

Chapter 5

The Sustainable Development Goals: Spinning Wheel for Our Time

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The SDGs, off-script proposal

“The genesis of the SDGs proves that it is possible to massively disrupt the status quo, and once a new vision takes hold, many are inspired to action. Bold synergies are now needed to simultaneously achieve net-zero emissions by 2050, stem the destruction of and protect our biodiversity, and boost equity for people around the globe.”¹

In early 2011, the current global agenda structured around the Sustainable Development Goals was conceived. Colombia considered that Rio+20 a unique, historic opportunity to craft agreement around a universal, ambitious, and comprehensive framework capable of shifting the global understanding of development and therefore commensurate with the interlocking crises that we must collectively tackle. Notably, it called for merging two tracks that in the UN were sharply distinct –development (MDGs) and environment (Rio process) – a feat that initially was dismissed as impossible.

In September 2023, the UN has invited member states and all stakeholders to convene under the framework of the *2023 SDG Summit* to share their views and visions on this agenda, in preparation for the *Summit of the Future* to be held in 2024. Most certainly, an assessment of SDG implementation so far and of the interlinkages with other global agendas will be one of the main issues addressed during the event.

Our recent book, *Redefining Development: The Extraordinary Genesis of the Sustainable Development Goals*, holds relevant lessons for the forthcoming UN process. We share the story of the genesis of the SDGs, a journey that was fraught with difficulties, resistance, and many obstacles. Ultimately it was only possible because we combined formal and informal diplomacy tracks at the UN together with a dedicated cohort of partners. This experience is extensively detailed in our book, which includes appendices that surface just how significant the opposition to the SDGs was. Understanding the scale of the opposition to this idea which effectively brought about a paradigm shift is essential so that we can appreciate the scale and dimensions of the transformative implementation that the SDGs demand. The SDGs are a universal call to action for implementing an ambitious, integrated, *disruptive* framework, for breaking away from business-as-usual approaches.

“The commonly held assumption that the SDGs were a logical and inevitable sequence to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) belies the stark struggles that took place

¹ Ibid, p.185

across governments and within governments and across constituencies.”²

Today, many assume that the SDGs were a natural continuation of the MDGs, a logical progression from a narrow metric with a social focus to a framework that incorporates most of the main tenets of sustainable development. But the reality is that absent the process that was led by Colombia, the MDG track at the UN would likely have resulted in a review of the MDGs and a revised set of discrete goals with a focus on social issues, maintaining a clear distinction between the roles and responsibilities of developed and developing countries. It would have been more of the same. And this is what many key stakeholders wanted. There was no single position across most governments: while some ministries or departments largely in the environment sphere welcomed the ambition and scope of the new framework that was being proposed, those in the field of development that had invested heavily in the MDGs were staunchly opposed to the SDGs and what they represented. These divisions were replicated across international agencies, foundations, and organizations.

“The SDGs fundamentally changed the development agenda, moving from a narrow, siloed suite of goals to be delivered almost exclusively by developing countries to a vibrant, inclusive, and universal framework. The SDGs spawned a more integrated understanding of the world, demanding that all dimensions of development be comprehensively and synergistically tackled. Today, they form the backbone of the international development agenda and guide the actions of governments, companies, and coalitions.”³

The process to get acceptance of the concept of the SDGs was challenging but the fact that it was ultimately accepted and adopted by the UN body of nations is what gives them their power. Negotiations at the UN can be challenging and slow –certainly the process we document in the book on the genesis of the SDGs bears witness to that– but under the current international system, the tangible commitments and decisions of States are needed to unlock and drive global actions. Yet the reality of the SDGs is that while State action is essential, it is not sufficient. Certainly, decisive leadership by government actors is critical, as the high ambition coalitions that have led the drive for deeper impact across the UNFCCC and the UNCBD, to name just two, attest to.

Yet implementation rests equally with other stakeholders, from multinationals to farmer associations, from research institutions to faith-based organizations. The engagement of civil society, academia, think tanks, students, and young professionals is crucial for transformation towards a more sustainable and just world for they bring new perspectives, innovative ideas, and a fresh approach to the challenges we face. Their energy and commitment can drive the change we need to implement the SDGs and other global agendas. The key is to understand how States can help create the enabling environments needed to unlock and incentivize synergies across different sectors and stakeholders, how they can channel both domestic and international resources to more sustainable pathways and help change how natural and human capital is valued.

Changing mindsets is challenging but vital. It is difficult to see progress from one high-level debate to the next. We compile, distribute, and copy statements, but the opportunity during these reviews to truly evaluate policies and actions is missed.

² Ibid, p.5.

³ Caballero&Londoño, 2022, p.1

“The system-wide pathways and responses that the SDGs seek to drive are those needed to tackle the climate change, biodiversity, and pollution crises.”⁴

We face a series of mutually reinforcing crises in which natural and social impacts are indelibly intertwined. The SDGs merged the two separate tracks of social and economic development and the environment. Creativity and knowledge of how the UN works made it possible to overcome the rigid structures that govern UN negotiations. The SDGs proposal managed to permeate these structures as support for the initiative gained momentum and forced many to realize that it made no sense to maintain an artificial separation.

Yet today the UN system is characterized by a fragmented approach to defining and implementing global agendas, which then cascades to other regional and multilateral entities, as well as stakeholders operating at the international level. It is time that the UN and other international processes recognize that regardless of the history of the various tracks at international level, it is imperative that they be merged. It makes no sense that the UN still manages the various arenas of sustainable development as distinct and wholly separate domains; a good example is the week of the UN General Assembly General Debate, where parallel summits and meetings have been held on the SDGs and climate as if the two were distinct agendas. How can there be policy coherence, alignment of resources, efficiencies of effort at country and sub-national level if States are expected to maintain the fiction of these separate agendas?

The genesis of the SDGs was exceptional, a “going off-script momentum” as described by Günther Bachmann in his book, *How to successfully encourage sustainable development policy: Lessons from Germany*:

“...then something happens that no one expects. A proposal is put on the table that changes everything. It irritates. And it comes from an unusual direction.... The proposal thus comes from the Global South, not from the regions of the world that have been used to hegemonic politics for centuries.”⁵

Important efforts are underway at many levels to channel adequate resources to support implementation of sustainable development issues but insofar as these efforts are siloed into different agendas, their import and impact will be reduced. All efforts should focus on identifying and driving win-win options and synergies across sectors while managing trade-offs. It is in the sphere of the so-called “co-benefits” that the most powerful business cases can be made to align diverse stakeholders around a shared vision and shared outcomes. The SDGs are tools for this in that they aim to integrate social, economic, and environmental challenges under one concept: sustainable development, an encompassing and comprehensive vision of the actions we need to take to restore balance between the needs of humanity and the preservation of the planet.

At this juncture in planetary history, we cannot afford to wait for another exceptional moment or driver of change like we had in 2011-2012. The system itself must recognize the folly of seeking to maintain separate agendas for internal political reasons, and step up the needed integration

⁴ Ibid, p.179

⁵ Bachmann, 2022, p.32

which is the reality on the ground. For decades, development and environmental policies have been considered and dealt with as separate entities without building bridges and creating platforms for connection. This isolation has had an impact on stakeholders' decision-making, financing, plans of action, implementation, policies, and outcomes.

“The SDGs were about “inequality between nations, inequality within nations, and inequality across generations.” If the new global agenda was to result in structural change and a systematic transformation of development trends, then it had to be universal. For us, the SDGs posited a revolution in responsibility for all.”⁶

Critically, the SDGs for the first-time engineered acceptance of a universal agenda. Universality is a key aspect of the SDGs because it acknowledges that all countries and all people are connected and interdependent. The pandemic brought home just how integrated our global and national systems are, with implications that transcend boundaries including climate change and biodiversity loss but also trade and finance flows, migration, and organized crime.

Through the SDG process there was finally recognition that all countries face development challenges. It is remarkable to think that only 10 years ago, so many argued that the universal approach called for by the SDGs was absurd because developed countries had no development issues at all. There was also deep resistance to the idea that developed nations could be asked to report to the UN. That initial resistance gradually gave way to a recognition, first voiced in the corridors during negotiations, that no one really knew how to even approach development issues for developed countries and how to come up with meaningful metrics. That's when we all really started to grapple with what universal and differentiated really meant. And that is what a paradigm shift looks like, one that is ultimately co-created by so many.

“Civil society played a decisive role, and from the outset we consulted with and gave representatives a leading place at the table. Many constituencies embraced the SDGs proposal early on and created momentum around it. Getting the SDGs to become a reality literally took a village.”⁷

Today, stakeholders at the local, national, regional, and international levels and from the public, private, research and cultural domains use the SDGs as a common language and metric to measure progress in relation to their commitments. However, whereas in the final stages of the SDG negotiations there was a stark sense that the SDGs were transformational not only because of their scope but because they called for integration –for making explicit the synergies and trade-offs across sectors of decisions, policies, actions, investments, and omissions– this commitment rapidly diminished. Current reports on SDG implementation often focus on implementation of specific targets, perpetuating a siloed approach to development.

All targets were meant to be evaluated through a prism that considers the impacts and opportunities at the core of more holistic approaches. We can have an ambitious, forward-looking framework like the SDGs and still, by sticking to pre-established ways of measuring results, turn it into an inert suite of stand-alone measures. Implementing *and* measuring the SDGs as they were

⁶ Ibid, p.12

⁷ Ibid, 2022, p.3

envisioned can create the space, the momentum, the logic for undertaking the deep shifts needed across markets, across the financial sector, across energy, food, water, and transport systems. Only then can we put in place the needed long-term pathways that will balance social and economic development and the survival of the ecosystems of our planet. That there is collective understanding of this reality is critical as we near the so-called mid-point of SDG implementation.

“Transformative implementation is hard. It requires creating movements to amplify the political space and will for transformative policies, investments, and strategies. The pull of the status quo, of what we came to understand as an MDG+ mentality, needs to be overcome. The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) journey yields instructive insights and lessons that may be germane to some of the challenges we face in the coming decades in tackling the crises of the Anthropocene.”⁸

Günther Bachmann considered that “transformation is always a matter of power”⁹ and that “the momentum for transformation to sustainability is strong when essential elements come together: (a) a sensitivity to pressing problems, (b) ideas that link regulation to self-efficacy, (c) scientific analysis and dialogue, (d) a culture of off-script leadership and responsibility. In short, mindset, governance, knowledge, cultural leitmotif.”¹⁰ In this context, the SDGs are designed to facilitate the strategic planning needed across global agendas. They fully inform and underpin a wide range of agendas, from climate change and biodiversity to social development and governance. The SDGs can be a multipurpose tool to align policymaking and decision-making.

Summits, more than words

Ideally in the upcoming SDG Summit, leaders will transcend the artificial strictures that underpin the event and address the interrelated drivers of the multiple crises we face that can only be effectively tackled through systemic approaches and through innovation in how resources are mobilized and channelled. Above all, leaders need to speak to what they have already done rather than simply taking the easy way out by announcing what they will do or recommitting to established agendas that are not delivering the decisive results that are needed. There is a possible pitfall that both the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future will result in more calls to action without showing tangible action, diagnosing individual goals or targets, or moving beyond hand-wringing around limited progress. Then, as a result of this, there is real danger that rather than courageously facing up to the fact that the limitations result from responses that are not transformational but mere adjustments to current financial, economic, and productive systems, the conclusion might be that we need to renegotiate the SDGs ahead of 2030.

What folly this would be! In the face of the reinforcing crises we face, we need decisive leadership and action, not more negotiations.

We recognize that transformation is a complex and long-term process, and it requires the involvement of all stakeholders, including governments, private sector, and international organizations. Therefore, we need rather to focus on how we can unlock the needed political will,

⁸ Caballero&Londoño, 2022, p.177

⁹ Bachmann, 2022, p.37

¹⁰ Ibid, p.38

the resources, the policies, the changes in mindsets to jump-start disruptive shifts across entire systems. We have a recent example of disruption worth highlighting.

“Yet as a global community, we are still largely pretending that we will bring about the necessary shifts across all systems – food, energy, transport, health – while eradicating poverty, merely through small tweaks to our business-as-usual models and pathways... The Covid-19 pandemic has shown just what disruption can mean, but despite calls for a “greener recovery,” rather than capitalizing on the crisis, humanity is simply slipping back into old habits.”¹¹

It is said, never waste a good crisis. Yet we wasted the pandemic and have not even begun to grapple with the long-term effects it will have on an entire generation. The pandemic showed how interlinked all global systems –whether trade or biodiversity or public health– are. It showed us what instant disruption looks like: the kind of disruption that may be triggered by any of the crises we are not tackling. But it also showed us the resilience of the human condition, the capacity for adaptation and innovation that resides both in the collective as well as in individuals.

We all participated in what was ultimately a remarkable process that forces us to manage together the unknown, to tackle risks and uncertainties we had never imagined. The pandemic –fuelled by the instant communications that today technology makes possible– brought us together as humanity to a degree that was previously unfathomable. It made it starkly clear just how interdependent we are. It also showed us how brilliantly and rapidly nature can recover when given a chance as the sightings of wildlife in cities and coasts around the world attest to.

During the pandemic there was constant talk of “green recovery” or “building back better”. None of it happened. We squandered the opportunities embedded in the pandemic in its immediate aftermath. But now is the chance to look back. To take stock. To realize what disruption really looks like. And to think through how we can ourselves craft the kind of disruption now needed across all our production and consumption systems and values, to stave off the worst impacts of today’s crises and set pathways for long-term wellbeing. Now is the moment. All that is needed is true leadership.

“With earnest intent, humans keep trying to get the outcomes that science demands without commensurate transformative efforts, as if somehow doing the same but “better” will ultimately deliver different outcomes or pathways.”¹²

There are currently also crises both in the multilateral system as well as at national level where rising levels of populism and protectionism threaten to undermine decades of progressive alignment around a shared global vision. Multilateral organizations were set up to deal with conflict and confrontation. The invitation now is for Member States to embrace the integral vision at the core of the SDGs in this moment in history, where both planet and peoples around the globe demand urgent action as we face potentially irreversible impacts to natural resources and systems, affectations for entire generations, disruptions across international mechanisms that were engineered over decades.

¹¹ Ibid, p.6-7

¹² Caballero&Londoño, 2022, p.179

We must also hold ourselves and our leaders accountable for delivering on their commitments to the SDGs which are one and the same with the climate, the equity, the biodiversity, and the circular economy agendas.

Ultimately, the SDGs were the result of many collective and individual actions. They are now in our hands to be fully implemented and to become the force of long-term transformation that we envisioned when we generated this movement back in 2011 and 2012. The SDGs are a universal call to action for all stakeholders to work together. We have the tools, the knowledge, and the motivation. Now it is up to us to drive the transformation.

“The story of the genesis of the SDGs is also a story of a movement. ...government representatives of Colombia... may have led the process, but without the resolute and vibrant support of a cohort of fellow negotiators and friends, the SDGs would not have been successful. Hailing from countries from both the Global North and the Global South, individual delegates worked tirelessly to position and advance the SDGs’ cause in their governments and in their respective political groups.”¹³

References and Endnotes

Bachmann, Günther, *How to successfully encourage sustainable development policy: Lessons from Germany*. London and New York: Routledge: Earthscan, Routledge Studies in Environmental Policy, 2022.

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¹³ Idem