

MDGs, SDGs and the Change of Paradigm

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Have you ever asked yourself the question: what does a change of global paradigm look like in daily life? Every now and then we hear that a paradigm change is happening around this issue or in that field. Digital content, mobile phones and social networks have brought disruptive changes to our lives. 3D printers are just about to do so. Yet, social change is substantially slower. Outside the markets for private goods, change has much more to do with how we perceive and think, rather than what technology we use. A reframing of collective action on public goods usually first takes place in the minds of a few thinkers. It takes quite a long time to get the mind shift to scale and to translate it into an actual behavioural change of a whole society.

It is also easier to spot old patterns dying than new structures being brought to life. I have witnessed the collapse of the recent global development paradigm at a number of events over the past few years. Some of the events were organized by businesses, but many by civil society and academia, especially those focused on environmental or (sustainable) development education. For me the most vivid example was the 2012 European Congress on Global Education in Lisbon, which practically broke down amidst irreconcilable perceptions, emotional statements and the widespread feeling of shattered confidence in commonplace explanations. Heated debates with more questions than answers, more focus on processes rather than substance and more inquiries into personal rather than global development led to the rejection of the pre-agreed final outcome, calling instead to open up space in order to rethink basic assumptions concerning development.

People in the field of sustainable development have already been talking about the need for paradigm change for decades. Meetings of high-flyers always attract thinkers. Therefore, global summits marked some of these changes: the Stockholm UN Conference on the Human Environment in 1972 brought ecological challenges to the forefront of international debates and triggered a wave of establishing environmental ministries; the 1992 Rio de Janeiro UN Conference on Environment and Development raised the notions of sustainability, defined key principles (such as those of precaution and common, but differentiated responsibility) and launched the first action plan with a global impact (Agenda 21); the 2000 Millennium Summit expanded on the priorities related to the eradication of poverty and, under the label of MDGs, mobilized unprecedented political, financial and human resources towards advancing social development in poor countries.

The latest UN figures show that the number of people living in extreme poverty has declined globally by more than half (1.9 billion in 1990 down to 836 million in 2015). The number of out-of-school children has fallen from 100 million in 2000 to an estimated 57 million today, with many more girls in developing regions in schools than 15 years ago. The global mortality rate for children under five has dropped by more than half;

maternal mortality is down by 45 per cent. 2.1 billion people have gained access to improved sanitation. Nonetheless, the results of the MDGs paradigm are insufficient and highly uneven, both among and within countries. Little or no progress has been recorded in the poorest countries and among the most marginalized groups. Women and girls still face more violence, worse jobs and barriers to them having their full share of decision making. The global environment keeps deteriorating, with CO2 emissions 46 per cent higher today than in 1990. The MDGs mindset also largely omitted the role of larger human structures, especially the quality of nations' economies and institutions, the crucial role of security and the far greater responsibility that both the so called developed countries and non-governmental stakeholders need to have in global sustainability.

Therefore, the new Agenda 2030 approved on the 25th of September at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York comes with another label – the SDGs - and another paradigm change. Apart from a commitment to finish the unfinished business of the MDGs, it once again marks an effort to shift the global mindset, reconcile the myriad of contradictory experiences and offer an innovative approach that would give birth to new methodologies of cooperation and effective solutions to global challenges. However, much of this is hidden in complex, cumbersome language and even found only when reading between the lines of the outcome document. These islands of positive deviation are much more visible today in a variety of mostly local contexts; concrete issues. Connecting these dots, therefore, is the name of the next game. Adjectives such as universal, integrated, inclusive, transformative and human, certain to soon become new buzzwords of the administrative jargon, are the code names for the new approach.

Do not launch individual Goals! The set of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (and 169 targets) is interlinked, mutually reinforcing and can only be delivered as a whole. Their ambition is to tackle root causes, not symptoms. This was the key message Amina J. Mohammed shared with participants at a seminar organized in New York by The Guardian and UNICEF a few days before the launch of the SDGs. As Special Advisor to the Secretary General on Post-2015 Development Planning, she knows better than anybody else about the paradigm change hidden in SDGs. This charismatic Nigerian is not only the mother of six children, but also of the new SDGs consensus in the UN.

Originally a Columbian idea, the SDGs were prepared by all (the global North and global South, governments, NGOs and businesses), require contributions by all (as the saying went around the summit - when it comes to sustainability we are all developing countries!) and are meant to improve the lives of all so that no one is left behind. In the words of David Miliband, former UK Secretary of State, we can only move from “applause to action” through accountability to the most excluded and vulnerable. Growth matters, but it is not a panacea unless truly green and inclusive. As one of the Indian delegates at the summit noted, success needs to be redefined by putting the last mile first!

Everyone agrees that business as usual will not do. But what exactly does that mean for the work of sustainable development professionals over the next 15 years? Well, in my experience of the SDGs discourse, the debates point in about five directions. According to these we need to:

- 1) invest in **new partnerships** - coalitions of different stakeholders in general, better coordination and coherence of policies in particular; while under MDGs global partnership meant the rich paying the poor, the SDGs paradigm calls for much more equal relationships; horizontal, network and trans-sectoral (not just trans-disciplinary and trans-national) cooperation;
- 2) tap into **new resources** – while ODA plays a crucial, yet limited role (of delivering aid where no one else can help and leveraging other resources everywhere else), the goal is to move “from billions to trillions” in investment for sustainable development, by engaging ministers of finance, central banks and institutional investors, getting responsible business involvement to an appropriate scale, and also unlocking the full potential of women and micro approaches;
- 3) develop **new skills and competences** – indeed new mindsets (i.e. not teaching everyone more knowledge and expertise to compete in the global markets) in order to set in motion a new quality of social entrepreneurship; innovation is not only about thinking creatively how to work together to find novel solutions, but also about the culture of people working to empower other people;
- 4) **improve the measurement** because, as the famous Stiglitz report concludes, what we measure is what we do – higher quality, timely and reliable data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, geographic location, and also migratory status, disability, sexual orientation and other relevant characteristics;
- 5) get more serious about **personal development** – the ultimate goal stipulated by SDGs is a decent and sustainable quality of life or well-being for everyone. An increasingly larger component of their indicators is subjective and has to do with how people perceive, feel about and reflect on their lives. If governments commit to comprehensive reforms and businesses go more green and social, then apart from glueing different sectors of society together, finding ways to make our individual and collective lives more comprehensible, manageable and meaningful might be the new challenge for civil society.

All these are tall orders, even for the most advanced societies. In the CEE region, they sound downright outlandish to most people. Unlike many Western countries, post-communist societies do not share the perception that many of our social systems are at the end of their life cycle. In general, we have not yet fully digested the transition to democratic capitalism, so calls for yet another transition are met with little enthusiasm.

Yet SDGs are clear proof that another change of paradigm is happening, whether we want it or not. While the starting line in post-communist countries is different, they do bring inspiration which is feasible in a regional context. Sustainable development professionals can certainly start to *inter alia* talk more to businesses and governments, think more critically about our educational system, take on the issue of various discriminations and expand and make more coherent their data sets. The best way to promote SDGs in both our professional and personal lives, I believe, is by “breaking down the silos among us, between us, and also inside us”.

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