

## The Post-2015 UN Development Agenda (II) – What is New With The New Agenda?

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RE: THE POST-2015 UN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA, PART TWO – WHAT IS NEW WITH THE NEW AGENDA?

### 1.- WHAT IS “NEW” WITH THE POST-2015 VISION?

The word “new” appears throughout the report of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, where it is associated with “global partnership”, “goals and targets”, “course”, “development agenda”, “spirit of solidarity”, “spirit of multilateralism”, “vision”, “paradigm”, “solutions”, “mindsets”, “opportunities”, “ways of working”, “ways of measuring success”, “sense of global partnership”, “era for multilateralism”... At this juncture of multilateral cooperation, the UN and its partners again wish to bring about a “paradigm shift” (1, p. 1). They advocate “change”, “progress”, “moving forward”.

**Let us recall that two decades ago, the post-cold war UN conference process had achieved a historic series of interconnected “paradigm shifts”, resulting in significant breaks from the modern western synthesis (“universal values”), from traditional modern democracy (representative democracy) and from Judeo-Christian anthropology, and bringing about a new world vision, one that is *postmodern and secular*.** It

had built a so-called global consensus on a series of “new paradigms” such as “sustainable development”, what it called “people-centredness”, “holistic approach”, “partnerships”, “good governance”, “participatory approaches”, “reproductive health”, “gender equality”, and so on.

Would the “new” post-2015 agenda be breaking from the “new global consensus” of the 1990s? Quite the contrary: the newness of the post-2015 proposed agenda is newness within the paradigm shifts then accomplished, within the new language and the new ethic. It consists in moving forward faster on the same path, “finishing” the job, “raising the bar”, going “beyond” and “deeper” than the MDGs. **The partners are not advocating new concepts,**

**but a new attitude towards the “new paradigms” of the 1990s, a change of mindset, pervasive cultural and structural change – a commitment to implement the agenda and change.**

The advocates of the new vision pursue two overarching, indivisible goals:

- to move from reducing extreme poverty to ending it; the new objective is to eradicate extreme poverty “in all its forms” (2, executive summary), “in the context of sustainable development”;
- to integrate the economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development, and to add on a fourth dimension to the system: “good governance”.

**Analysis reveals that the components of these two broad objectives easily lend themselves to ideological interpretations.**

These will be addressed more in depth in IIS 297. Let us just for now give the example of “poverty in all its forms”, a “holistic” concept deprived of a clear definition. “Poverty in all its forms” includes, according to the HLP report, “basic human needs like health, education, safe water and shelter as well as fundamental human rights: personal security, dignity, justice, voice and empowerment, equality of opportunity, and access to sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR)” (1, pp. 2-3). The post-2015 preparatory documents leave no doubt as to the determination of their authors to “finish the job” of granting universal access to sexual and reproductive health and rights by 2030 at the latest. “Poverty in all its forms” also manifests itself in “social discrimination and exclusion”, another undefined concept that is often ideologically interpreted (to push for cultural recognition of the LGBT agenda, for instance). Hence even the will to reach out to “the very poorest and most excluded people”, in itself a sign of universal humanism, is not devoid of hidden agendas.

According to IIS and as already mentioned in IIS 295, **the greatest “new” challenge that the post-2015 agenda confronts us with is of a political nature: it is the will, as expressed in the HLP’s report, to push the new global partnership “beyond the MDGs’ orientation of state-to-state partnerships between high-income and low-income governments to be inclusive of more players”** (1, p. 10) – in other words, the proposal for a more formal recognition of multistakeholder partnerships and of “thematic partnerships” as driving agents of “global” policy-making. IIS has often stated that the explosion of partnerships in the last decade amounts to a political revolution. Thematic partnerships, such as the “global reproductive health community”, now wield policy-making power that is far superior to that of single governments. Another connected political challenge is the strengthening of the linkage between “technical experts” and policy-makers and the High Level Panel’s advocacy for a “data revolution”: statistical mechanisms enabling the “partners” to monitor not only states, but civil society, the private sector, foundations and the international development community will become much more powerful. These political challenges will be further analyzed in IIS 298.

## 2.- A “NEW SPIRIT” AND A COMPELLING, BUT UTOPIAN VISION

The UN Secretariat had mandated the High Level Panel to recommend “how to build and sustain broad political consensus on an ambitious yet achievable Post-2015 agenda”. The HLP’s report underlines the necessity for the new goals to “encapsulate a compelling message on issues that

energize people, companies and governments,” (1, p. 13). The challenge is to rally a critical mass around the new goals to ensure their implementation.

Some sections of the High Level Panel’s report have a messianic undertone. The HLP is “convinced that the next 15 years can be some of the most transformative in human history” (1, p. 27). How could anyone resist joining the new global partnership that will eradicate extreme poverty, “in all its forms” and “irreversibly” (1, p. 29) from the face of the earth by 2030? This is an objective “that leaders have promised time and again throughout history”, something that “no other generation has ever done before” (4). And “we can be the first generation in human history” (1, p. 27) to achieve this historic objective, thereby meeting “the aspirations of eight billion people in 2030” (1, executive summary).

What will be even more seducing for developing and developed countries alike, and especially for young people – the key implementing agents of the future agenda -, is the proposed, winning, “new spirit” that will guide and animate the global partnership: a new spirit of “solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability”, a spirit of commitment “to changing the way we think and the way we act”, a spirit that will dynamically drive global transformative shifts and will grant “a role and a responsibility” to “each one of us” (2, p. 29). Who will want to remain an outsider with respect to the global happening?

**But the messianic announcements made spring from an exclusively secular worldview and are fatally reductionist. Health, material well-being and possession, pleasure, empowerment “for all” constitute their utopian core content and are absolutized. Human happiness, love and the family, joy, hope, faith – essential components of integral human development - are radically absent from the picture.**

As no alternative is proposed, no leadership emerging and no resistance expressed, the likely development is that, in spite of the moral vacuum of multilateralism’s current vision for development, in spite of its ideological, deconstructionist agendas, countries and peoples will follow suit. The advocates of the new development framework will likely have little difficulty co-opting the critical mass of partners it needs to advance its objectives.

### 3.- A NEW FRAMEWORK “FOR ALL”

**The goals and targets of the post-2015 development agenda will not be legally binding. But the new agenda is conceived to be a “goal framework that drives transformations” (1, p. 13):** it will “frame” health, education, human rights, environmental and development policies at all levels and globally, substantially influencing them and transforming societies.

The HLP considers such a framework “valuable in focusing global efforts, building momentum and developing a sense of global urgency”.

**The framework will be useful in “crystallizing consensus and defining international norms”**.

The goals are to “provide a rallying cry for a global campaign to generate international support”. And indeed, if there is any lesson to learn from the consensus of UN conferences since the 1990s and from the MDGs, it is the power of global socioeconomic, cultural and political transformation of “soft”, non-binding normative processes.

In addition, and this is a new worrisome trend of the multilateral agenda, there will be a strong focus on monitoring mechanisms. The goals and targets, reads the HLP’s report, “should be monitored closely” (1, p. 21). All the new goals “should be accompanied by an independent and rigorous monitoring system” (1, p. 21). The HLP calls for a “data revolution” for sustainable development, “with a new international initiative to improve the quality of statistics and information available to citizens” (1, p. 21). The new vision is “compelling”, imperative, ethically binding.

The new framework will be “for all” – an expression that the UN has been applying to its various socioeconomic agendas (health, education, sustainable development etc.) for several decades.

Let us distinguish four types of applications of the word “all” in the HLP’s report:

- “All” those groups who are part of the consultative, agenda-setting process and are at the effective rudder of global governance: this is a fake “all”, in the sense that these groups represent likeminded “partners”, a coalition of the willing;
- “All” those asked to implement the new agenda: “governments (at all levels), multilateral institutions, businesses and civil society organizations” (1, p. 1), “developed and developing countries alike” (1, letter), all “stakeholders” and all global citizens; every actor must enact the “universal” agenda and enforce its ethic;
- “All” the beneficiaries of the new development agenda, especially the excluded, marginalized, discriminated against: “a pattern of development where dignity and human rights become a reality for all” (1, p. 4).
- “All” the components of the single sustainable development agenda: “All countries would be expected to contribute to achieving all targets” (1).

4.- **TRANSFORM, TRANSFORMATIVE, TRANSFORMATIONAL**

**These words, used over 50 times in the 69 pages report**, express the will of the post-2015 “global” development visionaries to operate **a complete change within the economy, politics, societies, behaviors and mindsets, cultures, ethics** between 2015 and 2030: an internal revolution. This change must happen through sustainable development as the driving

principle, and it must be to sustainable development. Sustainable development is the starting, middle and end points of the global transformation to take place.

**The transformation must be complete and irreversible.** Let us underline that it concerns all domains - economic, political, societal,

behavioral, ethical, cultural. And **it applies to “everyone”**: the post-2015 agenda is “universal”.

**The primary domain that is to be transformed is the economy: “every” (1, p. 18) economy “must”, through sustainable development, become green and inclusive.**

**The transformation must be “profound” (1, executive summary) and “structural” (1, p. 18).** But apart from mentioning

the technological revolution (for instance mobile applications), the report is elusive on how concretely the shift is to happen. The how has been problematic ever since the introduction of the sustainable development paradigm. This elusiveness sharply contrasts with the imperative character of the UN agenda and the style used in the report, manifested in the frequent recurrence of the verb “must”: “all must change and start today” (1).

**The transformation of the economy presupposes a political transformation.** The HLP considers forging “a new global partnership” “perhaps the most important transformative shift” that needs to take place. The role of the new global partnership is to “enable a transformative, people-centred and planet-sensitive development agenda which is realized through the equal partnerships of all stakeholders” (1, p. 3).

All partners must “join” forces in tackling poverty, the economy and the environment together. The role of the new global partnership is also to provide “the policy space for domestic transformations” (1, p. 7): in other words, the “global partners” forge global policy that is to be implemented nationally, locally and by “all stakeholders”. This “new sense of global partnership” must be brought “into national and international politics” (1, p. 9). Partnerships are “transformational” (1, p. 63).

**“Governance”, too, must be transformed “for” sustainable development: “the public sector, business, and other stakeholders” must “commit to good governance, including transparency, accountability, access to information, participation” (2, p. 31).** “Governments (national and local) and business” must “commit” to the goals, “transparent monitoring, and annual reports” (2, p. 31).

Lastly, the “transformative shifts” are societal, ethical, behavioral: governments, multilateral institutions, businesses, civil society organizations and individuals now have an opportunity to “transform their thinking, and their practice” (2, p. 1). They “must transform the way they

generate and consume energy, travel and transport goods, use water and grow food” (1, p. 8). Transformation affects families: “Fully empowered” women “transform their families, their communities, their economies and their societies” (1, p. 35).

#### 5.- MAKE IT OR BUST FOR “SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT”

**Sustainable development is an umbrella concept inclusive of all the UN’s socioeconomic and environmental agendas. It is the UN’s “holistic” concept par excellence.**

Already the object of a “global consensus” at the 1992 Rio conference, then a “new” paradigm, sustainable development will remain the overarching framework of the UN’s development agenda after 2015.

The authors of the HLP’s report lament that up to now, however, no country has successfully met the key challenge of sustainable development, which is to integrate economic growth, social equity and environmental protection, its three constitutive parameters: “environment and development were never brought properly together,” states the HLP’s report (1, executive summary). “For twenty years,” the report goes on, “the international community has aspired to integrate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability, but no country has yet achieved patterns of consumption and production that could sustain global prosperity in the coming decades” (1, p. 8). In other words, integration, the very raison d’être of sustainable development, has so far been a smashing flop. “Futile debates” would have pitted “one dimension against another” (2).

**The HLP identified integration as the key challenge of the post-2015 development vision: they affirm that “it is time to streamline the agenda” (1, p. 5),** that the “moment is right to merge the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainability” (1, p. 5). The new agenda “will need to set out the core elements of sustainable lifestyles that can work for all” (1, p. 8). The HLP’s report insists on **the “glaring” need for a “single” agenda – one that would integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development**.

Although the agenda is already so broad as to make its complexity uncontrollable, the new vision proposes the integration of a fourth, political, component: good governance, including peace and security.

There are reasons why integration has not been achieved so far. It raises complex, perhaps even insoluble, practical questions. But it also confronts us with political and ideological challenges.

First, **the only way to achieve the difficult goal of “integration” (an unattainable goal for the ignorant**

**masses) is to hand over democratic power to the “initiated”, the experts, technicians and engineers who claim to have the “knowledge” to do the job.**

Sustainable development is a highly sophisticated, technical, “Gnostic” agenda. In other words, the implementation of sustainable development can only happen through the establishment and wide acceptance of de facto global enlightened despotism. The new development agenda will allegedly be much more “science-based” than the previous ones. **The “experts” consulted by the UN, who are among its chief “partners”, will have much greater influence on “global” policy-making.** And as the new agenda emphasizes the need to strengthen the global to local operational nexus, the same few “global experts” will become chief political agents at the regional, national and local levels. The global-to-local political streamlining movement will gain dramatic momentum.

The other challenge is ideological. The advocates of the new agenda recognize that the holistic, all inclusive nature of sustainable development makes it necessary to establish priorities: “precisely because the scope of the post-2015 agenda is so broad – blending social progress, equitable growth and environmental management – it must have clear priorities, and include shared global metrics as well as national targets. It is around these that the global community can organize itself” (13). What will be nationally and locally implemented then, is not sustainable development, but the priorities established by those who pull the strings at the global level. “Failures in one area, such as... gender equality, can undermine progress in others, such as the eradication of poverty” (2, executive summary), and “the lack of access to... sexual and reproductive health services for girls and women is a key driver of gender inequality” (2, p. 14). Would reproductive health and similar deconstructionist agendas then be the usual bottom line?

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) provides an example illustrating these two interconnected challenges. Set up by the UN Secretary General in August 2012, it wields significant power in the post-2015 agenda-setting process. The “mandate” of the SDSN is to help to overcome “the compartmentalization of technical and policy work by promoting integrated approaches to the interconnected economic, social, and environmental challenges confronting the world”. The SDSN, which “works closely with United Nations agencies, multilateral financing institutions, as well as other international organizations”, is “structured around 12 Thematic Groups of global experts that work to identify common solutions and highlight best practices”. The SDSN has “started launching Solutions Initiatives projects to pilot or roll-out practical approaches to sustainable development challenges and assist countries in developing sustainable long-term development pathways” (3).

Examples of the ideological issues that the network’s priority challenges raise are:

- Population control: the network frames the right to development within what it calls “planetary boundaries”, an obscure notion involving the objective “to stabilize global population by mid-century” (2, p. ix) and that the document “defines” as “the safe operating space for humanity in the Earth system along nine critical dimensions: greenhouse gas emissions, nitrogen and

phosphorous loading, ozone depletion, chemical pollution, freshwater use, ocean acidification, land use change, aerosol loading, and loss of biodiversity” (2, p. 2).

- Reproductive health, priority of health objectives: one of the report’s “priorities” is to “achieve health and wellbeing at all ages”, which the document spells out as follows: **“achieve universal health coverage at every stage of life, with particular emphasis on primary health services, including reproductive health”** (2) – the only aspect of “health”, IIS underlines, that is specifically mentioned.

Sources: Sources:

1.- A New Global Partnership: eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development. The Report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. May 30, 2013.

2.- An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development. Report for the UN Secretary-General. 6 June 2013. Prepared by the Leadership Council of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network.

3.- <http://unsdsn.org/>