2015 goals 'enabled' the world to more than halve poverty, make deep cuts in child mortality, and move towards universal primary education and gender equity. In fact, global poverty reduction has been driven by progress in China, high-growth East Asia economies and, more recently, India – countries where the MDGs are largely irrelevant. However, the MDGs did play a role in building support for the Global Fund on HIV/AIDS, Malaria and Tuberculosis and GAVI, which has saved millions of lives through vaccination. These funds have enabled philanthropic organizations to invest in initiatives that have made a lasting impact.

The MDGs also galvanized support for aid, debt relief and, perhaps more importantly, the development of innovative partnerships between governments, the private sector and civil society.

Ultimately, the SDGs will be as useful as we make them. Intergovernmental processes do not have a good track record in producing outcomes that challenge governments – and the SDG process is no different in that respect. But the goals have the potential to make a difference if philanthropic organizations take them up in the right way.

Opportunities for philanthropy Inequality

Behind the aggregate data pointing to improvements in child mortality, school attendance, and access to water and sanitation, inequalities are widening in many countries, inequalities that will derail progress towards the 2030 goals unless governments act decisively to reduce them.

The problem is that the SDG targets do not include targets for equity. Philanthropic organizations could support civil society partners, research institutes and social activists to develop such targets, monitor progress, and develop the data sources needed to identify who is being left behind, where and by how much. In this context, I have proposed the use of ‘stepping-stone’ equity targets – interim targets for reducing inequality that will push countries towards the 2030 ambition. To take one example, how about calling on governments to halve the death rate gap between rich and poor children by 2020? Establishing that goal would provide civil society groups with a benchmark against which to hold governments to account.

Health

It is one thing to declare support for ‘leaving no one behind’. Developing the strategies needed to finance and deliver basic services such as health, education and water, and energy to the poor on affordable terms, is more difficult. We urgently need new alliances committed to the principle of progressive universalism in health – the idea that, in expanding health provision, governments should start from the bottom. Philanthropic financing can help to build alliances for change and identify innovative solutions.

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Education

Education is a priority area for development. Improved access to good-quality education – especially for women and girls – is associated with progress in virtually every dimension of human development. The SDGs envisage universal secondary schooling. Yet progress towards universal primary education has stalled with 57 million children out of school.

There is also a crisis in education quality. Around 254 million children leave school unable to read or write despite having gone through four years of education. Child labour, early marriage among girls, and discrimination against ethnic minority groups are prominent factors pulling children out of education. Poor teacher training contributes to weak learning outcomes. Philanthropic engagement could make a real difference in these areas. Yet no area of development is more neglected by the philanthropic community.

Pooled funds

Grants currently suffer from many of the problems associated with aid. There are dozens of actors delivering small amounts of money with very high transaction costs. Pooled funds could be one way of overcoming this. Jeffrey Sachs, one of the architects of the SDGs, has called for the creation of expanded pooled funds in health and a global pooled fund in education. Learning from the lessons of existing global health funds, these mechanisms could provide a vehicle for financial delivery and a focal point for philanthropic engagement.

In 2014 a new partnership was launched, the Post-2015 Partnership Platform for Philanthropy, described by Heather Grady in her article in this issue of *Alliance*. For philanthropic organizations interested in engaging with the SDG debate and post-2015 development processes, there could be no better place to start.

The goals are ultimately about our responsibilities towards the world’s poorest and most vulnerable people. They reflect our shared interest in peace, prosperity and a more sustainable, less unequal pattern of globalization. Our success in achieving the ambition set out in the goals will determine our children’s future. We do not live in the best of times for multilateralism. There is a paralysing lack of ambition on development and climate change. The SDGs may be a shopping list, but it’s a shopping list underpinned by the values and norms that we need to build a safer and more just world – and failure to use it will further erode the credibility of international cooperation in tackling the great challenges of the 21st century. @

Philanthropy and the post-2015 development agenda

Heather Grady

This year, the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) come to an end, and all the world's governments will agree on a Post-2015 Development Agenda and set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – as described by Kevin Watkins in this issue of *Alliance*. Influencing how the SDGs are implemented is enormously important because they will drive the bulk of official development assistance, and the work of development ministries and government departments around the world. Moreover, they are universal: all governments will be expected to adopt them and to report on their achievement. How is the philanthropy sector responding?



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Foundations and individual givers largely select their causes on the basis of the passions and interests of their founders, boards and leadership teams, or from compelling non-profits with whom they interact. Less common is programme design that consciously builds on global or national development targets and government and UN commitments. There are exceptions in specific fields like HIV/AIDS and women's rights, but in general the meta-level frameworks have never captured the attention of philanthropy as a whole.

Bringing philanthropy into the development debate

In 2014, six organizations – the United Nations Development Program (UNDP), Foundation Center and Rockefeller Philanthropy Advisors, working with and supported by the Conrad N Hilton, Ford and MasterCard Foundations – launched the Post-2015 Partnership Platform for Philanthropy. Its aims are to:

- ▶ Create a means for philanthropy to engage better in the Post-2015 Agenda
- ▶ Create new methods of outreach and engagement to connect philanthropy to development ecosystems
- ▶ Develop country-level structures to facilitate collaboration
- ▶ Make data on philanthropic investments more accessible to track progress, find partners and tell stories about effective collaborative efforts

The strategy is both to encourage UN and government representatives to take part in philanthropy events and to enable philanthropy representatives to join and influence UN and government meetings.

At the country level, the Platform provides a means for philanthropy to facilitate partnerships and help translate the global narrative into local priorities. The strategy is being piloted in Kenya, Colombia, Indonesia and Ghana. The assumption is that if active collaborations can create deeper and more effective development interventions, they will become the new norm in an increasing number of countries.

A meeting held at the Ford Foundation in New York in September 2014, attended by 150 representatives of government, the UN, foundations and civil society networks, confirmed the interest of foundations that are already aware of UN processes. But the real proof of concept for the Platform was the level of interest at country and regional level. Would philanthropy actors be excited by the opportunity of engaging, or dissuaded by the obvious challenges?

Testing the concept in Asia

At the Philanthropy in Asia Summit in Singapore in October 2014, a plenary session on the Post-2015 Agenda was well received in a regional setting where public-private cooperation is taken for granted. Participants were urged not to let local values, culture and solutions get lost in the SDG planning process. The need to use business as a pressure point to achieve the SDGs was emphasized, and the importance of finding the right measures of progress. There is a need to measure quality over quantity (for example in health and education), and to find measures of well-being, happiness and community.

It was acknowledged that development is a fragmented process in Asia – hence the importance of creating a system where all sectors can contribute. The philanthropy sector has often focused on education, health and the needs of local communities. For many participants, therefore, thinking about how to make their giving contribute to achievement of the SDGs in their home countries or elsewhere is new. While there was a willingness to be more transparent, new methods of reporting – like contributing to the Platform's *SDGfund.org* website – was seen as a departure from business as usual.

Encouragingly, more than one philanthropy institution from Singapore, and the China Foundation Center, expressed interest in their countries becoming pilots in this project.

Testing the concept in Latin America

The next opportunity to roll out the concept was at November's Brazil Philanthropy Forum, an annual meeting bringing together about 100 participants – a mix of corporate and family foundations and philanthropists. Brazil is a country that would be well positioned to build collaborative platforms for the Post-2015 Agenda: it has an active and growing philanthropy community, an engaged business sector, and robust networks like GIFE and IDIS, the Forum organizer.

At a session on the Post-2015 Agenda, UNDP's lead on foundations, Marcos Neto, himself a Brazilian, posed this challenge: the Brazilian government is a leader and takes firm positions in the Post-2015 Agenda negotiations – could Brazil's philanthropy sector also become a leader in this, in Brazil and in Latin America? Many, like Cloves Otavio Nunes de Carvalho, CEO of the Votorantim Institute, anticipated engaging with the emergent framework of successor goals but saw it as too early to commit to which of the 17 SDGs might be chosen as local development priorities. The 17 SDGs have greater breadth than the eight MDGs and provide far more entry points, but foundations will need to select their priorities, as will other civil society actors and the business sector.

Piloting the Platform at country level – Kenya

Kenya is the first of several pilot countries, and its Platform launch drew 80 participants for a day-long workshop in November 2014. Leaders came from the philanthropic sector, the UN system, civil society, business and government to discuss the national themes relevant to the Post-2015 Agenda. For Kenya, these were financial inclusion and youth employment, education, and women's rights and empowerment.

One challenge for the philanthropic sector in Kenya, as elsewhere, is shifting from individual projects to collaborative efforts. Other relevant considerations were recent changes devolving authority from central government to the county level, and proposed amendments to the Public Benefit Organizations Act. Some stressed that although the presence of international philanthropy is important, local, indigenous foundations are key in sustaining progress in the long term.

The Partnership Platform's data element, *SDGfunders.org*, was embraced enthusiastically by participants, since a major challenge in building effective

collaboration is a lack of willingness to share information and of mechanisms for doing so. Nicanor Sabula of the East Africa Association of Grantmakers noted the need for 'a central repository for data and statistics which can be presented to government and other stakeholders, putting us in a much better place to negotiate and accurately present the valuable contribution of this sector in development'. It remains to be determined whether the National Bureau of Statistics would be the right institution to compile information provided by 'non-state actors' such as foundations, or whether an independent platform would be better.

Challenges and opportunities

These country and regional discussions brought to the surface various issues and challenges and some ideas about how they could be addressed.

- ▶ More opportunities for systematic exchange on lessons learned should improve impact.
- ▶ More aligned reporting as a community, rather than each foundation defining its own programme areas and priorities, would benefit all foundations by saving staff time, avoiding duplication and helping to find co-funders.
- ▶ Designing platforms that take into account national and thematic contexts could help to balance transparency of information with the sensitivity of some grantmaking.
- ▶ Finding more nimble 'partners' (departments, individuals) within bureaucratic organizations like the UN could help collaboration with philanthropists and enable better use of the data held by such bureaucracies.

Looking forward

Challenges remain in getting independent-minded philanthropic actors to collaborate, not only with the UN system and governments but with each other. As a few of us observed last year, the hard work of compromising through what is known as 'diffuse collaboration' requires short-term efforts for medium- and long-term gains. Some governments, even as they move towards more accountability for their decision-making and implementation, remain suspicious of philanthropy and its support of other civil society actors who may themselves be critical of those same governments. But these are tractable challenges that an increasing proportion of the philanthropy sector is willing to address. @

For more information

To find out more about the Partnership Platform, visit www.rockpa.org at <http://tinyurl.com/PartnerPlatform>