Aiming for sustainable development

You'll hear a lot of talk at Rio+20 about sustainable development goals (SDGs). Momentum is building up and some governments have suggested that the summit is the place to kick-start a process of goal-making as a way to guide action towards cleaner, greener and fairer development. In Rio this could include identifying what areas the goals should cover and agreeing a timeframe for their design. If this is generally accepted, the obvious timing would be to provide a smooth transition with the end of another set of goals — the Millennium Development Goals — in 2015. But should we be asking questions? Is everyone in agreement about this, for instance? What's the motivation behind the idea, do we know what the goals cover, and how the process would work? And what happens if Rio talks about SDGs are a flop?

Just another set of goals?

To understand the idea of the SDGs it's probably a good idea to recap on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). These were created in 2000 as targets for developing nations to achieve by 2015, in areas such as hunger, poverty and child health. The MDGs were put together quickly after the more lengthy negotiations of the Millennium Declaration. Despite this, they have had the tremendous effect of rallying international communities, focusing donors and helping UN agencies to work together better. And with more than two years to go before their end point they are not over yet.

The current nature of the discussion about the SDGs is that unlike the MDGs, they must apply to all countries. Nations worldwide need to change the way they operate and work towards SDGs. Supporters of the idea believe that at Rio there is an opportunity to build on the strengths of the MDGs while absorbing the lessons learnt. This time round, they say, there is enough time to conduct a better process, apply greater intellectual rigour to the content through thinktanks, consult more widely and ground the process by including business, as well as governments and development agencies.

Detractors — and there are some, mainly among poorer developing countries — say that SDGs will be just another international agreement, not particularly in their interests, to which they are forced to adjust.

What would the SDGs cover?

There's a wide range of possibilities, including food and water security, urbanisation, social safety nets, health, gender, education, green jobs, and sustainable oceans, forests, soils and biodiversity.

One major missing element of the MDGs was any kind of energy target and this would certainly need to be addressed, energy being a key driver of development. Few countries to date — notably Japan and Denmark — have succeeded in combining growth with reducing their overall energy consumption.

Key statistics

5.6%: Increase in global energy consumption in 2010 (Strongest growth since 1973)

20.3%: China's share of global energy consumption (world's largest)

Source: BP Statistical review of world energy, June 2011: bp.com/statisticalreview
Whatever themes the goals cover, to be truly sustainable they must each strike a balance between economic, social and environmental components, with these being indivisible – all three component targets achieved or none at all. But learning further lessons from the MDG process, these goals would have to make sense at the local as well as national levels. And they would need to work not only for big business but also small-scale producers. If accompanied by a drive towards greater local control and management of resources, this might just work for the people so far excluded from economic systems.

Isn’t Rio about the green economy?

This is one of the main themes, but sustainable development and green economy are not necessarily mutually exclusive. Some people say that moving towards green economies, which aim to bring social, environmental and economic benefits, is a way of achieving the ultimate aims of the SDGs.

They say now is a perfect time for the two ideas to come together because the original Rio Earth Summit in 1992 focused on the environment, while its successor summit in Johannesburg in 2002 tackled the social aspects of sustainability. Now Rio+20 provides the opportunity to complete the triangle by talking about a new economic framework for sustainable development.

But for those who interpret green economy as simply green growth, the concept does not successfully combine with sustainable development. This approach can target economic development through environmentally sound business models that ignore the social pillar of sustainable development. Or it can promote growth that depends on high tech solutions, thereby excluding many developing countries that lack high tech capability.

If some countries are going to pursue green growth models, there must be much greater involvement in SDG discussions from their ministries of finance and industry.

What’s the talk about wellbeing?

There’s a well-established school of thought that measuring a country’s progress solely in terms of economic success, using gross domestic product (GDP) as the key indicator, is no longer adequate. Supporters of alternative indicators believe that GDP not only masks inequality between different groups in society, but also misses out what really represents development for the individual.

Japan is planning a happiness index, following in the footsteps of the UK which, since April 2011, has measured wellbeing as well as tracking economic growth. Bhutan already has a gross national happiness index based on household wealth, physical and mental health, and community and social ties. In 2011 the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development launched its ‘Towards green growth’ strategy with a set of accompanying indicators.

It’s likely, then, that discussions around SDGs will be joined by debates on new metrics, beyond the traditional economic ones, that all nations can use to measure sustainable development, with their triple bottom line of economy, environment and social wellbeing.

Is there a hidden agenda?

The SDG idea is being driven by middle-income countries — countries just outside the inner circle of power that hope the principle of multilateralism manifested in the SDG concept will serve as a framework for their future development. They are never going to be powerful enough to go it alone, so they believe working collectively is the way forward for them and for less developed nations.

What happens after Rio?

If governments in both North and South adopt the principle of SDGs in Rio this will start a process to ‘define what the goals cover, the timetable and who should be part of the negotiations. If governments in Rio don’t agree that SDGs are a good idea, it’s possible that a group of countries will go ahead anyway, taking a plurilateral approach and hoping that they can persuade others to join in once the outline for the goals has been worked out.

This would weaken the SDGs potentially because their success rests on universal adoption. Process is also important: some nations will only sign up to goals that have been negotiated solely at the government level, rather than in a process that has included civil society, academics, business and others.

Additional resources

- For all suggestions to date for SDGs: www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=115
- SDGs: easy win or slippery slope? Oxfam blog: http://www.oxfamblogs.org/fp2p/?p=8551

Supported by

This briefing has been produced by IIED, for the Reframing Rio project. Reframing Rio is an ambitious multimedia project that aims to reignite the global debate about the need to re-set the world on more sustainable pathways around the landmark Rio+20 meeting in Brazil in May 2012. The project has been implemented by tve, together with IIED and IPS. This content has been produced with the financial assistance of the European Union. The content is the sole responsibility of IIED and tve, and can under no circumstances be regarded as reflecting the position of the European Union.