Public consultation and the 2030 Agenda: sustaining commentary for the Sustainable Development Goals

Abstract: This introduction briefly explains the process through which the Sustainable Development Goals have developed from their receipt in 2014 to their passage in September 2015 by the UN General Assembly, and it considers their development in prospect. The Millennium Development Goals, which spanned 1990-2015, present a case study that reveals the changeability of such long-term multilateral commitments. They were enmeshed in overlapping and inconsistent national and intergovernmental commitments reaching from 1995 to 2005, and the text of those goals also evolved, stabilizing for the last time in 2007. The Sustainable Development Goals and attendant commitments should be expected to evolve similarly over their fifteen year run. This presents a concern, for among the three committees established by the UN to create the goals, the two committees charged with public consultation were retired as planned in 2014. The process evident thereafter has displayed a shift towards a strategy of enrolling broad public endorsement that leaves such consultation and specific responsibility to those consulted in doubt. This bodes ill for public deliberation on the goals and for public accountability as the agenda proceeds towards 2030.

On the morning of September 25th at the fourth plenary meeting of the seventieth session of the United Nations General Assembly, nations adopted resolution A/RES/70/1, *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*.[1] Paragraph 3 of *The 2030 Agenda* provides the most succinct statement of the gathering's cosmopolitan ambitions:

> We resolve, between now and 2030, to end poverty and hunger everywhere; to combat inequalities within and among countries; to build peaceful, just and inclusive societies; to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls; and to ensure the lasting protection of the planet and its natural resources. We resolve also to create conditions for sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth, shared prosperity and decent work for all, taking into account different levels of national development and capacities.

Seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will replace the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) of the previous fifteen-year development round in a 'revitalized Global Partnership for Sustainable Development' to take effect January 2016.

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[1] http://papersmart.unmeetings.org/ga/70th-session/plenary-meetings/programme/.

[Table 1]

Millennium Development Goals: (2000-2015 (measurements dated 1990-2015))

Goal 1. Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger

Goal 2. Achieve universal primary education

Goal 3. Promote gender equality and empower women

Goal 4. Reduce child mortality

Goal 5. Improve maternal health

Goal 6. Combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases

Goal 7. Ensure environmental sustainability

Goal 8. Develop a global partnership for development

Sustainable Development Goals: (2016-2030)

Goal 1. End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Goal 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Goal 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Goal 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Goal 5. Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Goal 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Goal 7. Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

Goal 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Goal 9. Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Goal 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Goal 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Goal 12. Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Goal 13. Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

Goal 14. Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

Goal 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

Goal 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

Goal 17. Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Table 1: Millennium Development Goals and Sustainable Development Goals.

Source: United Nations Statistics Division, 'Official list of MDG Indicators' [January 1 2008], available at http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Host.aspx?Content=Indicators/OfficialList.htm, and United Nations A/RES/70/1.

The new goals present a shift in focus and a more general ambition than is to be found in the MDGs, not merely reflecting an increase in the number of goals sought, as **Table 1** may suggest. Specific disease threats (MDG 6) and specific health goals (MDG 4, 5) are still of concern, but they have been demoted to the level of targets within the SDGs, subsumed under a more general call to 'ensure healthy lives and promote well-being' (SDG targets 3.1-3.4 and SDG 3; the 167 targets are not presented in Table 1). Gender equality and women's empowerment remain within a single, clear goal (MDG 3, SDG 5), with the aim that we not just 'promote,' but 'achieve' these goals, for girls as well as women. MDG 1, 'Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger' expands in scope as 'End poverty in all its forms everywhere,' and hunger, a target contained within MDG 1, is elevated within SDG 2. Goals for education are expanded beyond an implicit focus upon youth and early adult literacy, to 'promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.' Language shifts explicitly towards inclusiveness: the expression 'for all,' which was absent from all MDG goals and targets before revisions in 2005, appears in six of the new goals, along with an explicit call to 'Reduce inequality within and among countries.' A goal of universal access to energy resources is new (SDG 7), and universal employment is brought to the fore (SDG 8). Country infrastructure and urbanization have come to receive explicit mention (SDG 6, 7, 9, 10).

The 'Global Partnership for Sustainable Development' returns in the new goals with an important change: in the detailed targets and indicators of MDG 8, the partnership focused upon official development assistance, access to international markets, and debt sustainability. Within SDG 17 'Finance,' replaces official development assistance, and 'investment promotion regimes for least developed countries' and 'Multi-stakeholder partnerships' now receiving mention. These terms reflect an implicit expansion of the partnership to involve multinational enterprise, international capital, and new arrangements of multilateral, private donor, and social enterprise partnership that have arisen following the creation of grand new ventures, including the UN Foundation in 1998 and the Global Fund to fight AIDS, Tuberculosis and Malaria in 2002.

The greatest change, reflected also in the new name for the goals, is the redistribution of the MDG focus upon environmental sustainability (MDG 7) to many varieties of sustainability across specific dimensions: sustainability in energy, economic growth, industrialization, marine resource use, agriculture, production, consumption, habitation patterns, water and sanitation. Combatting climate change and the preservation of terrestrial and marine environments each receive explicit treatment as goals (SDG 13, 14, 15).

This introduction completes a sketch of the process through which the SDGs were created, and it concludes with some critical comment upon that process. It continues the sketch of the UN process that is to be found in *Journal of Global Ethics* volume 11 issue 1, which presents an account of the process up to fall 2014. This paragraph summarizes that sketch, thus: The SDGs are born of a 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, often called the 'Rio + 20' conference, which follows the 1992 United Nations Conference on Environment and Development. The Rio + 20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*, established a process for development planning that advanced along three avenues: political, financial, and public. Along the first avenue, recommendations and visions for the goals were voiced by an *ad hoc* advisory group, the Secretary General's High-level panel of Eminent Persons to the post-2015 Development Agenda, in a single May 2013 outcome report.[2] Their work was followed by meetings of a High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) in September 2013 and another in July 2014.[3] Along the second avenue, an

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[2] The Secretary-General's High-level panel of eminent persons is not mentioned in the Rio + 20 document of 2012, and it was announced shortly after that document's adoption as 'the Secretary General's post-2015 initiative mandated by the 2010 MDG Summit.' No such panel is mentioned in the 2010 outcome document (A/RES/65/1). See 'UN Secretary-General appoints high-level panel,' [31 July 2012], http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/PRpost2015.pdf. For the panel's report, see http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml.

[3] *A New Global Partnership*, available at http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf; *Summary of the First Meeting of the high-level political forum on sustainable development* (UN A/68/588), *Adoption of the ministerial declaration of the high-level political forum* (E/2014/L.22-

Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing (ICESD) was given charge of studying finance needs, models and policy arrangements in consultation with 'Member States, intergovernmental organizations, non-governmental organizations, business sector and other major groups.' Their work was completed in August 2014, with a brief report that displayed very limited public consultation. (A/69/315). [4] The third avenue for development of these goals significantly distinguishes this process from that of the previous round of MDGs, and from much UN work of this sort pursued in the past. An Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals (OWG) was established in January 2013 to engage in an extensive public consultation process, soliciting opinions on priorities and on early draft formulations of the goals from states, peoples, faith communities, academe, civil society organizations and intergovernmental organizations (such as the International Labor Organization).[5] The meeting process of the OWG was the most elaborate of those developed within the three groups, consisting of thirteen sessions of consultation over sixteen months and various open opportunities for organizations and individuals to provide online written comment concerning development priorities and the goals as they were formulated in drafts. The OWG was ultimately responsible for drafting goals in a final report in August 2014, which contained 17 draft goals and 167 targets that articulate the general aspirations of the goals.

The goals and targets adopted by the UN this past September track very closely with the OWG recommendations. [6] Since the submission of final reports and the

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E/HLPF/2014/L.3), available at
http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=E/2014/L.22&Lang=E.
[4] Committee documents may be found at
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/intergovernmental/financecommittee.
[5] Committee documents of the Open Working Group are assembled at
https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/owg.html.
[6] Noteworthy changes from the OWG draft of August 12 2014 (A/68/970) to the August 1 2015 UN draft for the 'intergovernmental negotiation process' include the following: In material that is distinct from the text of the goals, paragraphs 1-59, contain largely new material, and 60-91 contain entirely new material. Within the goals text: Target 3.2: Explicit targets introduced for child mortality; 8.7: 'end modern slavery and human

formulation of the goals in August 2014, the financing and working group committees have disbanded: their work is considered to be complete.[7] I will argue in what follows that the creation, activity and especially the retirement of these committees is of importance concerning the public character of coming decisions and regarding accountability among nations and at the UN as *The 2030 Agenda* proceeds forward to its close in 2030. Because the OWG, the committee with which the public has primarily interacted, has been dissolved, the accountability of those with whom the public has consulted is also discharged.[8] Such an administrative change is of importance, for, as administration evolves, accountability comes to be obscured. Even what constitutes a commitment in this context is open to much interpretation, and for that reason also, accountability is diminished when institutions such as the OWG are retired.

To display the vagaries of accountability for commitments made by nations in this context, consider a detailed example: the development of Millennium Development

trafficking' is added; 15.3: The target date to 'combat desertification' is pushed back from 2020 to 2030; 17.2: 'ODA providers are encouraged to consider setting a target to provide at least 0.20 per cent of ODA/GNI to least developed countries' is added. In various entries the phrase in the 2014 document 'by [x] per cent' is replaced with 'substantial' / 'substantially' / 'a substantial proportion', *etc*.
For notes on final amendments (found in *The 2030 Agenda* draft released August 12 (A/69/L.85)), see International Institute for Sustainable Development, 'News: UNGA President circulates Amended 2030 Agenda' [12 August 2015], http://sd.iisd.org/news/unga-president-circulates-amended-2030-agenda/. For interpretation of those changes, see Social Watch, 'U.N. post-2015 development agenda adopted amindst closed-door deals,' at http://www.socialwatch.org/node/17008.
[7] The Secretary-General's High-level panel of eminent persons seems to have outlasted the other temporary groups, with the 'former members' providing the Secretary-General a 'One year on' follow-up report in advance of the UN meetings this past September. Available at http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml.
[8] For a discussion of areas in which such accountability might be of importance, see the Third World Network report on the closing sessions of the Open Working Group, 'Conflict zones in the SDG negotiations,' http://www.twn.my/title2/unsd/2014/unsd140801.htm. See also the concerns voiced by the Campaign for Peoples' Goals for Sustainable Development, 'OWG Final Outcome Document Falls Short of Commitment to Development Justice for Post-2015' [18 August 2014], http://peoplesgoals.org/download/CPG%20Response%20to%20OWG%20Outcome%20Document.pdf.

Goal 1, 'Eradicate extreme poverty and hunger,' and the commitments that have been made by nations in the process of endorsing that goal. MDG1 was first articulated in a pair of commendable targets that are clearly less ambitious than the goal itself ('Target 1: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people whose income is less than one dollar a day; Target 2: Halve, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger').[9] Perhaps the commitments nations have made can be reconciled by noting that Goal 1 was not actually stated in the *Millennium Declaration* (A/RES/55/2): it may be found instead in the Secretary-General's *Road map towards the implementation of the United Nations Millennium Declaration*, issued a year later (A/56/326). The content of the General Assembly's actual commitment, which was expressed in one bullet point within the *Millennium Declaration*, was also re-distributed across two goals in the Secretary-General's follow-up document. The *Millennium Declaration* included a third objective alongside the two objectives noted above: that objective, 'halve the proportion of people who are unable to reach or to afford safe drinking water,' found its way into a target under Goal 7 ('Ensure environmental sustainability'). Re-distribution of these commitments may express a re-interpretation of the idea of what is integral, or is most fundamental to development. It also allows for the possibility of declaring success in achieving a goal – or the lesser targets, anyway – without actually meeting the original commitment. V*ice versa*, it could serve to allow nations an opportunity to meet one commitment without necessarily having achieved the two goals.

Even so simple a term as 'half' may be worthy of critical scrutiny in this context, as is seen in the simple ideal of 'halving the world's poverty and hunger.' Thomas Pogge has reminded us that the target of halving the *proportion* of hungry or undernourished people is a far less ambitious goal for a growing world than halving the *number* of hungry people. The latter goal is to be found in a commitment made by 112 nations four years earlier at the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's World Food Summit in

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[9] A list of revised targets, with revisions dating to 2007 that followed General Assembly discussion in 2005, may be found at
http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Attach/Indicators/OfficialList2008.pdf.

Rome.[10] The Secretary-General's report of 2001 notes that, on this issue, the *Millennium Declaration* 'reaffirmed the commitments agreed at the World Summit for Social Development,' but it remains mute about the commitment of the *Rome Declaration*, despite that the Rome Summit, which is mentioned in the Secretary-General's text just a paragraph later, followed the World Summit by a year; and so it might be taken to supersedes the World Summit.[11] It is also not apparent that the World Summit commitment has really been honored: a list of specific targets in 'Annex 2' is keyed to closing dates of 2000 and 2015. Among these is 'By the year 2000, a reduction of severe and moderate malnutrition among children under five years of age by half of the 1990 level.'[12] Some among the World Summit targets appear to have been missed before the Millennium targets, which were also keyed to 1990 start dates, were even proposed.

What is it, for a nation or an intergovernmental organization to live up to its commitments, when they are so entangled, and open to re-interpretation? This history of MDG 1 indicates that our judgment concerning the achievement of the SDGs should be an ongoing interpretive process that considers a layered and changing political system of nations and of intergovernmental organizations that affirm different commitments through diverse bodies. The bodies refer to other bodies' commitments as they formulate their own, but the bodies referred to are manifold and incommensurable. The General Assembly is distinct from the Secretary-General's office, as are their commitments to differently framed goals. Both are distinguishable from ECOSOC and its functional commissions, such as the Commission on Social Development, which hosted the World Summit for Social Development. 'Specialized agencies' such as the Food and Agriculture Organization diverge further: they have distinct 'affiliation' with the UN and they hold their own annual conferences of members in which

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[10] UN Food and Agriculture Organization, *Rome Declaration on Food Security*, available at http://www.fao.org/docrep/003/w3613e/w3613e00.HTM. See also 'The first UN Millennium Development Goal: A cause for celebration?' in Thomas Pogge, *Politics as Usual: What Lies Behind the Pro-poor Rhetoric*. Cambridge: Polity, 2010, 57–73.
[11] A/56/326 paragraphs 88, 89.
[12] Report of the World Summit for Social Development (A/CONF/166/9), Annex 2, section 36.

commitments are made and are reported to the UN.[13] Some inconsistencies may be resolved: the General Assembly has reconciled some commitments by affirming the MDGs at the 2005 World Summit. But the goals they affirmed were not exactly as stated in the Secretary-General's report, they were the goals *circa* 2003, which were also altered before approval in 2005, with changes including a new and very different target added under MDG 1 ('Achieve full and productive employment and decent work for all, including women and young people').[14] So, perhaps the UN harmonizes some of its ongoing commitments, but it has not resolved the inconsistencies that remain unaddressed, for example, from the Rome Summit.

The history suggests that we should assess achievements by considering diverse interpretations of the specific commitments, and we should also revise the appraisal over the fifteen year span in light of evolving scientific understanding of people and their environment, for example, adjusting for economic change,[15] improving practices in public health, and better understanding of the drivers of climate change. For this process, public consultation is vital, as is public discussion, including public interpretation of whether commitments have actually been met. The creation of a UN working group is important insofar as it creates a publicly accessible locus for discussion, assimilation of the discussion into policy, and accountability; its subsequent demise is also of importance, for it leaves in its absence a different organizational geography, with diminished capacity for interpreting discussion and a cloud of organizational

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[13] See United Nations, 'Funds, Programs, Specialized Agencies, and Others,' http://www.un.org/en/sections/about-un/funds-programmes-specialized-agencies-and-others/index.html.

[14] For the goals as formulated in 2003, see http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/Resources/Attach/Indicators/OfficialList2003.pdf. The UN general assembly re-visited the goals in 2005 and in 2010, see A/RES/60/1 and A/RES/65/1. For a brief history of changes to the goals up to 2008, see UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, 'The United Nations Development Agenda: Development for All,' (ST/ESA/316, 2007) http://www.un.org/esa/devagenda/UNDA_BW5_Final.pdf.

[15] See Franco Ferreira, 'The international poverty line has just been raised to $1.90/day...' The World Bank, http://blogs.worldbank.org/developmenttalk/international-poverty-line-has-just-been-raised-190-day-global-poverty-basically-unchanged-how-even.

commitments where accountability once was to be found. In contrast to the *ad hoc* financing and working groups – both charged with different forms of external consultation, and both retired in summer 2014 – the HLPF continues to meet and to be heard in a report delivered in July 2015 and with others forthcoming in July 2016, and so on. There are no plans for disbanding the committee, though its charge was formulated alongside those of the other two in the Rio + 20 outcome document, *The Future We Want*;[16] it continues as the organizational successor to the now retired Commission on Social Development, which was established by the original Rio conference of 1992.[17] The HLPF is 'the central UN platform for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development;' it operates under the auspices of both the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC), which holds general responsibility for coordination of planning, implementation, and further consultation in the process of the development of the SDGs.[18] The new avenues for budget design and public input regarding the SDGs dead-ended over a year ago, and it appears that the fine-tuning and the interpretation of the goals, from that time forward, has been the purview of more traditional UN bodies, with different relations to the public and, one might infer from recent and planned activity, diminished responsibility for public consultation. Consultation now lies in the hands of the administration of ECOSOC and HLPF, but open consultation does not, at this point, appear prominently in future plans indicated by these UN bodies.[19]

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[16] See the Rio + 20 outcome document, *The Future We Want* (A/RES/66/288*), which indicates the creation of three committees at paragraphs 84 (HLPF), 248-9 (OWG), and 255 (ICESD).

[17] See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/intergovernmental/csd, and *Lessons Learned from the Commission on Sustainable Development* (A/67/757).

[18] See https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf, and https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/intergovernmental/ecosoc.

[19] As of November 4 2015, ECOSOC makes no mention of future consultations at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/intergovernmental/ecosoc; HLPF provides access to one informational submission form (at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/hlpf) and no indication of attendant responsibility to report input or gather the public for discussions.

The public consultation process was reduced significantly following the OWG's presentation of goals and targets to the UN in August 2014. That process finished well before the final product was formed: additions and some changes in the text have arisen through negotiations, and indeed, the SDGs have yet to be finally settled, despite national commitments to goals and targets that were made this past September. Like the Millennium Development Goals that precede them, the SDGs are elaborated as goals, targets, and indicators.[20] Indicators are the measurements that mark the achievement of the targets, which themselves provide the marker of the achievement of the Goals. In the OWG draft document, and in the *2030 Agenda*, indicators are not present and many of the 169 targets are finessed through phrases such as 'substantial' / 'substantially' / 'a substantial proportion', *etc*. Thus, targets are still to be limned through review of forums for expert consultation (closed in September 2015) and further negotiation over the indicators, over a thousand of which are scheduled for consideration and winnowing in March 2016.[21]

Public consultation and public discourse – carried out in regular, visible forums that allow the space for collective and individual voices to discuss the ends and means of sustainable development – will be vital to making the process over the coming fifteen years one of genuine development, rather than a political push. The HLPF will provide some space for input concerning the process toward achievement of the goals, but it is not evident that voices are as welcome as they were, and it is not clear such voices will receive the hearing they did in the OWG, which coordinated an extraordinary public

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[20] For an explanation of this scheme, see Nicole Bates-Eamer *et al.*, *Post-2015 Development Agenda: Goals, Targets and Indicators Special Report*. Centre for International Governance Innovation (Canada) and the Korea Development Institute, pp. 6-8 (available at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/775cigi.pdf); and see UN A/68/970 section 18.

[21] For critical comment on that process, see Casey Dunning, 'SDG Negotiations Round 3: Indicators,' http://www.cgdev.org/blog/sdg-negotiations-round-3-indicators and see the site of the UN Inter-agency Expert Group on SDG Indicators, http://unstats.un.org/sdgs/iaeg-sdgs/.

consultation process. The retirement of the OWG returns consultation to its former condition and status within the processes of the UN.

The public process evident at the meetings in September 2015 included many side events that allowed well-organized and well-positioned groups to voice their concerns. Whether they were heard, and how their voices will come to be treated, is less clear than it was during the period of operation of the OWG. The meetings displayed a shift away from consultation and from specific responsibility to those consulted, displaying instead a strategy for enrolling broad public endorsement. A UN-sponsored non-governmental and corporate partnership simplified and re-branded the Sustainable Development Goals as 'The Global Goals,' and supplemented them with a merchandise portal and iPhone app.[22] The words 'Sustainable' and 'Development' were left aside for the sake of alliteration and brevity, and the specific goals were similarly re-cast to five words or less. What may have been lost in a well-intentioned effort to make the goals 'famous' was the opportunity to make them generally understood and thoughtfully discussed.

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[22] A first appraisal of this publicity effort and its connections to business is provided by Barbara Adams, 'Public SDGs or Private GGs?' https://www.globalpolicywatch.org/blog/2015/09/25/public-sdgs-or-private-ggs. The Global Goals site www.globalgoals is maintained by parent organization Project Everyone (www.project-everyone.org), which includes several UN organizations among its partners.