

# **CIDSE Response to the Progress Report of the UN General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (A/76/941)**

**November 2013**

## **Introduction**

CIDSE is an alliance of 17 Catholic development organisations in Europe and North America partnering with civil society organisations and social movements across the world. CIDSE advocates a societal model focused on the realisation of the human rights and dignity of all people.

CIDSE has been engaged in policy processes leading up to and emanating from the Rio+20 Conference in 2012, as well the debate on a successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). We welcome the increasing integration of the process to establish global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) with the process to deliver a successor to the MDGs and the efforts of the OWG to facilitate this integration. Based on research and consultations that we have conducted with our Partners and people living in poverty<sup>1</sup>, we seek to ensure that lessons are learned and that an ambitious, effective and people-centred framework for action emerges for the SDGs and the Post-2015 framework.

The moral and existential challenges of persistent poverty and spiralling environmental destruction facing the human family are inextricably linked and require significant shifts to increase equity, sustainability and responsibility between and within all countries. While a Post-2015 framework is unlikely to deliver the scale and scope of changes needed by itself, it can and must contribute to the transformational shifts needed in development. A successful Post-2015 agenda will be measured largely by its success in laying the foundations for an ambitious and transformative development agenda, incentivising the shifts in governmental, intergovernmental and non-governmental action and accountability to this end. It is with this perspective we take this opportunity to share our analysis of the Progress Report issued by the Open Working Group (OWG) Chairs in July.

## **1. Conceptualising Poverty**

The concept of poverty alluded to in the Progress Report, captured in paragraph 36, reflects that of the MDGs. While the MDGs played an extremely important role in increasing understanding of poverty as more than a lack of income, the concept of poverty captured in the MDGs remained limited to a list of socio-economic outcomes, or lack thereof. Inspired by Catholic Social Teaching, CIDSE is convinced that poverty eradication should not just be about removing socio-economic obstacles but should be centred on respecting human dignity and enhancing the

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<sup>1</sup> See (2013) CAFOD, [Building from the ground up](#), (2013) Trócaire, [My Rights Beyond 2015](#).

well-being of all. The Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights has already provided such a definition of poverty in 2001, which complements the holistic interpretation of development set out in the UN Declaration on the Right to Development.

*Poverty is a human condition characterised by the sustained or chronic deprivation of the resources, capabilities, choices, security and power necessary for the enjoyment of an adequate standard of living and other civil, cultural, economic, political and social rights’.*

UN Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, 2001.

*‘Development is a comprehensive economic, social, cultural and political process, which aims at the constant improvement of the well-being of the entire population and of all individuals on the basis of their active, free and meaningful participation in development and in the fair distribution of benefits resulting there-from’.*

UN Declaration on the Right to Development, 1986.

The MDG framework's failure to conceptualise poverty and development in a holistic way can be associated with the widely acknowledged weaknesses of the MDG goals, including the failure to address structural issues such as inequality and discrimination, or to address issues of lack of participation or accountability in governance.

Consistently, weaknesses in the conceptualisation and implementation of the MDGs have been linked to the failure to integrate a human rights approach. Some have stressed that the MDGs were not intended to replace the human rights treaties, and were one element of the Millennium Declaration, which reaffirms the Right to Development and recalls the body of international treaties deriving from the UN Declaration of Human Rights.<sup>2</sup> As highlighted repeatedly in many post-2015 consultations to date however, in practice the MDGs became detached from human rights principles, diminishing their potential to operationalise human rights, as is evident in the outcomes<sup>3</sup>.

The Progress Report does include proposals to respond to some of these weaknesses, including proposals for the collection of disaggregated data, incorporating issues of access and quality (paras 37-40). These proposals are important and should be retained. However, unless the structural issues that prevent the poorest and most marginalised people from accessing services and opportunities, with the demand for quality, equality and security acknowledged and factored in, the contribution of the framework to sustainable change for the poorest and most marginalised will be limited, as partially acknowledged by the Report itself (para 41). For the framework to track outcomes in a disaggregated way is important, but incentives and accountability for tackling the drivers should be stronger to avoid reducing these innovations to technical exercises, subject to misinterpretation and/or manipulation.

On this basis, CIDSE believes incorporating a human rights approach to poverty and development should inform not only the narrative vision for the post-2015 framework, but also be integrated substantially in the choice and articulation of goals and targets, and in the establishment of implementation, monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Existing human rights norms and legal frameworks provide a legitimate, universally applicable, people-centred basis for the framework. While imperfect, the human rights framework has the moral, legal and political basis to anchor the process and guide the way forwards at international and national levels. In The statement by 17 special procedure mandate holders of the human rights council on the post-2015 agenda clearly reminds us that ‘grounding development priorities in human rights is not only a legal and moral imperative, but can also enhance effectiveness and accountability’<sup>4</sup>. This view was echoed in civil society consultations all over the world. The progress made in

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.un.org/millennium/declaration/ares552e.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> UNDG (2013) ‘A Million Voices’, P. 14.

<sup>4</sup> Statement by 17 Special Procedures Mandate-Holders of the Human Rights Council on the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

developing human rights benchmarks and indicators makes human rights centred- goals more a matter of will than technical feasibility (see para 26). In June 2013 the High Commissioner for Human Rights Navanethem Pillay stated that it is not about adding a ‘disconnected human rights goal’ to the framework. ‘Nor does it require extending the framework to include unmeasurable targets or an unmanageable range of goals’. It is much more about ‘the courage to break from the limited approaches of the past, and the vision to chart a new course, based on fundamental human rights’.<sup>5</sup>

## Recommendations

- The OWG should take a human rights approach to poverty and development as the basis for the minimums required for building the SDGs and post-2015 framework.
- Base the post-2015 agenda on universally agreed human rights standards by linking global goals with national and sub-national targets and benchmarks.
- Priority must be placed on enabling all to achieve their human rights, while moving to sustainable resource use and development that exists within planetary boundaries.

## 2. Conceptualising Sustainability

The Progress Report refers to a narrative emerging around transformative changes to realise a shared vision of poverty eradication and universal human development in the context of sustainable development, respecting human dignity, protecting our planet and living in harmony with nature for the wellbeing and happiness of present and future generations. While these are important components of a narrative, critical concepts such as safe environmental thresholds and planetary boundaries are missing. Poverty eradication and universal human development in the context of sustainable development require a firm commitment to equitable access to all resources, while moving to development that operates within safe planetary boundaries.

Para 20 of the Progress Report reaffirms the concept of and strategy for sustainable development as addressing and incorporating ‘in a balanced manner all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages’. Again, the concept of safe planetary boundaries indicates that the concept of ‘balancing’ must be more clearly articulated to convey the need for the economy to be constructed with the primary and overriding objective of serving the common good of all within safe environmental thresholds.

The aim of sustained and sustainable social and economic progress referred to in para 21 is dependent on finding a sustainable and equitable approach to resource use and management. The reality of finite resources and safe environmental thresholds should see efforts toward achieving ‘efficiency of use of resources’ in paras 53, 63 and 65, accompanied by establishing ‘sufficiency’ of use within equitable access and sustainable levels of resource use.

Paras 26 and 28 refer to the need for sustainable consumption and production patterns to take hold, and the importance of addressing ‘drivers of sustainable development’. CIDSE believes that the critical other side of the coin is the eradication of unsustainable consumption and production patterns and their drivers, which are missing in the Progress Report. Para 52 refers to the need to reduce wastage in the food system which is undermining its ability to meet the demand of growing populations and changing diets – while failing to acknowledge the many unsustainable aspects of the current food system, including unchecked increases in demand for resource-intensive goods and services.

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<sup>5</sup> Human Rights in the Post-2015 Agenda, 6 June 2013, letter to all permanent missions in New York and Geneva right before the Vienna+20 human rights conference 27-28 June 2013.

## Recommendations

- The narrative framing the choice and conceptualisation of goals should acknowledge the need to ensure equitable access to resources for the eradication of poverty, from natural resources to atmospheric space, while moving within safe planetary boundaries.
- ‘Balancing’ the three dimensions of social, economic and environmental of sustainable development must clearly articulate the need for the economy to be constructed with the primary and overriding objective of serving society, within safe planetary thresholds.
- Recognition of the need to increase efforts toward ‘efficiency of use of resources’ in paras 53, 63 and 65, should be accompanied by affirmation of the need to establish ‘sufficiency’ within equitable and sustainable levels of resource use.
- The OWG should acknowledge the need to address the drivers of unsustainable consumption and production across all goal areas.

### 3. The place of 'process' issues in the Post 2015 Framework

The Progress Report refers to human rights, governance, rule of law and wider participation in decision-making as ‘enablers, drivers, strategies and approaches’ (Para 26). While this is not inaccurate, the brevity of their reference in the Report belies the critical importance of these issues to the credibility of this process and the effectiveness of its outcomes. The MDG experience has demonstrated the limitations of focusing on a limited set of top-down outcomes without attention to process or power structures, resulting in a groundswell of support this time around for human rights and a rights-based approach to be placed at the centre of a new global development agenda. The breadth and strength of support for human rights as central to the post-2015 agenda calls for a substantive discussion on how this can be meaningfully and effectively achieved in practice in the new framework.

While the role of a post-2015 framework is not to replace existing human rights conventions and laws, it should further their implementation. This would respond to the criteria set by the Rio+20 Resolution which stated that Sustainable Development Goals should build on existing commitments and be consistent with international law<sup>6</sup>. The MDG framework fell far short of playing this role.

On the other side of the coin, the international human rights framework is a valuable guide for the designing and implementation of the framework. For instance, by identifying rights-holders and duty bearers for common action as well as political, administrative and judicial mechanisms, human rights help to establish clear responsibilities at international, national and sub-national levels. Making commitments or even enacting policy without adequate accountability mechanisms tends to be inefficient and not sustainable. Learning from the MDG experience, the post-2015 agenda should make use of existing accountability mechanisms at various levels and contribute to further development of accountability mechanisms.

CIDSE believes human rights principles of equality/non-discrimination, participation/empowerment, and accountability should be mainstreamed across the implementation and monitoring of all goals, including the disaggregation of data at global levels but also at national levels, to capture progress for different groups and in particular those experiencing discrimination. This should not, however, exclude these from consideration of individual goals in their own right. The variety of human rights violations associated with persistent and pervasive discrimination against women, for example, presents a strong case for both

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<sup>6</sup> Resolution adopted by the General Assembly 66/288 (2012). ‘The future we want’ Para 246.

mainstreaming gender throughout each goal area as well as the establishment of a self-standing goal relating on gender.

While part of a universal agenda, the post-2015 framework should deliver the greatest positive change for people experiencing poverty and deprivation. In order to ensure that the post-2015 framework responds to the needs, experiences and priorities of people in poverty, they must be included in the design, implementation and monitoring of the post-2015 goals. Qualitative indicators within each goal are a route to embedding the participation of the poorest people across the framework.

Much work has been done by academics and practitioners to provide the basis for goals, targets and indicators in relation to governance and rule of law, and in relation to particular human rights such as equality and participation<sup>7</sup> and calls for their substantive inclusion in the goals and implementation of a post-2015 framework are strong and widespread.

## **Recommendations**

- Human rights principles such as equality and non-discrimination, participation and accountability should be mainstreamed across all goals in a post-2015 framework, and should be considered among proposals for goals in their own right.
- Participation of people experiencing poverty and marginalisation must be a priority to ensure that outcomes reflect their needs, experiences and priorities. This can be done through embedding qualitative indicators within each goal.
- Align the post-2015 agenda with existing international obligations and human rights mechanisms at international and national levels to ensure global commitments are fulfilled.

## **Conclusion**

We welcome the Open Working Group's commitment to sharing its thinking to date, represented in this Progress Report. It demonstrates that the group is willing to take account of learning from the MDG experience and current thinking on the future framework and set of goals. As an alliance of Catholic development organisations, CIDSE is convinced that the future framework must pave the way for a holistic vision of human and planetary well-being. It requires going to core of the matter by addressing the fundamental systems and structures that impede the realisation of this vision. We call on the Open Working Group in the next phase of its work to consider how a future set of SDGs and the post-2015 framework will remove these impediments, based strongly on the guidance and obligations set by human rights norms and standards.

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<sup>7</sup> UN Task Team (2013) 'TST Issues Brief: Human rights including the right to development', Ps 2 and 6 .



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**CIDSE** is an international alliance of Catholic development agencies. Its members share a common strategy in their efforts to eradicate poverty and establish global justice. CIDSE's advocacy work covers global governance; resources for development; climate justice; food, agriculture & sustainable trade; and business & human rights - [www.cidse.org](http://www.cidse.org)

**Contact:** Jean Saldanha, [saldanha\(at\)cidse.org](mailto:saldanha(at)cidse.org), +32 (0)2 233 37 53, Rue Stévin 16, B-1000 Brussels

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