

GENDER & DEVELOPMENT NETWORK

“Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”

A reflection from the Gender and Development Network

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are of course not everything we wanted; they are after all the outcome of tortured negotiations among nearly two hundred governments many of whom have highly dubious views towards gender equality and human rights. That said, the document just agreed by the UN General Assembly this month¹ is certainly an improvement on the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), and a lot better than many of us feared. Glimpses of concern about inequality – or at least a desire to ‘leave no one behind’ - suggest some progress in the last 15 years and there have been positive developments in many areas. Specifically on gender equality, there is also some movement in the right direction. While the agreement of this document changes nothing today, it does provide us with some valuable rhetoric with which to hold governments to account tomorrow and in the decades to come.

The goals and targets

At one point it seemed a very real possibility that there might be no standalone goal on gender equality, with women’s rights subsumed within a basket of disadvantages. The experience of MDG 3 on gender equality had demonstrated the resources and political leverage that a gender goal could bring and we argued hard that any dilution of this explicit commitment would be seen as a major step backwards. It is therefore with relief that we see the fifth agreed SDG is: *Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.*²

We also called for a broadening of the topics covered under such a goal. Violence against women and girls had been recognised as a major omission in the MDGs and it was clear early on that this would be included as a target. Political participation is now more broadly defined and language on sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, constantly under attack, was protected. Sexual rights are still missing, and the struggle for LGBTQ rights has a long way to go. But the real surprise – and perhaps one of the biggest successes for us – was the inclusion of a target on unpaid care. While the wording of the target is not perfect, its inclusion marks a major step forward in recognition of the issue as a major barrier to achieving gender equality. We remain concerned though as to why SDG 5 has no time limits when most other targets start with ‘by 2030’.

In addition to a standalone goal, GADN also called for gender mainstreaming across the framework. There are a few specific mentions of measures important to gender equality in other targets: equal pay for work of equal value appears in target 8.5, equal access to education in 4.5, the particular needs of women and girls in relation to hygiene and sanitation in 6.3. But overall the mainstreaming of gender equality is not well developed and there is little recognition of the specific barriers that

¹ “Transforming Our World: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development” sourced at http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/69/L.85&Lang=E on 24/9/15

² *ibid*

women and girls face in meeting targets, such as the role of unpaid care or occupational segregation in restricting employment opportunities.

During the negotiations there was much talk of 'transformative' targets, but it remains to be seen whether the structural barriers preventing progress in each of the target areas will really be addressed.

A crucial test will be how the indicators for each target (due to be agreed next March) are developed, and whether they cover the structural barriers where change is most needed. The experience of the MDGs shows that governments put their time and money into trying to achieve these measured indicators of success, not into matching the rhetoric of the goals and targets. Furthermore, for the indicators to be effective their measurement will also need to be resourced with sufficient aggregation of data and use of qualitative as well as quantitative measures, and substantial capacity building in implementation. We are also concerned that in many cases women over 49, and in some case girls below 15 years of age, will not be included in data collection, thus excluding them from the potential benefits of the framework.

Framing the Agenda

The rhetoric included in the preamble and opening paragraphs of the document is also important. At a time when women's rights are under attack around the globe an internationally agreed statement has important symbolic value.

Many women's rights activists opposed the use in the preamble of five pillars of sustainable development (people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership) both because it distracted from a human rights approach and made no specific mention of gender equality.

These pillars remain, but both in the preamble and in the subsequent paragraphs of the Declaration there is some useful language which can be used to hold governments to account. There is commitment to promoting gender equality and women's and girls' empowerment, and even recognition that half of humanity is denied its full human rights.

Preamble: "They [the goals] seek to realize the human rights of all and to achieve gender equality and the empowerment of all women and girls."

Para 3: "We resolve.. to protect human rights and promote gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls"

Para 8: "We envisage... a world in which every woman and girl enjoys full gender equality and all legal, social and economic barriers to their empowerment have been removed."

Para 20. "Realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets. The achievement of full human potential and of sustainable development is not possible if one half of humanity continues to be denied its full human rights and opportunities. Women and girls must enjoy equal access to quality education, economic resources and political participation as well as equal opportunities with men and boys for employment, leadership and decision-making at all levels. We will work for a significant increase in investments to close the gender gap and strengthen support for institutions in relation to gender equality and the empowerment of women at the global, regional and national levels. All forms of discrimination and violence against women and girls will be eliminated, including through the engagement of men and

boys. The systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda is crucial.”³

Future challenges

Clearly the challenge now lies in implementation. GADN has written elsewhere of our disappointment with the Addis Ababa Action Agenda and we are concerned about the link between this and the implementation of the SDGs. In general funds for gender equality work have always been grossly inadequate and significantly more funds will be needed to meet the new ambitions laid out in the Declaration. Moreover the type of funds and way they are given are vital. A significant danger within the SDGs is the increasing role assigned to the private sector both in global decision making, and in the delivery of funds. Such private financing is frequently inadequate and inappropriate for the achievement of gender equality and women’s rights. Moreover the focus on corporates turns attention from the responsibility of states to take positive measures to ensure gender equality.

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³ *ibid*