



Interview: *United Nations Development Programme (UNDP)*

UNDP specialists

Ms. Sheila Marnie
Programme Advisor

Mr. Mihail Peleah
Programme Specialist, Green Economy & Employment

Ms. Elena Danilova Cross
Programme Specialist, Poverty & Inequality

Interview contacted by

Maria Stamata & Konstantinos Tsioutras
Undergraduate Students Department of Law, UCY

Academic advisor

Tatiana-Eleni Synodinou
Associate Professor Department of Law, UCY

The UN's final report on MDGs, yet for all the remarkable gains, outlined several inequalities as well. In which extent do you think that MDGs have been successful and in which aspect the Sustainable Development Goals differentiate from their predecessors?

Firstly, the MDG report was not a final report, because the final results/indicators will only become available end of this year or next year. But in any case, it is broadly recognized that the MDGs were hugely successful in focusing the attention of the world on key development challenges – the MDGs were formulated in a relatively way, had clear targets and indicators for monitoring progress. The attention that they attracted also generated a lot of discussion, knowledge, and actions, leading to increased understanding of development issues, while also rallying and attracting donor support and development aid to address the challenges.

But it is also broadly recognized that the MDGs, for all their success, focused only on a narrow set of goals. Unintentionally and implicitly, they encouraged a silo-like approach, whereby successes in one goal could be achieved without parallel successes in the other; they often addressed the symptoms of problems (income poverty), without drawing attention to the underlying causes and the need to find sustainable longer term development solutions. They also missed out some of the key issues which were highlighted in the Millennium Declaration from which they were derived (for example, respect for nature, the right to live in peace and security).

The SDGs differ in many ways from their predecessors. Firstly in scope and ambition. The consultations held worldwide before the adoption of the new global agenda showed that people

around the world still put health and education at the top of their priorities. But the discussions also pointed out, for example, that in health, there is a need to go beyond child and maternal mortality, and address for example the pressing issues surrounding non-communicable diseases. In education, there were calls for a focus not just on access, but also on the quality of education.

The SDGs also take on the new challenges which have emerged or become more acute since 2000 – including the fact that our environmental footprint is growing bigger and we are in danger of breaching several planetary boundaries, and indeed have already breached some. The MDGs had just one goal related to environmental sustainability, and even that had a limited focus. The SDGs represent a merging of what has previously been two separate development agendas – poverty reduction and environmental sustainability. They draw attention to the need to tackle the quality of growth: to gradually move away from unsustainable production and consumption patterns, and to put employment at the centre of macro-economic policies in order to achieve more inclusive and more environmentally sustainable growth patterns. SDGs are also attracting attention to the importance of Governance, introducing a whole new Goal 16 “Peace, justice and strong institutions” recognizing that peace, stability, human rights and effective governance based on the rule of law are important conduits for sustainable development.

The SDGs are also more “universal” in character. This can be interpreted in two ways. Firstly they are universal, in that they apply to all countries, not just to less-developed ones: they are universally relevant. (The MDGs were very much about goals which solve the problems of poorer countries, often times requiring aid from richer countries). With the SDGs, all countries have to commit to tackling environmental issues, and to tackling inequalities. Secondly, they are universal in that they apply to everyone. The MDGs had “half-way” targets, such as halving poverty levels, cutting maternal mortality by two-thirds. The rights-based approach underpinning the SDGs means that they are based on the premise that no-one should be left in extreme poverty, that they should apply to the most marginalized, who were often forgotten due to the use of national average indicators and aggregates to monitor progress in achieving the MDGs.

17 specific goals have been set for the new sustainable development agenda and many would argue that this numerousness shadows the effectiveness. What is your opinion on that and what do you think are the interlinkages among the different nexus areas?

The SDGs attempt to combine the advantages of the MDGs (especially concise and measurable targets), with a more holistic framework which draws attention to the interlinkages between the goals. Indeed UNDESA looks on the SDGs Goals as a network of targets¹. We in UNDP have also analysed SDG targets and considered on them as a network, looking for practical implications for countries. In a practical sense, these interlinkages can be approached as “themes”, analysing and programming for tightly interlinked targets, requiring complex measures. For example, if growth is lifting people out of income poverty, we also have to look at the impact of

growth on environmental sustainability. To take another example, employment perspectives for young people (Goal 8) cannot be tackled without taking into consideration education issues (Goal 4), and solving these problems contributes to more equal societies (Goal 10). A disaster risk-prone country will find a lot of linkages between Goal 11 on sustainable cities with Goals 8 on economic growth and Goal 9 on infrastructure. What is important is the realization that inputs/investments in achieving one goal will have a direct or indirect impact on another Goal. The smart choice of priority policy actions will be the driving force in effective realization of SDGs. All of the issues can be formulated as goals, but many of them are also enablers or factors influencing the achievement of the other goals.

The best example of interlinkages is perhaps that of education, which is seen as a fundamental human right, and a goal in itself; but also as an enabler for achieving other goals. The SDG conflict, violence and disaster consultation called for conflict-sensitive education, and education which plays a role in promoting tolerance, peace-building and conflict resolution. It also drew attention to the need for safe educational infrastructure, so that children are less vulnerable to disaster risks. For environmental sustainability, including the sustainable use of energy, water, and land, education is seen as vital in cultivating an understanding of how people interact with and rely on the environment. In fact the environmental sustainability consultation called for transformative changes in education inside and outside schools to raise knowledge of sustainability challenges and the urgency of tackling their root causes, and encourage respect for the resources of the planet. Education is seen as important in tackling malnutrition, to promote healthy food choices, and to promote good hygiene practices, all of which influence health outcomes. Education improves women and children health and influences choice of family size. The inclusion of sexual and reproductive rights into school curricula helps ensure women make informed choices regarding fertility. In the growth and employment consultation, education was seen as having a key role to play in helping young people learn the skills they need to find decent jobs. Education also has a role to play in reducing inequalities provided that it is inclusive of marginalized and excluded groups – such as girls, children with disabilities, and gay and lesbian communities – and addresses discrimination issues by making young people aware of their rights. Education, especially completed secondary level education, has a multiplier effect on womens' and girls' empowerment. The governance consultation recommended anti-corruption education as part of national curriculums, and more broadly to support participation in decision making.

From this wide catalogue of goals, which are particularly important in your opinion and given the Agenda's global perspective, how can we harmonize approaches when in some sectors precedes individual responsibility?

There are three main principles underpinning the SDGs. One is their universal nature (mentioned above), the second is that of “leaving no-one behind” (discussed below), and the third is the indivisible nature of the agenda. It is a holistic agenda, recognizing the interlinkages of the challeng-

es which need to be addressed to achieve sustainable development. Tackling just one or selected goals will mean that the agenda will not be achieved. Indeed in our increasingly globalized world the development challenges are global and all countries are interlinked. There are issues and values that span all countries – human rights, sustainability, equality, security. And there are issues and challenges that have to be tackled collectively. Partnerships will be key in implementing the agenda.

A fundamental guiding principle of the new Sustainable Development Agenda and its implementation is to “ensure that no one is left behind”. What does inclusion mean in practice (strategies, policies) and who are really those being or at risk of being left behind?

As mentioned above, the SDG formulation process revealed concerns that the way in which the MDGs had been worded meant that attention was drawn away from the plight of those left behind, even when overall targets were achieved. The focus on “half-way” targets (e.g. reduce by 50% in MDG1, or reduce by two-thirds in MDG 4), as well as use of national aggregates or averages as key indicators, has meant that the poorest families and most deprived groups could be left behind even if at the national or global level the goals will be met. There were therefore calls for the new development agenda to be more consistent with universal human rights. This means *inter alia* expressing targets as “reduce to zero” or “100%”. For example, eradicating extreme income poverty; for hunger, food insecurity and malnutrition (e.g. child stunting) to be ended sustainably by 2025; for preventable child deaths to be virtually eliminated by 2035; for universal access to basic health services; for education for all at all levels; and for a generation which is free from the threat of HIV/AIDs, TB and malaria. The use of national averages have concealed often highly uneven progress towards MDG targets, with many specific groups, such as women and girls, people with disabilities and ethnic minorities, as well as families in remoter rural and urban slum localities, being systematically left behind.

It has been said many times that the SDGs require a “data revolution”. One of greatest potential advancement of SDG is the call for greater disaggregation of information to be collected for SDG monitoring, so that needs and challenges of such people are well captured and adequate policy measures taken to improve the situation and well-being of such people.

Another focus of the SDGs, particularly SDG 8 is that of jobless growth, which is seen as a major factor contributing to income inequalities, reinforcing other types of inequalities and exclusion risk. A lack of jobs leads to a sense of injustice and insecurity. For societies, jobs are necessary to bring about the development transformation. For individuals, jobs are the only sustainable means to earn incomes and escape poverty. Inclusive growth policies require putting employment at the centre of macro-economic policy making.

As countries adapt the global SDGs indicators framework into their national plans, what are the economic, social and environmental components that they need to take into account and what are the possible threats?

Key as mentioned above, will be looking at the interlinkages between the components. It is not enough to have economic growth, it should be economic growth which brings with it decent jobs and more inclusive growth. Growth should also be based on environmentally sustainable patterns of production and consumption. Improvements in housing and infrastructure should be energy-efficient etc. The threats are concentrating on one aspect of sustainability without the others – clearly in some cases trade-offs will have to be made, but they should be carefully weighed up. However, we should not compromise holistic and transformative nature of agenda, especially the necessity to combine economic growth and poverty reduction (Goals 8 and 1) with ensuring environmental sustainability (Goals 12, 13, 14, and 15).

Possible threats include focusing on easy issues (“cherry-picking among the goals/ targets”) without tackling core transformative challenges, like combining economic growth and equity with sustainability and climate change.

How can we ensure long-term access to health, education and social needs, instead of short-term gains based on projects?

This should be addressed through inclusion of such targets and goals into long-term and comprehensive development programs and visions, backed up with adequate budgeting and financing. Ideally, all development projects should be linked to national or local development planning. For example, the Development Aid Assistance mechanism in some countries ensures connectedness of projects implemented by donor organization with their country priorities and long-term visioning².

How can countries in special situations meet the integration of the sustainable development agenda and how can we achieve resilience despite their vulnerability?

For all countries, a concentration on goal 16 “ Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels” will be fundamental for integrating the agenda.

What is your organization's contribution towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals?

We at UNDP act as the development broker in realization of the SDGs – please read this article of our Administrator, Helen Clark:

*<http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/speeches/2016/01/18/sustainable-development-goal-implementation-the-un-development-system-and-undp-s-roles.html>*³.

In tandem with other UN agencies we render our assistance to countries under the so-called MAPS approach (MAPS, *Mainstreaming, Acceleration, and Policy Support*).

As with the MDGs, we may not achieve all SD goals by 2030 across the globe, but hopefully some countries will set an example, and again as with the MDGs, the goals will provide a focus for our collective efforts to make our development trajectories more inclusive and sustainable.

¹ United Nations Department for Economic and Social Affairs, *Development Aid Assistance mechanism*. <<https://www.un.org/development/desa/en/>>.

² OECD, *Net ODA (Official Development Assistance)*. <<https://data.oecd.org/oda/net-oda.htm>>.

³ Clark H, *Speech on Sustainable Development Goal Implementation – the UN Development System and UNDP's Roles* (United Nations Development Programme, 18 January 2016). <<https://goo.gl/sF9ISZ>>.