

SPECIAL REPORT



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OPINIONS BY YOUNG POLICY ANALYSTS ON THE UN SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Special Report on the UN Sustainable Development Goals

Editor:

Mathis Hampel, Austria

Authors:

Ahmad Shariq, Azerbaijan

Ays Sirakaya, Belgium

Beatrice Mumbi, Kenya

Jaap Rozema, The Netherlands

Jonathan Volt, Denmark

Justine Chauvin, Switzerland

Lea Duplan, Germany

Rustam Issakhojayev, Hungary



INTRODUCTION

Mathis Hampel

Editor, Politheor

Editor of the Special Report

Serving as reference goals for the international development community for the period 2015-2030, on 19 July 2014 the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) were proposed by the United Nations General Assembly in New York. The difference in wording – Sustainable Development Goals replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – reflects the ever growing importance societies place on sustainability, which – like all interesting words – defies easy definition.

Not least because sustainability has become a catch-all phrase, much ink has been spilled about the UN SDGs. Commentary alternates between praise, critique and cynicism. While UN and government officials hail their brainchild, and critics take issue with what they identify as conservatism – SDGs aim to save the world without transforming it; they sustain systematic inequalities – others again have compared the Goals to a high school wish list to save the world.

In this special edition, students and young policy scholars take issue with the SDGs. Far from a critique of, let alone comprehensive guide to the SDGs, this collection of op-eds shows their engagement with Goals which are likely to shape the global development agenda for the next fifteen years. Their op-eds are bringing to life what an audit culture is eager to press into league tables and performance targets so as to objectively measure development. Because the 17 goals and their 169 targets mean different things to different people in different places, they also defy easy measurement.

Ahmad Shariq, prospective Public Policy MA from Azerbaijan Diplomatic Academy, takes the SDGs as point of departure to tell a story about oppression of women in his native Afghanistan. Weaving a narrative web of Afghan history, domestic violence, primary education, the national assembly and transnational organizations, for Ahmad, Sustainable Development Goal 5 which aims at “gender equality and empower all women and girls”, means hope for Afghan women.

In her op-ed on Goal 15, which seeks to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”, **Ays Sirakaya**, a PhD candidate in European, Public and International Law at Ghent University, makes

an interesting observation about how the pursuit of this one Goal in isolation may miss important synergies. Crucially, her observations reveal that, in Goal 15, Western imaginations of nature are reproduced: Nature is to be found and conserved in rural areas, not in cities.

In a similar vein, **Jonathan Volt**, MSc in Political Sciences from Lund University, notes the fragmented approach to the global system and thus argues for more coordination on the governance level. His observation opens up other intriguing questions: Who should govern a highly fragmented global system and where should it be governed from? Actors, places and values matter in the making of credible global governance. Do we all share these values of global governance players?

Jaap Rozema, PhD in Social Environmental Science from University of East Anglia, certainly does not. He argues that the underlying idea of how the SDGs are to be achieved – globalization of a certain kind – are not unanimously shared by all. In his analysis of the UN's “The future we want” (TFWW) document he asks us not to look at the Goals but at the assumption underpinning UN ideas of sustainability. Is this the sustainable future we want?

For **Rustam Issakhojayev**, MBA in General Management and prospective MSc in Environmental Sciences and Policy from Central European University, the SDGs represent a shift from an anthropocentric to an ecocentric world view. While their predecessor the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were rather weak on environmental issues, “environment” appears in at least 7 of 17 SDGs. He endows the ecocentric worldview and sustainability with a certain quality which, he argues, is absent from an anthropocentric view.

For **Beatrice Mumbi**, BA in Law and prospective MA in Public Policy from Kenyatta University, the problem is 'anthropocentric' to begin with. In her op-ed she confronts the morals of the African elite, who plunder natural and human resources to their benefit, leaving the wider population powerless and impoverished. Can a more ecocentric worldview challenge these corrupt elites or is it the political system that needs changing first? For Mumbi a transition to sustainable development first and foremost

requires the establishment of, and respect for, the rule of law.

Establishing the rule of law through “effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels” is inscribed in SD Goal 16. **Lea Duplan**, prospective MA in Public Policy from the Hertie School of Governance, reiterates the importance of open government data (OGD) in building such trusted public institutions. Concerned with the diminishing authority of public institutions, Duplan argues that governments must do more than pay lip service to openness and transparency, in fact, “most of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) could use OGD to succeed in their strives.”

Arguably nowhere are issues of openness and access more relevant than on the internet. Here good intentions and philanthropism are never good enough, argues **Justine Chauvin**, MA in International Politics of the Internet from Aberystwyth University, in her op-ed on the Goal 9 aim to “significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020”. While that target suggests a geographical divide to be bridged, Chauvin's op-ed asks us to rethink where exactly that divide is – between countries or between providers and users? After all, those who provide internet services have huge influence in determining what kind of technology the internet is becoming.

This special edition is not a comprehensive guide to the SDGs – if that is at all possible. Nor do we offer a radical critique. The SDGs are a lens of hope through which our policy analysts address the many inequalities vexing humanity. Whether that hope reminds you of a high-school wish list to save the world does not matter. Such 'critique' also misses the point. The discussion should not concern the arithmetic feasibility of these Goals, but how we are to attain them, recognizing interlinkages and synergies as we go; not the Sustainable Development Goals but the Sustainable Development Pathways (SDPs) should be up for debate. If in 2030, whilst formally having reached many of the 169 targets, grave inequalities between and within societies remain, we cannot speak of success!

Women in Afghanistan: a story of hope and despair



Despite many achievements in women's rights during the past 14 years, most Afghan women remain suppressed by and excluded from the society. While the Millennium Development Goals' (MDGs) contribution to their advancement were notable, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are expected to preserve and further enhance them.

Author: Ahmad Shariq

After fourteen years of struggle for democracy and women's rights in war-torn Afghanistan, with support of international community, Afghan women are still subject to physical, sexual and mental abuses. In March 2015, 27 year old Farkhunda Malikzada was brutally beaten and killed in the capital Kabul by a mob who accused her of setting on fire a copy of the Quran. In the aftermath of the shocking event, Kabul witnessed mass protests of Afghans demanding the government to sue the perpetrators. In a different instance (of many) a 60 year old Kabul kindergarten teacher was shot dead by unknowns while walking to work.

The patriarchal nature of society and high rate of illiteracy in Afghanistan has allowed men who consider women inferior to oppress them. Oppression is highly prevalent in rural areas where the rate of illiteracy is higher and traditional customs dominate societies.

This provides a fertile ground for domestic violence.

According to a survey by the Asia Foundation, domestic violence follows illiteracy and unemployment as a "big problem" for Afghan women, causing many to harm and even kill themselves: the Ministry of Public Health (MoPH) of Afghanistan reported 2,301 cases of self-immolation in 2014, most of them as a result of domestic violence.

Forced marriage is another major concern among Afghan women. Human Rights Watch (HRW) reports that, according to a 2006 study by Global Rights, 85% of Afghan women "experienced physical, sexual, or psychological violence or forced marriage." Although former president Hamid Karzai imposed rigid punishment on forced marriage by signing the Elimination of Violence Against Women Law

(EVAWL) in 2009, the practice of forced marriage prevails across the country.

On a positive note, women have made many achievements after the fall of Taliban regime in 2001. Women's participation in economic, social, political and cultural affairs has risen substantially. According to the Asia Foundation, currently 27.7% of seats in the lower house and 17.6% of upper house seats in parliament are held by women. The survey further acknowledges the political success of women in 2015 when current president Mohammad Ashraf Ghani appointed four female ministers and two female governors.

What is more, statistics by the World Bank show that eleven years after the fall of Taliban regime, in 2012, 2.9 million girls were attending school; while during the previous regime girls were banned from receiving formal education. It is also worth noting that despite many cultural and social obstacles, Afghan women have played an active role elsewhere: a report by Oxfam states that 1,551 policewomen were serving in 2013.

During Afghanistan's so-called Transformation Decade (2015-2024), women's rights are particularly important to ensure a sustainable and peaceful society. Considering the religious and conservative nature of Afghan society, strategies to tackle aforementioned problems must include:

(a) A national awareness campaign, concentrating on rural areas, that involves different actors on local, national and international levels. This would raise the understanding of women about their rights as citizens. Civil society and religious leaders play an important role in the process.

(b) A primary school education campaign about the role of women and their rights, for example by including a mandatory subject on the topic in school curricula. This would raise a generation of more responsible citizens towards women's rights.

Finally, transnational organizations have played a major role in promoting women's rights in Afghanistan. With the UN launching the SDGs, it is important to pay more attention to the often precarious conditions of women in Afghanistan, whose hope also rests on Goal 5, which aims at gender equality by ending discrimination against women, eliminating any sort of violence towards women and empowering women to actively shape the future of their countries.

The national government and international organizations must take Goal 5 as a starting point to ensure the protection of achievements which have been obtained at huge cost in the past 14 years.

Because without granting women equal rights, conflict in Afghanistan will never cease.

SDGs and Urban Biodiversity: Protecting rats and pigeons?



The freshly released Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) please ecologists: Unlike the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs have 'environment' firmly enshrined in almost half of the 17 Goals. And yet Goal 15 on biodiversity loss makes us grin to a certain extent, as it seems to assume that nature can only be found on the countryside.

Author: Ays Sirakaya

On 25 September 2015 more than 150 world leaders agreed to adopt the freshly released SDGs of the United Nations (UN). SD Goal 15 promises to tackle biodiversity loss. But to tackle that Goal we need to find synergies with other SDGs, since none of them can be achieved without sufficient progress in others. UN Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning Amina Mohammed also believes that we need to concentrate on these interdependences.

With this in mind, let's start thinking of what other Goal would need to work with Goal 15 to reach the targets.

Take Goal 11 on sustainable cities: While the world is getting more and more urbanised – the UN [predict](#) that the rural land conversion into designated urban areas will increase dramatically as cities will be hosting more than 60% of the world's population by 2030 – international nature conservation laws of today

solely focus on the conservation of rural biodiversity. Nature is only to be found on the countryside as it were. In other words, the only official solution available for biodiversity conservation is designating conservation areas in rural zones.

If cities keep growing and designated urban areas keep expanding, how are we supposed to find rural nature to conserve? More importantly, how are we supposed to halt biodiversity loss without expanding our horizons for conservation?

The answer is straightforward. Instead of exempting cities from conservation targets, we need to conserve the existing nature in cities and re-establish them as ecosystems on par with rural ones. While mainstream belief would separate nature from cities and would not acknowledge the existence of biodiversity in cities any more than the existence of rats or

pigeons, the findings on urban biodiversity demonstrate far beyond that.

Ecologist Alexis Alvey [argues](#) that 15 urban and suburban parks in the Flanders area of Belgium contain 30% of the total number of wild plant species, 50% of the total number of breeding birds as well as 40% of the total number of butterflies. The same research also notes that, all over Europe, urban areas contain higher level of biodiversity than many unpopulated areas.

These findings suggest that what we need to protect is among us.

But we also need to look at other continents, different climates and other urban landscapes with differing traits before we can reach a general conclusion. Importantly, before we can talk about reaching the targets of Goal 15, we need to rethink the 'nature' of, and in,

cities. We need more research to discover what other gems we might be living together with, in order to make sure these species survive as we increasingly move into cities.

This means that we also need to structure urban areas in line with ecological principles: Sustainability in a city should not solely focus on better infrastructure, better transportation or better sanitation. It is not possible to think of a sustainable city without the visible aid of ecosystem services, which can only be balanced by acknowledging the presence of biodiversity in cities.

In order to progress within Goal 15 on halting biodiversity loss, sustainable cities and Goal 11 are only one of the many places to look at. Additionally, endorsement of biodiversity in urban areas is only the beginning of a long untamed path. Luckily, Goals 11 and 15 give us a head start for collaboration.

Fragmented, Incoherent & Chaotic – Global Goals need better Orchestration



A [new universal agenda](#) including 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and 169 targets was established in New York this September. It is a complex agenda with interlinked issues, which requires an “orchestrator of orchestrators” to ensure an effective and fair implementation process.

Author: Jonathan Volt

One of the strengths of the new agenda is the acknowledgement of *interlinkages*. “We reiterate that this Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals and targets, including the means of implementation are universal, indivisible and *interlinked*,” write the UN (para. 71 in the new [agenda](#)). But while it is common sense that climate change, education and poverty are interdependent problems within a shared environment, the biggest hurdle for a successful implementation of the SDGs is an international system that is not fit for purpose. It has two inherent problems: First, issues are being organised in “silos”. Second, it is fragmented.

Importantly, this system is not designed to handle the interlinked problems we are facing. This is evident in the case of climate governance, where the UN climate conferences grow in complexity, agenda items and participants every year. A new bottom-up approach, with [Intended Nationally](#)

[Determined Contributions](#) (INDCs), has also contributed to a mess of miscellaneous policies.

Things are also getting more intricate outside the UN umbrella, with additional forums such as the [Major Economies Forum on Climate and Energy](#), minimulti- and bilateral negotiations (see the [China-US climate deal](#)) and a growing number of Public-Private Partnerships (like the [Asia-Pacific Partnership on Clean Development and Climate](#)) emerging almost every week. This policy shift reflects a diverse set of motivations and doubts of an effective UN climate agreement.

The effect of this fragmentation is multifaceted. Even if an increased level of fragmentation includes additional actors, which has an inherent value in a global governance process, fragmentation comes with a price.

[Studies](#) have shown that an increased level of fragmentation is worrisome for both equity and participation. Public-Private Partnerships, which play a key role in the implementation of the SDGs, have a history of mixed results and generally [proven](#) to be incapable of helping the most marginalised groups. In accordance with this, a recent [report](#) shows that climate change and inequality are among the SDGs that are least likely to be reached. If the SDGs cannot help the people who need them the most – what are they good for?

Such an incoherent governance system entails a working stream where “agreements are negotiated by specialised ministries,” which are “detached from the negotiating arenas of other international agreements,” argues media and governance scholar [Norichika Kanie](#). In other words, only policy coherence can bring both effectiveness (through knowledge sharing and efficient allocation of resources) and inclusiveness (ensuring that we “leave no one behind”). Take the SDG 13 on climate: After a couple of vague targets, it states that global action against climate change shall be negotiated in the UNFCCC. No coherence.

Integrating the many dimensions of sustainable development will require political leadership and someone who dares to challenge the current institutional system. The only plausible forum that could impose some policy coherence is the UN’s High-Level Political Forum (HLPF). HLPF is a central UN platform under the auspices of ECOSOC, in which follow-up and review of the SDGs and the new agenda will be conducted.

A topical [Policy Brief](#) shows that an empowered HLPF could provide that coordinating leadership. First, the HLPF should prioritise “policies designed to improve [...] institutional coherence across the UN system,” argue [a group](#) of distinguished governance scholars. Second, HLPF must facilitate a forum for productive dialogue, in order to solve existing and future North-South disagreements. Third, they ought to take advantage of their universal membership to attract actors outside the environment-development nexus. If governments can’t agree on a “orchestrator of orchestrators” that is the HLPF, a successful implementation of the SDGs will have a slim chance for success.

The Future We Want?



Resolution A/RES/66/288 of the United Nations, better known as The Future We Want, is an ambitious document published in 2012 to end the World's major problems through the sustainable development goals. With the post-2015 development agenda soon to take off, and the climate summit in Paris in foresight, The Future We Want is back in the limelight – if ever gone to begin with. The future will be sustainable. Because that is what we want. Is its essential underpinning, globalization, also the future we want? Jaap Rozema guesses not.

Author: Jaap Rozema

The Future We Want (TFWW) resulted from the Rio+20 conference in 2012, which followed up earlier conferences on sustainable development held in Rio de Janeiro (1992) and Johannesburg (2002). Probably the most significant contribution TFWW has made is advocating the need for a new set of goals to realize sustainable development. And so the sustainable development goals (SDGs) were born, replacing the Millennium Development Goals which as a policy imperative will be terminated by the end of this year.

Last September the United Nations adopted altogether 17 SDGs to make up its *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, including ones on ending poverty, ensuring health and well-being, achieving gender equality and tackling climate change. They present a sincere intention to improve the living standards of all.

How can one dispute the SDGs? Indeed you can't and, perhaps, shouldn't. The real interesting question is how we are to attain them, and so realize a future we want for all.

In a 2012 [report](#) by the United Nations on this issue, the answer seems unambiguous. It argues that “[t]he central challenge of the post-2015 UN development agenda is to ensure that globalization becomes a positive force for all the worlds’ peoples of present and future generations.”

TFWW doesn't just take globalization as a given, but also endows it with a particular quality absent in other systems of international organization. One such quality is the ability to enable free trade by opening up local markets to outside demand. If all do what they're good at, local markets will prosper. The benefits of

globalization will be evenly distributed.
Everybody happy.

It is not too difficult to shoot holes in this theory. Yes, a theory, as there is enough evidence to suggest globalization is another poverty trap. But the effectiveness of globalization for realizing the future we want is not what's at stake here. The legitimacy is what is. It is disturbing to see that the UN is taking sides in a debate that has sparked so much civil discontent now and over the previous decades. Globalization is not only an analytic concept marking a shift in the way the economy is organized, but also a container full with values on the desirability of free trade, division of labour, international markets, and so on.

Increased private sector involvement in the future we want marks a related area of contestation. In the future we want, policies should facilitate business, entrepreneurship and innovation. While there is nothing intrinsically wrong with this, it often means that elected officials cease to have their say. Democratic erosion, in other words. Voluntary measures for promoting sustainable development are on the rise, leaving us disenfranchised and subjected to the mercy of corporate benevolence.

The United Nations is ready to admit that building consensus on the future we want is a thorny issue. It [states](#) that “[r]eaching a unanimous agreement that carries the same simplicity, strength and power as the MDG framework and responds to the challenge of sustainable development is a formidable challenge”.

Quite so, I dare say.

Take the elusive and amorphous idea of the ‘green economy’, for instance, which is celebrated by decision-makers as capitalism gone sustainable. TFWW presents the green

economy as definitive proof that our global economic system can be adjusted to solve global environmental sustainability issues. And therefore make a valuable contribution to achieving the SDGs. Yet to the [World Social Forum](#), a loose worldwide coalition of pressure groups and indigenous communities, the green economy “promotes the further commodification and financialization of nature with the introduction of new market mechanisms”. In a ‘green’ economy, the Forum argues, environment and climate are simply rendered business as usual. It hence urges the grassroots to stop the Green Monster. “The future we don’t want!”

TFWW is taking its absolutist approach to the next level. It promotes globalization as the driving force for taking appropriate action.

It doesn’t have to be this way.

The Post-2015 agenda is an enormous joint programmatic focus of the United Nations, and with it national governments, non-governmental organizations and development institutes in years to come. SDGs play a pivotal role herein. For a good reason. We all want to live in a sustainable world. But thinking about the future we want should be as much about the road towards it. It should be about the way we want to organize production and consumption, what kind of development we desire (if at all ‘economic’), how to relate to other human beings across the globe, about the morality of markets, about sustainability and its umpteenth different meanings for different people. Or about reclaiming the sovereignty of us who are currently subjectified to the soft power of globalization.

That is the future I want.

That is the future I want.

Transition from MDGs to SDGs: a guiding star to the better future for all.



The global ecological and environmental challenges we are facing can be solved by shifting our ways of thinking from anthropocentric to ecocentric, and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) can be a guiding star on this path.

Author: Rustam Issakhojayev

Adopted at the turn of the millennium, the MDGs have determined development policies of the past 15 years. Their main goal was the eradication of poverty and hunger in the world. While some parts of the world have had relative success in achieving most of the 8 goals and 21 targets set forth by MDGs, others are still facing hard times in eradicating poverty, feeding their people, providing adequate norms of living and improving degrading environmental conditions.

Succeeding the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the SDGs are going to be widely used and discussed as an agenda setting framework for governments, International Organization, NGOs and UN Agencies for the next 15 years. What can they do better? First, even if the MDGs spoke of environmental sustainability as the foundation on which strategies for achieving all the other MDGs must be built, in comparison with the SDGs, the MDGs were steeped in a more anthropocentric paradigm. Proponents of the anthropocentric view believe that poverty and hunger can be

eradicated by improving the socio-economic conditions of population, giving comparably little importance to the environmental aspect of poverty. Advocates of the ecocentric view argue that sustainable use and access to the basic natural resources and public goods are much more important than the dollar value earned by an individual per day.

The adoption of SDGs now marks the transition, also institutionally, to a more ecocentric view: While MDGs that had only one goal directly related to the environment, SDGs now have at least 7 goals out of 17 that directly focus on the environment and human rights for healthy living conditions; they are more holistic and inclusive.

To be sure, eradication of poverty and hunger are still the main focus. But, as the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) [notes](#), “poor people depend on the environment for their livelihoods and well-being. Improved management of the environment and natural resources contributes

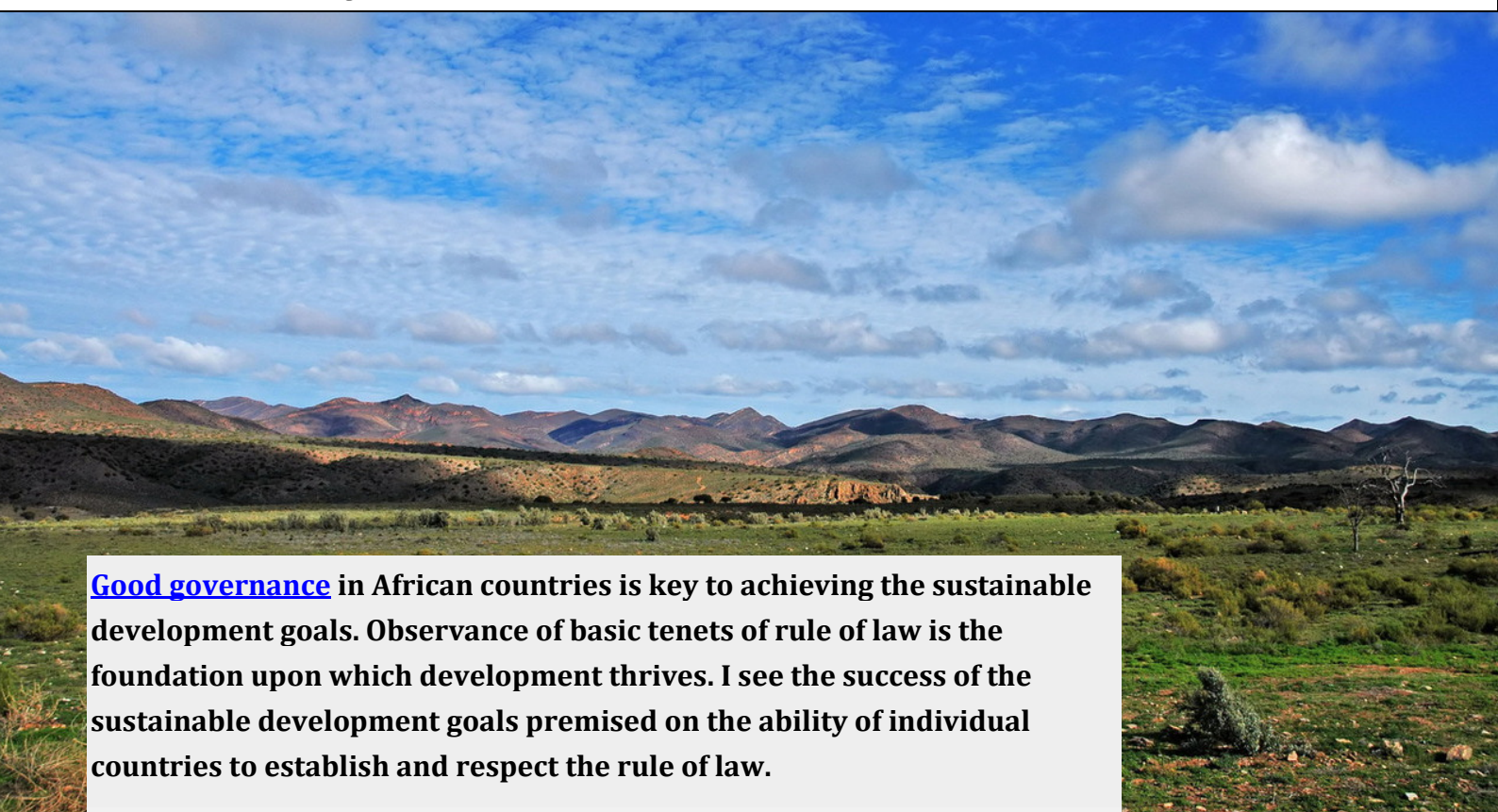
directly to poverty reduction, more sustainable livelihoods and pro-poor growth.”

Second, SDGs can provide a platform for currently more than 500 Multilateral Environmental Agreements (MEAs) in the world that deal exclusively with matters related to the environment. UNEP and various other UN agencies and programs, as well as international environmental organizations and financial institutions have done a lot to make

this happen, but we need global community to understand that we have all the necessary tools and resources to tackle poverty and hunger.

While this huge number suggests fragmentation and a lack of cooperation, the SDGs with its holistic and inclusive more ecocentric approach can be the ultimate guiding star for environmentally sustainable development.

SDGs: does Africa have what it takes?



Good governance in African countries is key to achieving the sustainable development goals. Observance of basic tenets of rule of law is the foundation upon which development thrives. I see the success of the sustainable development goals premised on the ability of individual countries to establish and respect the rule of law.

Author: Beatrice Mumbi

Many Africa countries are experiencing armed conflicts due to varying underlying reasons. Elsewhere, corruption and pillage of public resources is normalized to the extent that good stewardship is the exception, not the norm. Michela Wrong's book 'It's our turn to eat' is an apt representation of how political leaders in Kenya have in the past abused their positions to enrich themselves. In the continent, political positions have been used to steal public resources. Many other vices such as nepotism and hiring along ethnic lines are also deeply embedded in the governance systems. These situations are obstacles to mounting priorities that would advance the achievement of the SDGs.

In my visits in the horn of Africa, I was often struck by extreme levels of poverty and isolation some populations have to live in. In this day and age in some places, children are still studying under the shade of trees while health services of a very basic standard are still

a dream to thousands and possibly millions in the region.

Genuine commitment to good governance is therefore necessary to start off the sustainable development goals on a realistic path. It must start with the very way that political power is exercised as it determines how all other pieces fit in the puzzle. However, self-interested leadership and tight grip on power has only deprived populations' opportunities for growth and right to development. Mass suffering, unnecessary deaths and mass displacements have characterized this phenomenon in Democratic Republic of Congo, South Sudan, and Central Africa Republic and more recently Burundi, among others.

Commitment to peace is long due for a number of countries currently experiencing instability. Normalcy has to return for any sustainable development to take shape. I strongly believe that the greatest problem is the very value system of the political class, and

if it does not change, peace will never hold. It has even become a commonplace for parties in a conflict to breach the terms of a peace agreement even before the ink on the paper dries! [South Sudan](#) is a case in point.

The [human development index](#) has consistently put African countries at the very bottom of the list. The irony is, numerous natural resources abound in the continent but the [beneficiaries have not been the local population](#). [Stewardship](#) of these resources is wanting to say the least, as foreign multinationals hunt for them and leaders line up their pockets with the proceeds. It is unfortunate that communities pay the price when conflicts over minerals occur, while they should be enjoying enhanced lifestyles.

The sustainable development goals place a serious obligation on the governments of the day to plan strategically. They envisage the achievement of the goals to be long-lasting,

beyond the fifteen years. Huge investments by both the governments and private sectors will be needed, so optimum conditions must be created. Good governance and absence of war will attract foreign and domestic investments to bridge the gaps.

The African Union before the adoption of the Sustainable Development Goals in September had urged for goals that take into account the [African context](#). This was largely achieved and African countries therefore have no legitimate reason not to implement the goals. It is then fair to expect that the Union will implore upon its members to ensure the goals are met. It does also mean that the Union needs to urgently devise a plan to monitor many states whose governance models require reformation.

As it is now, only a few countries would [pass the test](#).

The hidden power of open government data in the EU



We increasingly hear about data revolution, open governments or digital strategies, but how do they exactly impact our relationships with the government and government agencies? Here is how open government data relates to Sustainable development goals and how it can help improve the transparency, inclusiveness and accountability of the decision-making process.

Author: Lea Duplan

Ranging from eradicating poverty to promoting peaceful and inclusive societies, most of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) could use [open government data](#) (OGD) to succeed in their strives. This means that all the data collected by governments to perform their tasks could be more useful than we think if they were to be open to the public and free to re-use. Goal 16, in particular, could benefit from OGD: «Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, (...) build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels».

Publically sharing information is key to meeting the targets of SDG goal 16 - to develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels (target 6) and ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision making at all levels (target 7). First, it enhances transparency, which helps limit corruption and strengthens

trust in government. Second, the publication of various datasets coming from different government agencies, helps citizens and decision makers make informed public actions. Less information asymmetry can therefore be the basis for citizen's participation in the decision making process.

The European Union grasped the potential of open data in 2010 when the EU 2020 Strategy was adopted, comprising directives on digital economy and open data. In December 2012, the official EU open data portal went live. These initiatives showed that the European Union supports and embraced the economic, social and political potentials of open government data. It also pushes Member States to develop their own open data portals. In fact, in the European Union, 23 countries out of 28 have their own open data portals according to the EU open data portal. So how can OGD achieve targets 6 and 7 of Goal 16?

Looking at the United Kingdom for example, it is one of the best performing countries regarding the [publication of OGD](#). Government agencies already published over 25.000 datasets on the official open data portal. The government has focused its efforts on opening government data to increase its transparency, accountability and effectiveness. And it works. Government spending apps, for example, are flourishing: [OpenlyLocal](#), [MikeBach](#), [BioLap](#). Almost all UK citizens are now able to track their local government's budgets. In turn, it increases transparency but also holds the government accountable for any error. Moreover, by having an easy access to information, government agencies gain in efficiency as they stop losing time waiting for information from other agencies. In other words, feedback loops enhance effectiveness of public governance.

Furthermore, the availability of online public datasets promotes better informed citizens. Better informed citizens can generate more participatory, inclusive and representative decision-making. The new [Irish Open Government Partnership National Plan](#) re-asserts this assumption: «The basis of citizen's participation is to provide accessible and timely information about policy and service development proposals». Once citizens get access to these public information, they can engage better in a dialogue with policy-makers.

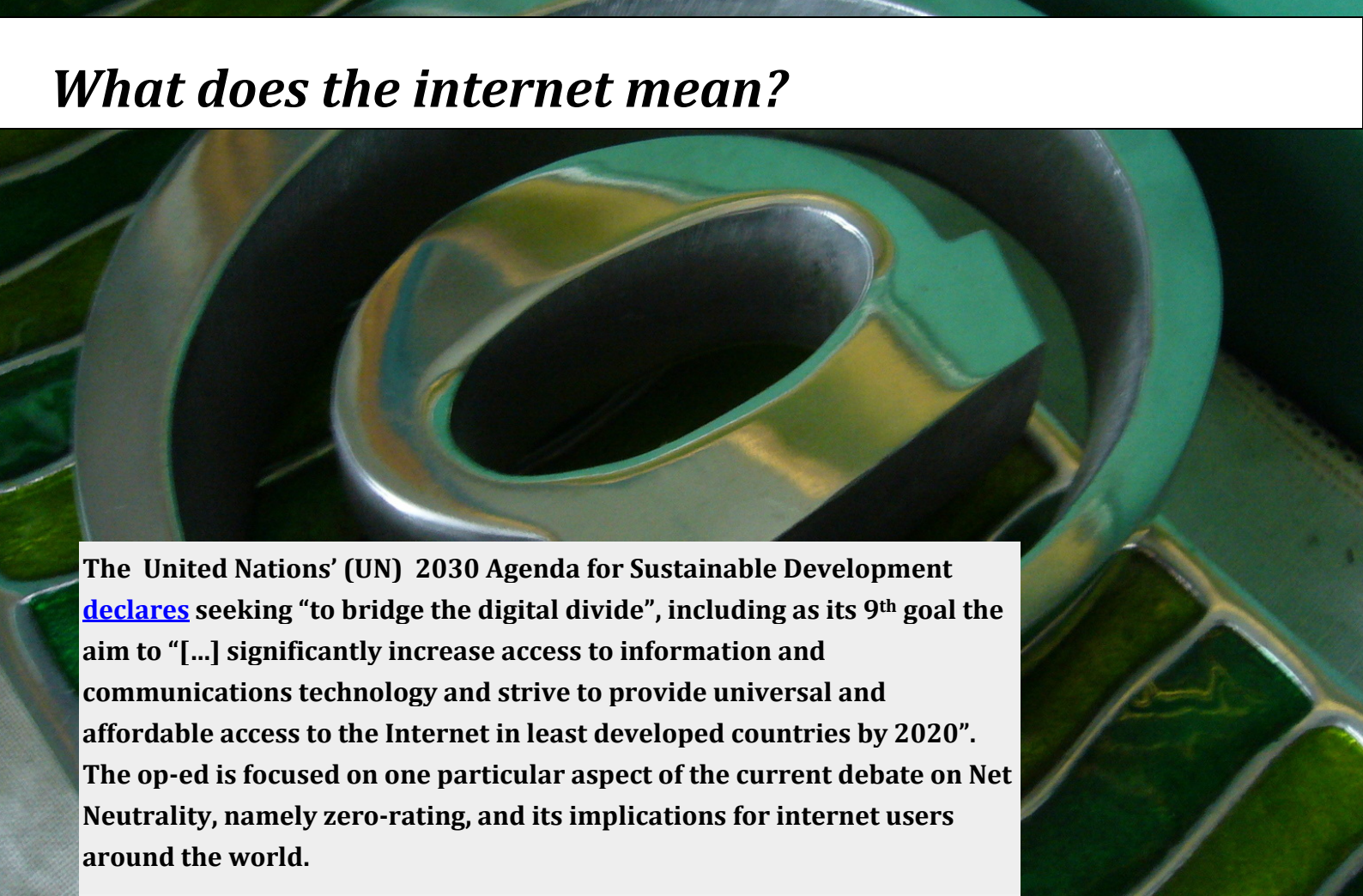
Some leading governments in terms of open data regularly organise open data competitions. France, for example, launched a

[Climate Change Challenge](#) for the *COP21* taking place in Paris this December. The aim was to create a innovative environmental projects using open government data. In a nutshell, we are encouraged to participate and inform ourselves on current issues on the political agenda.

Nevertheless, besides technical challenges of harmonising conflicting data from different public authorities, open government data require constant monitoring. Data collection, data sharing and data monitoring are important components of the effective use of OGD. Additionally, data itself is lacking value. Governments need to develop budgetary, technological and communicative capacities of open data projects to effectively exploit OGD. While capacity building is essential, public awareness is crucial too. If governments do not communicate the existence of OGD to the public in a meaningful way, the benefits of OGD will be weakened.

Is Open government data a solution to the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals in the European Union? Yes, but not by itself alone. OGD clearly has the potential to enhance institutional transparency and citizen's participation in the decision-making process but requires financial, technical and political efforts amongst many others. Still, the European Union and its digital agenda could serve as a good basis for States to carry out their open government data revolution.

What does the internet mean?



The United Nations' (UN) 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development [declares](#) seeking “to bridge the digital divide”, including as its 9th goal the aim to “[...] significantly increase access to information and communications technology and strive to provide universal and affordable access to the Internet in least developed countries by 2020”. The op-ed is focused on one particular aspect of the current debate on Net Neutrality, namely zero-rating, and its implications for internet users around the world.

Author: Justine Chauvin

On 27 October 2015, the European Parliament approved the [Telecoms Single Market \(TSM\) regulation](#), which is supposed to set Net Neutrality rules across all EU member states. Net Neutrality can be defined as a non-discrimination principle stipulating that data packets should be treated equally by Internet services providers (ISPs), regardless the provenance, content, type, platform, or mode of communication.

Although TSM states that the general rule should be the equal treatment of traffic, Net Neutrality defenders [regretted](#) the numerous exceptions and potential loopholes present in the final agreement. One crucial point is that the text fails to mention anything on “zero rating”.

Zero-rating refers to data practices proposed by ISPs or Network Mobile Operators (NMOs), which offer specified amount of data usage to their customers without extra charge.

It also includes [current private initiatives](#), such as [internet.org](#) by Facebook, providing in developing countries a free access to a limited number of websites and applications. This is usually done in partnership with NMOs in regions where internet access is limited, inexistent or hardly affordable for a large population. Zero-rated services are an emerging issue directly related to Net neutrality, insofar as they offer users either an unequal access to the internet, or only a minor and disconnected part of it.

At the EU level, the TSM leave *de facto* to the EU member states the decision to legislate – or not – on zero-rating. The expansion of cheap zero-rated plans could raise the average price of the full internet access, as well as introduces a [bias](#) in favour of the internet heavyweights. In other words, if the issue of zero-rating shifts the debate on Net Neutrality from data discrimination to [paid prioritization](#); it leads to

similar effects in term of network discrimination and market distortion.

However, if in the richest countries the problem is not access to the internet *per se* – but the quality and affordability of it – it should be reminded that 2/3 of the population residing in developing countries (representing 4 billion people) [remain offline](#).

In these countries, zero-rating is often presented as a philanthropic gesture designed to “connect the unconnected” aiming to bridge the digital divide. The core argument is that even if zero-rating schemes do not provide users with the full scope of the internet, [“something is always better than nothing.”](#) Others denounced these “Internet basics” as [cynical attempts](#) by internet heavyweights to extend their dominant position to [emerging markets](#), attracting new users in denying them access to alternative services. Furthermore, in May 2015, more than 65 advocacy groups [called out](#) Mark Zuckerberg, pointing out the numerous problems that internet.org raises in term of Net Neutrality, but also freedom of expression, privacy and security.

The internet is outlined by the UN sustainable development plan as an instrument which “has great potential to accelerate human progress” and increases “global

interconnectedness” ([UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development](#), 15th point).

According to this particular definition, it is doubtful that zero-rating has the potential to make a positive difference for users in developing countries.

Indeed, in essentially denying people the possibility to be anything else than passive users of determined services, zero-rating schemes do not offer the interconnectedness and dynamicity of the internet; neither do they give users the option to come up themselves with innovative solutions to their problems.

In addition with the numerous flaws outlined above, the propagation of zero-rating schemes in developing countries could actually jeopardize efforts to realise the 9th UN Sustainable development goal. It is currently fundamental to prevent the development of a [“poor internet for poor people”](#), in clearly distinguishing between the internet and zero-rating schemes – offering at best an inert and microscopic part of the former. Otherwise, this misconception could lead to endanger the development of alternative options genuinely able to bridge the digital divide, ultimately denying “the unconnecteds” – or “misconnecteds” – the possibility to truly benefits from the internet’s numerous opportunities.

