

The 2030 Development Agenda: A Transformative Agenda?



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Let me begin with these two simple assertions: 1) the world is changing very fast, becoming more and more complex; and 2) the new agenda, if it is to be transformative, must be consistent with this complexity, in order to face new challenges and problems. In fact, there are several important reasons why the current world is very different from the one in which development theory and development cooperation policies were created. I will take a quick look at some of these changes in a very impressionist way.

- First, when the development theory emerged, in the fifties, the world could be represented by means of a bimodal distribution, with a small group of rich countries, on one side, and an ample group of developing countries, on the other side. There was a sharp and visible gap between them: the so-called North-South divide.
- Second, at that time the world was immersed in an intense process of decolonization, in an international landscape characterized by a bipolar tension

between market and socialist economies. Development cooperation policy was subordinated to this bipolar logic.

- Third, it was a fragmented world. Countries maintained significant levels of trade barriers and important restrictions to capital flows. International externalities were significantly less relevant than they are nowadays. Therefore, development was basically understood as a national endeavor.
- Forth, for the most part, poor people lived and in those countries that were considered poor. As a consequence, both tasks -reducing poverty a promoting development- were closely interlinked.
- Fifth, most of the poor people lived in rural areas. In fact, one of the features that characterized underdevelopment was the high weight that the rural sector in the economy and society.
- Sixth, in developing countries, average levels of education were terribly low and, with them, there was a massive presence of illiteracy.
- And finally, it was thought that through a well-oriented development policy, developing countries could converge with the economic and social conditions that characterized the developed world.

There have been significant changes in all these dimensions.

- First, the *levels of heterogeneity in the developing world have grown substantially*. The North-South divide is no longer a good description of the world. Deep international inequality continues but developing countries are more diverse than before. Therefore, if we want to create a universal development agenda that involves everyone, that heterogeneity needs to be recognized and the range of areas we address must be broadened to take into account the different priorities of countries at diverse stages of development.
- Second, *new powers have emerged in the developing world*, opening up the possibility of a transition toward a more multipolar world. As a consequence, countries' commitments should be adapted to the new distribution of wealth and capacities. The simplistic split between "developed" and "developing" countries should be replaced with a more complex and gradual distribution of responsibilities at the international level. Additionally, there is a broader

spectrum of actors in the international arena, with multitude of private agents – INGOs, foundations, unions, corporations—playing a more central role as global players. As a result, the international system has become more complex.

- Third, the level of interdependence among countries has increased and, with it, international externalities and cross-border spillovers have also expanded. The *specific domain of international public goods (IPGs) has emerged from those externalities*. Among the IPGs, those related to environmental issues are the most challenging. As you know, some form of global collective action becomes necessary to supply this kind of goods. For that reason, it is necessary to *correctly define the framework of rules and incentives at the international level in which agents and countries operate*. Multilateral organizations offer the best institutional framework to fulfill this task, but there is a widespread feeling that – as they stand currently – they lack the legitimacy, ability, mandate and resources to carry out that role efficiently.
- Forth, the growth of some developing countries has produced a *significant decrease in the number of people who live under the poverty line*. It is important to emphasize, however, that the bulk of the population (close to 4 billion people) has an income of between 2 USD and 10 USD a day. These are people living in highly vulnerable conditions with the risk of falling back into poverty if any negative change takes place. At the same time, there was a shift in the geography of global poverty: two thirds of the total is living in middle-income countries (MICs), with the remaining third living in low-income countries (LICs). This pattern is entirely new, because in 1990, more than 90% of poor people lived in LICs. While absolute poverty has reduced, the trend of the *number of relatively poor people has hardly changed* over the last 20 years. This result is consistent with the *increase of domestic inequality* in a wide group of countries, including most OECD members. More precisely, from 1990 to 2010, domestic inequality grew in two-thirds of the countries with available data. So, we live in a world with less absolute poverty and more relative poverty and inequality; a world in which, according to the data, global poverty is not merely, or even predominantly, an issue for LICs but also affects MICs (and even some high-income countries, HICs).

- Fifth, some current demographic trends pose an important challenge. We are moving toward *a world with a still increasing and ageing population*, increasingly living in cities, but with contrasting demographic dynamics between regions and countries. The disparity in North-South demographic trends, coupled with persistent inequalities in living conditions between different regions *exacerbates international migratory pressure*. The generalized use of restrictive border measures has proved ineffective in halting that process: it has only made the human costs associated with emigration much more painful.
- Sixth, most of the world's population is living in cities and enjoying higher levels of education than before. Both changes are important: the former because urban life offers more possibilities for social communication, processes of learning and social mobilization; the latter because education develops human capacities and allows people to more actively define their social preferences and participate in the process of collective decisions.
- Finally, we live in a world that is increasingly aware of the bio-physical restrictions of our economic growth if future progress is to be sustainable. Developing and developed countries are obliged to look for new models of development in which social, economic and environmental pillars have to be simultaneously compatible. Regarding this important issue, we have some reassuring words, but very few good ideas and alternatives.

To a certain extent, we could say that the two principles in which the development theory was built have been demolished. That is, *the principle of difference*: the developing world is a specific reality (different from that of the developed world) that demands new categories for analysis; and *the principle of similarity*: with appropriate policies, the developing world can converge with the developed world.

Now, instead of the radical duality between North and South, on which the principle of difference is based, countries fall within a much wider range of different development levels. And instead of convergence, we have to move to new patterns of development because the world would be absolutely unsustainable if the principle of convergence were in force. In other words, the problem is not about how to make developing countries similar to developed ones, but how both groups of countries move, from

different departing points, towards new (and partially unknown) sustainable models of development.

Taking into account the aforementioned changes, we could say that the past Millennium Agenda, even if successful as an international initiative, fell short regarding the spectrum of challenges we face today. We should acknowledge that the MDGs had some clear advantages: a short list of goals, a well-defined purpose (in relation to the reduction of extreme poverty) and a narrative that made it easy to convey the message to the people. But the current world is more complex and heterogeneous, requiring a different agenda. An agenda that should be:

- 1.- More *comprehensive*: because we live in a complex and heterogeneous world
- 2.- Based on *Common (but differentiated) responsibilities*: with a more appropriate and fair distribution of responsibilities, voice and opportunities.
- 3.- Oriented to promote *cooperative action*: because we need to put different actors, capacities and experiences together to tackle some of our common problems.
- 4.- With social *participation*: because we do not need only technical adjustments, but also political (and legitimate) responses.
- 5.- Assuming the *subsidiarity* principle: issues ought to be addressed at the lowest level capable of addressing them.
- 6.- Based on a continuous effort of *creativity*, because we do not have good responses to all of our problems. In a radical sense, we should consider development as a process of discovering and learning.

In relation to the MDG process, the new 2030 agenda presents some important improvements. Firstly, it has been created around *one of the most complex and ambitious participatory, opinion-gathering exercises ever run by the United Nations*. Secondly, the new agenda is *far more comprehensive than the MDGs*, tackling the fight against poverty and the promotion of more inclusive and sustainable development in many dimensions. Lastly, *the agenda is universal in the sense of applying to the entire*

international community and not only the developing world. All countries are called upon to make a balanced and shared effort.

In summary, the new agenda is broader and more ambitious than the one defined by the MDGs. Some have raised concerns about this point, the ambitious nature of the agenda, saying that there are too many goals and targets. Perhaps they are right, but, firstly, it was what governments decided in an open process of participation; and, secondly, few would question the idea that ambition is necessary to address our current development challenges.

It is also true that, during the process of its definition, more effort was invested in the definition of the new goals and targets than on building a broader narrative about the world we jointly want to create. The five Ps (planet, people, peace, partnership and prosperity) offered by the Secretary-General is a bad substitute for this absentee narrative. These two problems (many targets and lack of an appropriate narrative) will likely be barriers for activities of dissemination and social mobilization around the agenda.

I do not have enough time to describe the contents of the agenda. However, a quick look reveals that it can be structured in three groups of goals:

The first cluster embraces those goals that set out to complete the task started by the MDGs, focused on the fight against extreme poverty in all its forms. Despite being the part that is closest in content to that of the MDGs, it both broadens the range of goals considered and sets more ambitious targets.

For example, the MDGs in Goal 1 concentrated efforts on reducing hunger and extreme poverty by half. Here, the SDGs propose to “*eradicate extreme poverty* for all people everywhere” and to tackle *relative poverty*, cutting “at least by half” the proportion of people of all ages living “in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions”.

A similar broadening of goals is envisaged in the fields of health and education, two central subjects of the MDGs. With regard to *health*, for example, the MDGs had clear targets for child mortality, maternal health and communicable diseases. In contrast, the SDGs call for healthy lives and the promotion of the wellbeing of people at all ages. And in the case the *education*, the MDGs concentrated their attention on achieving universal access to primary education. The SDGs go further by calling for “inclusive and equitable quality education and promoting life-long learning opportunities for all”.

In addition to the greater ambition in terms of targets, the SDGs have also increased the number of subjects to be addressed. Two are particularly relevant in this cluster. The first is the fight against extreme inequality, both within countries as well as between countries. Although this goal was mentioned in the Millennium Declaration, it never became part of the MDGs. Now, however, inequality has become an important issue in the policy agenda (as mentioned previously in this article).

The second is the profound revision of the treatment of gender equality. The goal now extends to spheres that were previously neglected, including the need to end “all forms of discrimination against women and girls”, to “eliminate all forms of violence” against women and other “harmful practices, such as early and forced marriage and female genital mutilations”.

The second cluster of the agenda is related to the commitments to support countries’ transitions toward sustainable development. Environmental goals play a central role in this sphere, with statements such as: “ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all”, “make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe resilient and sustainable”, “conserve and sustainably use of the oceans, seas and marine resources”, “protect, restore and promote the sustainable use of territorial ecosystems”, and “urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts”

Two other issues that were excluded from the MDGs also form part of this large section of new proposed goals. The first refers to promoting “sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all”.

The second is related to good governance, promoting “peaceful and inclusive societies”, fighting corruption and promoting effective, accountable and transparent institutions and ensuring equal access to justice for all.

And the third cluster groups those goals related to the provision of IPGs. The agenda dedicates a goal to “strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development”. There are a group of targets related to the so-called “systemic issues”, including financial stability and trade, for example. Finally, the agenda recognizes the necessity of enhancing the multi-stakeholder partnership that mobilizes and shares knowledge, expertise, technologies and financial resources to support sustainable development strategies, particularly in developing countries.

In sum, we have an ambitious and very comprehensive agenda. The question now is: will the 2030 agenda be really transformative? Is it what we need now? The only possible answer is: it depends. It depends, in my view, on five crucial questions:

- First, will the Agenda preserve its comprehensive approach? Or alternatively it will just focus on poverty and other social issues, but marginalizing the other (economic and environmental) dimensions?
- Second, will the Agenda be truly universal? Or, alternatively, will it end up, once more, as an agenda for the poorest countries?
- Thirdly, will the Agenda involve all public policies (the government as a whole)? Or, alternatively, will it be an agenda just for the development cooperation policy?
- Fourthly, will the Agenda adopt effective mechanisms of accountability? Or, as usual, will it contain only aspirational goals without effective commitments, and without clear processes of monitoring and accountability?

- And finally, will the Agenda be able to mobilize the resources and means of support needed to make its targets a reality?

Regarding this last point, it is worth saying that, on this occasion, financial issues were considered simultaneously to the process of setting the agenda, not only because the agenda took into account some means of support, but also because the Third Conference on Financing for Development took place in Addis Ababa, in July this year. The results of this Conference are, however, ambiguous.

The Agenda for Action approved there has some positive elements that we should consider. For example:

- The agenda preserved a comprehensive approach to the financing for development field. Public and private resources, domestic and international sources, and concessional and non-concessional mechanisms were considered together. This is important, because some think that the United Nations should only discuss official development assistance (ODA).
- Second, the agenda integrated new elements. In particular, the section dedicated to science, technology, innovation and capacities is very important, because these elements are going to play an important role in the new agenda.
- And finally, the first section of the Addis Ababa Agenda for Action endorses some important normative principles, related to human rights, gender equality, etc. This is very significant in a document on financial means.

But the agenda reveals some shortcomings as well. I would underline the following:

- The document maintain a vague tone (with limited effective commitments), perhaps except with regard to ODA in which previous commitments have been confirmed one more time.
- There is an important asymmetry between the elements. In my view, the agenda gives an excessive role to private resources. I agree that private

resources will be important in the new agenda, but it is difficult that they play a leading role in funding action against poverty, hungry, education or health.

- Finally, I think that we missed an opportunity to advance towards more effective international tax cooperation. Developed countries, under the leadership of United States and The United Kingdom, rejected the creation of a new organization, based on the United Nations, with a clear mandate on tax cooperation. It is true that over the past years, the OECD has made important progress in these issues, particularly through BEPS (a very interesting initiative). Nonetheless, developing countries are not part of the OECD.

Recently, the ODI has issued a report which attempts to project progress across the full spectrum of SDGs, showing where –if current trends continue– the world will be in 15 years. Its main findings are clear: much more effort will be needed to reach the new goals. In fact, without increased effort, none of the goals and targets will be met. The report shows a scorecard with three clusters, classifying targets as needing reform, revolution or reversal.

The group of targets to end of extreme poverty, promote the economic growth of LDCs and halt deforestation give the most cause for optimism. In these cases, the world is on course to make considerable progress toward the target by 2030. In order to be successful within the established time frame, a large group of targets, including most of the MDGs unfinished business, will need to speed progress significantly with regard to current rates. And finally, we might feel pessimistic about another group of targets, which will require the reversal of current trajectories. This group includes those goals referring to the reduction of inequalities, limiting slum populations, combating climate change, reducing waste or protecting marine environments.

In summary, we need more efforts and more means of support if we plan to make the SDGs a reality. It is important to say that a notable increase in financial resources, though crucial, would not be sufficient. The agenda requires countries to mobilize technological and institutional capacities and political will. These three elements -

resources, capacities and political will- are necessary. Furthermore, we should take into account three other considerations, very briefly:

- We do not know the destination point (what a sustainable model of development is). Therefore we have to open our minds to novelty, based on innovation and a dynamic of experimentation and learning.
- The required changes should affect the basis of our social model, our patterns of production and consumption. Therefore technological and social alternatives have to be developed with the participation and support of social agents.
- And finally, changes go beyond any individual capacity. Therefore we have to build networks and partnerships among different actors and countries.

I would like to finish this presentation with a reference to five tasks that, in my view, are needed to advance the 2030 Agenda:

Two of them are related mainly to civil society:

- First, the agenda cannot remain only at the global, international or national levels. Everyone can operate at a micro-level to promote changes or seek alternatives aligned with the SDGs agenda. We have to trust in social mobilization in search of new ways of life and new patterns of consumption. For example, people have shown that they want to have a more autonomous and sustainable means of consuming energy. This is in line with what the Agenda proposes. Unfortunately, governments (with the support of electric companies) have defined restrictive legislation in this area. In several cases, alternatives will not be possible without the creation of networks and partnerships among different actors.
- Second, the agenda will not be a reality unless there is a social pressure for its implementation. Therefore, it is necessary to build alliances among actors to promote activities of advocacy and monitor public commitments regarding the goals and targets defined by the agenda.

Two other tasks are related to governments' responsibilities:

- Governments should be obliged to transplant goals and targets into the national reality. Targets must be transformed into public policy objectives at different levels of government. In this sense, governments (national and regional) should draft and present implementation plans in order to fulfill the agreed objectives.
- Parliaments should become the most important place to monitor the agenda; and governments have to be accountable to their Parliaments. Summing up, we have to take the agenda into the political space, which means that political parties should be involved in this process.

And finally, there is one task at the international level:

- Processes of monitoring should be implemented at regional and global levels. The regional level is particularly important (in our case, the European Union), because countries consider this level to be more familiar and accessible. In that sense, mechanisms such as independent reports or peer reviews could be very useful to promote a learning process and emulation among participants.

Thank you for your attention.

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