

Managing the transition from MDGs to SDGs – an UNRISD contribution to what it will take

Summary of key points:

- Reducing inequality should be recognized as guiding principle for the post-2015 agenda around which the SDGs can be integrated and implemented coherently across the dimensions of sustainability
- Social policies provide an effective set of policy instruments for achieving more equitable and sustainable development when designed and implemented in an integrated, and coherent manner
- A shift in the normative hierarchy for decision-making is required, away from social and environmental issues as the consequences of economic policy choices, to economic choices being conditioned on sustainable and just social and ecological outcomes

1) Reducing inequality as overarching principle in the post-2015 agenda

Despite overall progress towards the MDGs, development successes have been hampered by rising inequalities and increasing environmental disruption (UNRISD 2014a, 2010a; Fukuda-Parr 2012). This can be seen as a result of insufficiently integrated policies that have focused on one dimension of sustainable development rather than balancing economic, social and environmental objectives (Elson 2002, UNRISD 2012a). But it can also result from the strong emphasis on poverty eradication as the main, overarching objective of the MDG agenda, which inadequately addressed the root causes and drivers of social exclusion and unsustainable practices.

Shifting the main objective onto reducing inequalities allows to overcome these pitfalls. Addressing inequality not only among and within countries, but also in a third, intergenerational dimension - which implies ecological sustainability to ensure future prosperity - offers the potential of balancing social and environmental objectives with economic development. Anchoring the new development agenda in the overarching objective of reducing inequality opens the way for transformative change that is socially inclusive and ecologically sustainable .

2) Policy implications for an ambitious, integrated, coherent, universal post-2015 agenda

UNRISD research suggests that it is only by addressing and remedying the structural determinants of inequality and unsustainable behaviour that the transition to sustainable development can be achieved. Inequality hampers economic growth and poverty reduction efforts (UNRISD 2012b). Countries that managed to reduce poverty in a shorter time frame had political systems deliberately focused on both economic growth and collective welfare. These countries created competent bureaucracies, institutionalized social rights and nurtured competitive democratic regimes (UNRISD 2010a). As economic growth per se does not guarantee that social and environmental goals are met, it has to be framed as a means to address inequality to be more inclusive and sustainable. This requires a stronger focus on redistribution, not only of economic goods and services, but also of entitlements, rights and obligations and with regard to power relations that shape policies, process and outcomes (cf. Cook et al. 2012: 1).

Social policy is a mechanism for promoting these fundamental values of social inclusion, solidarity, equity, respect for nature and human rights (Cook and Dugarova 2014: 34). But various policies and instruments

need to be articulated and integrated in a coherent way to reduce inequalities across the different dimensions.

Current policy making tends to be dominated by a particular set of social protection mechanisms aimed at addressing the social consequences of socioeconomic transition (Cook et al. 2012: 9). A second set of approaches aims to achieve social goals in combination with economic or environmental objectives, through policies or programmes that can deliver so-called co-benefits or achieve a win-win scenario, such as green jobs or incentives for green consumption (Cook et al. 2012: 10). A third level of policy relates to social processes that drive structural change, such as the structural determinants of inequality and unsustainable behaviour. This third level of policy, while currently least addressed, has the potential to move beyond the current focus on compensating losers or protecting the vulnerable, to tackle structural causes of vulnerability and achieve both green and social goals (Cook et al. 2012: iv).

Based on findings from UNRISD research, the emphasis given to these different approaches should be reversed to ensure that structural transformations are prioritized. Cook et al. (2012) have posited that, in order to address social and environmental goals effectively for a green and fair transition, policies should, inter alia, compensate losers and support adaptation through a range of social protection measures; create employment and facilitate the uptake of green economy jobs among disadvantaged groups; facilitate the participation of women as producers and citizens by alleviating the care burden; and minimize inequalities and entrenched disadvantage through redistributive and other social policies (Cook et al. 2012:13). This integrated approach is illustrated below.

a) Structural transformations

Addressing structural transformations for a more ambitious development agenda needs to shift the normative hierarchy for decision-making, away from social and environmental issues as the consequences of economic policy choices, to economic choices being conditioned on sustainable and just social and ecological outcomes (Cook and Dugarova 2014:32). Examples include mutually supportive redistributive policies such as land reform, especially in highly unequal economies where the poor depend substantially on land for their livelihoods; fiscal reforms that improve tax administration, prevent tax evasion and avoidance, and limit opposition to progressive taxation and redistribution; income-generating employment opportunities; and a number of expenditure-related policies that will enhance the welfare of the poor (UNRISD 2010a: 12). Providing the poor with greater access to productive assets can make use of more sustainable growth to reduce inequality (UNRISD 2010a; Rao 2014).

Participation mechanisms must give disadvantaged groups a voice, empowering them to claim their rights, mobilize collectively and exercise influence over decisions that affect them. UNRISD research has highlighted three forms of participation or organized efforts that can be particularly relevant for sustainable development: (1) resource mobilization at the local or community level, which often acts as a precondition for (2) access and influence in decision-making and governance processes; and (3) advocacy by social movements to reframe policy debates on development priorities and pathways” (UNRISD 2014b: 5). In relation to **gender equality** in opportunity and outcome social policies must also address the unpaid work that goes into sustaining families, households and societies by investing in infrastructure and basic services, and thus reducing the unpaid care work done largely by women (UNRISD 2010b:2).

b) Co-benefit approaches

Eco-social policies can create synergies between sustainable development objectives, for examples policies linking climate and employment via green (and decent) jobs, such as in the renewable energy or clean waste sectors; job creation and training in “green and decent” work; education, retraining and skills for the transition from “dirty” to green jobs (Cook at al. 2012, p. 10). Such win-win policies can address the distributional consequences of energy prices and green taxes on different income groups; mitigate the social costs of industrial restructuring, through the creation of green jobs and related training programmes; set standards of decent work associated with green jobs; and protect and promote the livelihoods and rights of rural populations and communities (Cook at al. 2012, p. 21).

In the same vein, Social and Solidarity Economy (SSE) can contribute to more sustainable development as SSE organizations tend to have lower carbon footprints due not only to their environmental objectives but also to the nature of their systems of production and exchange. Furthermore, organizations such as forestry cooperatives and community forestry groups can play an important role in the sustainable management of natural resources, particularly in contexts where they constitute common-pool resources (UNRISD 2014c: iv-v).

c) Addressing social consequences of transition

Universalism in social protection and the provision of social services has proved to achieve better results in reducing poverty while simultaneously contributing to greater equality than have targeted approaches towards the poor (UNRISD 2010a). Accelerating income growth for the poor at a greater rate than national average has direct implications for the promotion of decent work, equitable quality education, gender equality and empowerment of women and girls, but also requires that the bottom 40% have access to health facilities, water and sanitation, and energy as well as social protection to ensure well-being as a prerequisite of achieving their full productive capacity (UNRISD 2013). Assessing social consequences and developmental progress in the post-2015 era should be based on disaggregated goals and data to not only depict vertical but also horizontal inequalities (UNRISD 2010a). This can promote a greater social, economic and political inclusion of all.

3) Conclusions and outlook

To achieve more equitable, people-centred and planet-sensitive outcomes, the post-2015 development agenda needs to be not only internally consistent and cohesive but also compatible with other international agendas such as WTO and G20 agendas. Contextual factors may act as counterforces and prevent the process to deliver its outcome. To achieve such multidimensional coherence therefore requires that the post-2015 agenda and various other institutional agendas converge and mutually reinforce each other. This can be achieved by a shift in perspective which recognizes reducing inequality as overarching objective of international governance.

4) References

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