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South Centre Paper on Sustainable Development Goals SDGs: Overall Conceptual Framework Development

This paper of the South Centre on the overall concept of the SDGs was presented by its Executive Director Martin Khor during the expert panel at the opening day of the first session of the UN's open working group on SDGs held in the General Assembly hall on 14 March 2013. It had also been presented to a meeting of the G77 and China in New York as part of its preparation for the meetings of the UN working group on SDGs.

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The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) process should be coherent with the Development Agenda process in that the design, structure and choice of SDGs should be in line with what developing countries want to achieve in the Development Agenda.

The SDGs should not be a set of goals for only developing countries to undertake as a kind of conditionality or new obligations applying only to them and only at national level. The Rio plus 20 outcome decided that the goals are "universally applicable to all countries", including the developed countries.

Since this is being formulated in the UN in the context of international cooperation, the **international cooperation aspects are crucial**. While the developing countries also take on national goals, they should be supported by:

- (a) corresponding actions of developed countries that support (and not be a barrier to) developing countries' efforts;
- (b) actions at the level of the international economic, financial, trade, technology and social systems, to support and enable developing countries' actions/efforts;
- (c) provision of finance and technology and other means of implementation.

It is proposed that the **structure of the SDG framework** should comprise:

(1) Principles and modalities.

(2) A section or sections on goals, targets and actions at the level of the international system that will be supportive of the developing countries' achievement of SDGs. This will be a more elaborate and systematic version of Goal 8 (Global Partnership for Development) in the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). This will be a general section not necessarily categorized as economic, social or environmental.

(3) Sections on Economic, Social and Environmental Goals.

a. In each section, there should be a number of goals. In order to have balance between the three pillars/dimensions of sustainable development, there can be an equal number of goals in each pillar. Each goal will be accompanied by a number of targets.

b. For each goal, there can be differentiation between developed and developing country goals and targets. There can be a preambular part in each goal that explains the issue and perhaps the actions required.

c. For the goal pertaining to developing countries, there can be the following structure: (a) The goal; (b) The international factors or targets that have to be established or reformed or removed in order to enable the developing countries' goals and targets to be met, including providing sufficient policy space for national development; (c) National Sub-goals or Targets; (d) The means of implementation (finance, technology) required by developing countries.

(4) A general section on means of implementation (especially financial resources and technology transfer and development).

Categories of Issues that Can Be Basis for Formulating the Goals: In the Rio+20 process, much attention was centered on environmental goals. In order to implement a balanced approach, it is imperative for developing countries to put forward goals under economic and social pillars in order to provide an overall balance. Also, developing countries can put forward their own views on what the environmental goals and targets will be.

On the economic pillar, the following are categories of economic issues for developing countries from which goals could be drawn:

1) Adequate rate of economic growth, which is inclusive, sustainable and sustained.

2) Financial stability, with adequate regulation and a reformed global financial architecture.

3) International financing for development.

4) Effectively addressing debt problems of developing countries, including through an international debt restructuring mechanism.

5) Trade and development.

6) Technology transfer and development, and orienting the intellectual property rights (IPR) regime towards sustainable development.

7) Promoting industrialization in developing countries.

8) Promoting sustainable agriculture in developing countries.

9) Commodities: prices and revenues; adding value through processing and industry; speculation in commodity markets.

10) Importance of developing countries having adequate policy space and instruments to put into effect policies in the above mentioned areas.

In relation to social issues, the following categories of issues were raised:

1) Poverty eradication.

2) Redistribution policies and measures.

3) Policies and measures to reduce inequalities at national and international levels.

4) Objective of full employment and adequate livelihoods.

5) Access of the poor to affordable health, food, water and sanitation, energy, education.

6) The global food crisis and food security.

7) Social protection measures.

8) Importance of international environment and partnership and support to enable developing countries to achieve the above, through finance, technology transfer, trade policies.

On environmental issues, the following categories can be used:

1) Atmosphere and climate.

2) Oceans and seas.

3) Water

4) Forests

5) Biodiversity

6) Toxic chemicals and waste.

7) Sustainable Agriculture

8) Sustainable consumption and production patterns.

9) Importance of international environment, partnership and support (international system and policies of developed countries that can support and achieve the above).

In formulating each goal, the three dimensions of sustainable development will be given consideration. Thus though an issue may be primarily economic (e.g. promoting agriculture sector), the social aspects (e.g. access to land and credit for small farmers) and environmental aspects (ecologically sound techniques) will also be considered.

Developed countries will also be obliged to undertake goals and targets. In establishing these, the interests of developing countries will be fully taken into account, e.g. that there not be negative effects on developing countries; and that the targets are adequate in order that developing countries have more environmental and development space. A key broad goal that is important for developed countries is sustainable patterns of consumption and production.

Especially since the goals will be applied to all countries, the principle of common but differentiated responsibility (CBDR) must be applied in a central way when formulating the goals and targets.

Principles of SDGs: The principles will guide the entire SDG process. These principles should be drawn from the Rio plus 20 outcome (especially paragraphs 246, 247). This can be supplemented by the March 2012 G77 position. In accordance with the Rio+20 outcome (para 246), the principles should include:

(a) The SDGs should be based on Agenda 21 and Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (and also Rio+20 outcome and other UN conferences on economic, social and environmental issues).

(b) The formulation and implementation of SDGs shall fully respect all Rio Principles, taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and priorities.

(c) The SDGs are to be consistent with international law.

(d) The SDGs should build upon commitments already made, and contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major Summits in the economic, social and environmental fields, including Rio+20.

(e) These goals should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages.

(f) They should be coherent with and integrated in the United Nations Development Agenda beyond 2015.

(g) They should contribute to the achievement of sustainable development and serve as a driver for implementation and mainstreaming of sustainable development in the United Nations system as a whole.

(h) The development of these goals should not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals.

Other agreed features of the SDGs (as taken from para 247) are that the SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities. The goals should address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development. Governments should drive implementation with the active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate.

On the **interface between the SDGs and the development agenda**, there are at least two schools of thought. One is that there should be a convergence of the MDGs, SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda up front (i.e. now or as soon as possible). Another view is that it is too early to decide on the issue of convergence as there are various processes taking place at the same time, and it is not possible at the moment to ascertain whether it would be positive or possible to combine the processes. Moreover, the history, background and principles and understandings underpinning the SDG process may differ from those of the Development Agenda and the MDG processes, thus

creating difficulties in a marriage of the two. It is clear that developments in one stream of work should inform and influence the other stream, and modalities should be established for such interaction. The two different processes can also converge in two future places: the outcomes of both can be launched at the envisaged Development Summit in 2015, as two separate outcome documents. Convergence can also take place if the follow up activities for the outcomes of the SDGs and the Development Agenda are both located in a common home, such as the High Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

On the **Open Working Group (OWG)**, the presence and participation of the G77 and China and its Chair is vital not only to advocate the views of the Group but as an essential contribution to reaching an agreement. The common positions of the Group would also be an important guideline for the members of the working group. The OWG's deliberations should be opened for the presence and participation of all Member States, as far as possible, and as a rule rather than an exception.

Annex:

Example of SDG using proposed structure: Food and Agriculture

Goal: Promote sustainable agriculture and small farmers' livelihoods/incomes in developing countries.

Explanation: Agriculture is a vital sector in developing countries, as it employs a large section of their populations, and there is a high concentration also of poverty, while the countries' food security relies on the growth of this sector. However, there are many problems including international issues such as imbalances in the global agricultural trade (including high subsidies in developed countries), inability of small farmers to compete with often subsidized imports due to lowered tariffs, and inadequate international funding for agriculture. National level problems facing small farmers include lack of access to land, lack of credit, and high costs of inputs leading to indebtedness. Due to the spread of chemical/industrial agriculture, which is environmentally harmful (including as a major source of greenhouse emissions) there is also a need for a transition to ecologically sound farming, in many areas.

Examples of Subsidiary Goals and Targets to be developed for:

1. Changes in rules of global trade and commodity markets required for achieving sustainable agriculture and food security
2. Reduction of agricultural subsidies in developed countries: (Targets with dates/figures)
3. Trade policy in developing countries that promote small farmers' livelihoods, food security and rural development (three principles accepted in WTO Doha negotiations)
4. Increase in international funding including aid to agriculture in developing countries
5. National goal for increase in production of food, and assistance to farmers for production
6. Access by small farmers to land and security of land tenure
7. Access by small farmers to credit and marketing facilities

8. Target for development of and transition to ecological farming and for rehabilitation of soils, irrigation, etc.

9. Means of implementation (international finance and technology transfer) to support national policies in developing countries

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