High stakes at the UN on the Sustainable Development Goals

A special event at the UN General Assembly on Sept 25, 2013 marks a bridge between the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the end of 2015 and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that presumably will run from 2016 to 2030.1 The special event will address urgent actions to accelerate progress to the MDGs over their remaining 2 years, while setting a timeline and diplomatic framework for creating the post-2015 development agenda. For many, the UN processes seems convoluted, or even irrelevant, but what is taking shape has the potential to help humanity make an urgent change of course to address the deep and interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges the world faces.

The MDGs have been the most successful global undertaking in history to coordinate action to fight extreme poverty in all its forms: income, hunger, disease, lack of schooling, and deficient basic infrastructure. Most importantly, they have helped sub-Saharan Africa to enter an era of economic growth and disease reduction by focusing domestic and international policies, expertise, and finance on recalcitrant challenges, such as AIDS, tuberculosis, malaria, low farm yields, and children out of school.2 The MDGs have mobilised an unprecedented focus on the global poor by promoting the cancellation of unaffordable debts; prompting the establishment of new organisations such as the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria; and encouraging new technologies for diagnostics, medicines, supply chains, microfinance, and infrastructure. They will not be met in full, but the MDGs have made their mark despite the hurdles of wars, the global financial crisis, tax evasion, and debilitating corruption in rich and poor countries alike.

It was in the context of this MDG-inspired progress that member states at the Rio+20 UN Conference on Sustainable Development, in June, 2012, committed to adopt global goals based on a holistic, sustainable development framework addressing the key challenges faced by all countries. On the 20th anniversary of the Rio Earth Summit, world leaders contemplated a dire reality: the gains in fighting poverty, and indeed
generations of economic gains, are at serious threat of reversal unless deep structural crises of rising social inequality and rapid environmental degradation are finally addressed. They noted that three climate treaties adopted in 1992 at the Rio Earth Summit—the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, the Convention on Biological Diversity, and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification—had failed to translate into transformative action on the ground. They concluded, rightly, that only by committing the world to ending extreme poverty while also placing social and environmental concerns into an expanded set of SDGs would there be the chance to mobilise urgent global action by governments, business, and civil society. Hence came their unanimous call for a new set of SDGs to follow the MDGs.

The complexity of the global negotiations to put the SDGs into practice may seem daunting, even self-defeating. The UN's leadership and its 193 member states have embarked on an unprecedented scale of consultations and negotiations that will last until 2015. Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon received several reports on how best to proceed, including from a High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, and from various international groups, including one that I lead on behalf of the Secretary-General, the Sustainable Development Solutions Network. He has recently issued his own report on the post-2015 development agenda to the UN General Assembly. In parallel, the UN member states created working groups to propose the specific SDGs; to examine financial options to meet them; and to establish a new high-level political forum that will put heads of state and government in the lead to oversee the implementation and monitoring of the SDGs.

Despite the ongoing negotiations, there is already near universal assent on key aspects of the emerging SDGs. The new goals should be centred on sustainable development, meaning the integration of economic, social, and environmental objectives. The highest priority of the new goals should be the end of extreme poverty in all its forms by 2030, completing the work begun by the MDGs. The SDGs should be universal and apply to all countries although placed in local context. This universality is especially relevant for environmental goals, on which rich countries have so far not met their global
responsibilities. Yet it is also true of the emerging social goals, given that many rich countries have had a deterioration of social capital and a decline of social mobility in the past generation under the forces of globalisation, rapid technological change, and often-errant politics. The post-2015 agenda should also include the means of implementing the SDGs, including financing, technology, monitoring, and political accountability.

Cynics scoff at this flurry of activity, doubting that the mere statement of new global goals could make much difference in the face of powerful economic and political forces that treaties have been unable to affect. The cynics are wrong. Like the MDGs, the SDGs can provoke a new global awareness of needs and of possibilities on a global scale. Part of the story is generational: millions of young people around the world want to reshape the world for their own survival. The doubters underestimate the power of the SDGs to help harness breakthroughs in information, communications, materials, and biological technologies to solve problems of energy, water, food production, and universal access to health, education, and financial services.

There is the real possibility of a gathering revolution. Strong voices from across the world are coalescing around a new approach: SDGs to help the rising generation to set the global priorities they will need for a safe harbour for their societies and for the planet. The new goals can also mobilise and inspire leaders from business, civil society, and government to work together on solving deep and complex challenges. Time is short, the negotiations are laborious, and significant work remains to build the needed trust and consensus on priorities, yet the meetings taking place this week at the UN have the chance to make a profound positive contribution.

I declare that I have no conflicts of interest.