

THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR THE WESTERN BALKANS

2015 is an important year for international cooperation. With the need to replace the Millennium Development Goals that end in 2015, and the decision at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) in 2012 to prepare Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the United Nations launched a wide participative process to collect input for and negotiate a post-2015 development agenda. The UN Secretary-General summarized much of this in his Synthesis Report on the Post-2015 Agenda: *“The Road to Dignity by 2030: Ending Poverty, Transforming All Lives and Protecting the Planet”* released on 4 December 2014 (UN 2014). In this report, the Secretary-General said that a fundamental transformation is needed in society and the economy. The Sustainable Development Goals at the heart of the new agenda define a paradigm shift for people and planet. They are inclusive and people-centred, leaving no one behind, and integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a spirit of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability, with the participation of governments and all stakeholders.

The intergovernmental negotiations concluded with the adoption on 25 September 2015 at a UN General Assembly Summit of an outcome document, *“Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”* (UN 2015). “This Agenda is a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity. It also seeks to strengthen universal peace in larger freedom. We recognise that eradicating poverty in all its forms and dimensions, including extreme poverty, is the greatest global challenge and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development.... All countries and all stakeholders, acting in collaborative partnership, will implement this plan. We are resolved to free the human race from the tyranny of poverty and want and to heal and secure our planet. We are determined to take the bold and transformative steps which are urgently needed to shift the world onto a sustainable and resilient path. As we embark on this collective journey, we pledge that no one will be left behind.” (UN 2015)

These are lofty aspirations that the governments of the world have accepted at the highest level. Putting them into practice and implementing the changes necessary to achieve them in 15 years would require an enormous effort, even if there were not countervailing forces for destruction, corruption and disintegration also evident in today's complex world. The Balkans region has had its share of negative processes from which it is now emerging. The new 2030 Agenda provides an opportunity for the region to build a positive momentum for transformation to a just and sustainable society. It gives a universally-accepted policy-relevant framework to be adapted to each country's specific priorities and needs, with tools to measure progress.

The 2030 Agenda covers five major themes as described in the outcome document of the Summit:

People

We are determined to end poverty and hunger, in all their forms and dimensions, and to ensure that all human beings can fulfil their potential in dignity and equality and in a healthy environment.

Planet

We are determined to protect the planet from degradation, including through sustainable consumption and production, sustainably managing its natural resources and taking urgent action on climate change, so that it can support the needs of the present and future generations.

Prosperity

We are determined to ensure that all human beings can enjoy prosperous and fulfilling lives and that economic, social and technological progress occurs in harmony with nature.

Peace

We are determined to foster peaceful, just and inclusive societies which are free from fear and violence. There can be no sustainable development without peace and no peace without sustainable development.

Partnership

We are determined to mobilize the means required to implement this Agenda through a revitalised Global Partnership for Sustainable Development, based on a spirit of strengthened global solidarity, focussed in

particular on the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable and with the participation of all countries, all stakeholders and all people.” (UN 2015, Preamble)

While Agenda 21 adopted at the Rio Earth Summit in 1992 provided a carefully-negotiated action plan for sustainable development that has guided the world for more than 20 years, there was little in it to hold governments to account for what they signed up to. It also did not really address the interactions between the issues in its many chapters. Efforts at environmental protection were pursued independently of actions for social progress, and economic development proceeded in much of the world with little regard for its social and environmental impacts. The Millennium Development Goals adopted in 2000 established quantifiable targets for poverty reduction that helped to focus international efforts and inspired considerable progress, but not all the goals were met by the 2015 deadline. They were also framed as efforts by the more affluent to help the poorer countries reduce poverty, an approach based on charity and on value judgements as to who is “developed” or “developing” that is increasingly seen as depriving people of their dignity.

The new agenda is an important step forward, as it presents challenges for every country, rich or poor, north or south, including those in the middle like the Balkan states. It also questions the traditional approach of separating issues into silos treated independently, whether by different ministries in a government, different professional fields, or different academic disciplines. “This is an Agenda of unprecedented scope and significance. It is accepted by all countries and is applicable to all.... 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.” (UN 2015, §5)

Aided by the new information technologies and the opportunities for information sharing and networking provided by the Internet, the 2030 Agenda was not just prepared by diplomats or international bureaucrats. The scientific community, hundreds of civil society organizations and millions of individuals participated in a broad consultative process and made significant inputs to the agenda, and should continue to be involved in its implementation. As the Summit put it: “It is “We the Peoples” who are embarking today on the road to 2030. Our journey will involve Governments as well as Parliaments, the UN system and other international institutions, local authorities, indigenous peoples, civil society, business and the private sector, the scientific and academic community – and all

people.... It is an Agenda of the people, by the people, and for the people – and this, we believe, will ensure its success.” (UN 2015, §52)

The adoption of the Agenda at the United Nations is only the first step in a long process. One additional step will be the legally-binding agreement from the Paris Climate Change Conference in December 2015. It is widely acknowledged that sustainable development will be delayed if not reversed if climate change accelerates, so the SDG on climate change will be completed by the Paris agreement.

Already all the principal actors are revising their policies and preparing for implementation of the SDGs. Each government should prepare its national strategy, and a region like the Balkans would benefit greatly from cooperation and concerted action across the region. “We encourage all member states to develop as soon as practicable ambitious national responses to the overall implementation of this Agenda. These can support the transition to the SDGs and build on existing planning instruments, such as national development and sustainable development strategies, as appropriate.” (UN 2015 §78) This process needs to be as participatory at the national level as it has been at the international level. “We also encourage member states to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels which are country-led and country-driven. Such reviews should draw on contributions from indigenous peoples, civil society, the private sector and other stakeholders, in line with national circumstances, policies and priorities. National parliaments as well as other institutions can also support these processes.” (UN 2015 §79)

At the heart of the new Agenda are the Sustainable Development Goals. These are 17 action oriented goals, global in nature and universally applicable (TABLE 1). They are carefully balanced between economic, social and environmental dimensions to represent an integrated whole, with the achievement of each one dependent in part on the accomplishment of all the others. From an environmental perspective, it may help to view the goals in three substantive clusters:

- goals that place humans at the centre, where environmental challenges represent threats to human health and well-being, and where environmental solutions can reinforce human progress;
- goals for environmental resources, processes and boundaries defining planetary health on which human well-being and development depend; and
- goals about transitioning to a green economy that builds rather than undermines planetary sustainability.

The final two goals are on institutional and governance issues and the means of implementation.

TABLE 1. – Sustainable development goals

1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
10. Reduce inequality within and among countries
11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15. Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development: Finance, Technology, Capacity-building, Trade; Systemic issues: Policy and institutional coherence, multi-stakeholder partnerships; data, monitoring and accountability

Such generalized global goals as ending poverty are not so policy-relevant in and of themselves. Therefore, under each goal are a number of quantified targets, 169 in all, which should be met at least by 2030. Table 2 gives an example of the targets under Goal 12: sustainable consumption and production. These targets should provide the focus for policy action at the national level. While progress should be measurable on many of these, there are some that will require further work to give them the necessary specificity and make them measurable. A scientific review of the targets showed that only 29% were well defined and based on the latest scientific

evidence, and the majority needed more work. It also signalled a danger of conflicts between different goals, such as overcoming poverty and moving towards sustainability (ICSU/ISCC 2015). From this perspective, the SDGs are still a work in progress, and will require further contributions from governments, the scientific community and other stakeholders to fulfil their complete potential.

TABLE 2. – Example of SDG targets

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
12.1 implement the 10-Year Framework of Programmes on sustainable consumption and production (10YFP), all countries taking action, with developed countries taking the lead, taking into account the development and capabilities of developing countries
12.2 by 2030 achieve sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources
12.3 by 2030 halve per capita global food waste at the retail and consumer level, and reduce food losses along production and supply chains including post-harvest losses
12.4 by 2020 achieve environmentally sound management of chemicals and all wastes throughout their life cycle in accordance with agreed international frameworks and significantly reduce their release to air, water and soil to minimize their adverse impacts on human health and the environment
12.5 by 2030, substantially reduce waste generation through prevention, reduction, recycling, and reuse
12.6 encourage companies, especially large and trans-national companies, to adopt sustainable practices and to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle
12.7 promote public procurement practices that are sustainable in accordance with national policies and priorities
12.8 by 2030 ensure that people everywhere have the relevant information and awareness for sustainable development and lifestyles in harmony with nature
12.a support developing countries to strengthen their scientific and technological capacities to move towards more sustainable patterns of consumption and production
12.b develop and implement tools to monitor sustainable development impacts for sustainable tourism which creates jobs, promotes local culture and products
12.c rationalize inefficient fossil fuel subsidies that encourage wasteful consumption by removing market distortions, in accordance with national circumstances, including by restructuring taxation and phasing out those harmful subsidies, where they exist, to reflect their environmental impacts, taking fully into account the specific needs and conditions of developing countries and minimizing the possible adverse impacts on their development in a manner that protects the poor and the affected communities

Quantified targets are only useful if there are suitable indicators available, and these are only now being developed. The UN Statistical Commission will be approving an initial list of indicators in March 2016 (UNSC 2015). In the meantime, there are proposals for hundreds of indicators to measure progress towards the targets, such as those of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN 2015). Not all the targets have indicators available, and many still need to be designed. Then there will be the challenges of collecting the necessary data, always a problem with indicator programmes (Dahl 2012), and of building the necessary national capacity for assessment and monitoring. One specific issue is the need to disaggregate data collection to distinguish marginalized groups, since the intention of the SDGs is to leave no one behind. It is the poor, the migrants, those in the informal economy, indigenous peoples and groups subject to discrimination that usually escape from normal data collection and are statistically invisible, so indicators and data collection procedures need to be designed specifically to measure them. These technical issues should not be used as a reason to postpone SDG implementation at the policy level. Progress at both levels should advance together.

Each Balkan country should start now to implement the SDGs. There are several parts to this process. All countries are expected to adapt the SDGs, targets and indicators to their national situation. This in itself requires a review of most national policies and programmes. At the same time, due consideration needs to be given to each country's fair share of the global responsibility to achieve the SDGs, such as by reducing resource consumption to respect planetary boundaries, limiting greenhouse gas emissions, and responding to the increasing numbers of displaced persons. Another challenge for all countries is to develop an integrated approach cutting across all departmental responsibilities, which means overcoming the natural tendency of ministries to defend their own interests. The SDGs are an integrated whole, and need to be implemented as such at the national level. Finally, an important effort will be needed to strengthen national statistical service for data collection on relevant indicators and for annual reporting, since regular national reports will need to be submitted to the United Nations.

The United Nations has established a High Level Political Forum (HLPF) to follow up the SDGs and to review progress at regular intervals. The Forum will also undertake thematic reviews of successes and challenges in specific areas. The Secretary General and the UN System will prepare an annual *SDG Progress Report* based on the global indicator framework, data from national statistical systems, and information col-

lected at the regional level. There is also a new *Global Sustainable Development Report*, which is more scientific and evidence-based, and aimed at the science-policy interface. The intent is to have a reporting process that is robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated, and that helps countries to maximize and track their progress. It also must ensure that no one is left behind. For this to work, mutual trust and understanding among all nations will be important (UN 2015).

In addition, the SDGs are too important to leave them to governments alone. This is why the Summit outcome document emphasizes the participation of all stakeholders. At the national level, it is important to ask how participatory this will be. Will there be public debate around the SDGs? Will ethical principles have any influence on their implementation? What can civil society organizations and faith-based groups do to support the implementation of the SDGs? How do we hold governments accountable for what they have agreed? Politicians are more apt to act if they know that there is public support, so building that support will be essential.

This places a responsibility on everyone to take on the SDGs as their own goals and targets at their own level. The United Nations process is essentially top-down, building a global consensus among governments. The SDGs need to be appropriated by individuals, communities and civil society to start a bottom-up process, translating the goals into local realities. This will be the best way to ensure that the aspirations so clearly defined by the Summit in New York become a reality in 2030. "The interlinkages and integrated nature of the Sustainable Development Goals are of crucial importance in ensuring that the purpose of the new Agenda is realized. If we realize our ambitions across the full extent of the Agenda, the lives of all will be profoundly improved and our world will be transformed for the better." (UN 2015 Preamble)

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