



LEADERSHIP FOR THE SDGS: WHY FOREIGN POLICY MUST RECHARGE MULTILATERAL COOPERATION NOW

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The initiative and this publication by adelphi research gemeinnützige GmbH are supported by a grant from the German Federal Foreign Office.



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In cooperation with

Chatham House

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Layout

undstoffers Designbüro, www.undstoffers.de

Photo credits

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Acknowledgement

The authors of this essay would like to thank Paul Joffe (Lawyers' Committee for Civil Rights Under Law) for sharing insights and experiences through comments on various parts and versions of the essay. Needless to say, this does not imply that the reviewer necessarily endorses the analysis and recommendations presented in this essay. We wish to thank Anya Malhotra, Jonathan Smith, Lucas Plummer and Adrian Foong for their valuable editorial support.

Place and Date of Publication

Berlin, 30th of April 2019

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BY OLI BROWN (CHATHAM HOUSE) AND STELLA SCHALLER (ADELPHI)

The SDGs set out a powerful vision for a better world, but action since 2015 is not delivering that promise. Foreign policy practitioners are in a unique position to help advocate for and assist in the implementation of the SDGs. Given that the SDGs and foreign policy want to achieve the same things – stability, peace and prosperity on a healthy planet – delivering them should be seen as a litmus test for the effectiveness of foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

2015: THE YEAR OF INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

2015 was a landmark year for international cooperation. In the space of one year a slew of ground-breaking agreements were signed: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the Paris Accord on Climate Change, the Iran nuclear deal, the Addis Ababa Agreement on Financing Sustainable Development and the Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. At the time, many of us assumed these were milestones towards a community of nations that, finally, would be able to tackle some of the world's most intractable problems more decisively.

A NEW MODEL FOR DEVELOPMENT

The 17 SDGs represent the world's most comprehensive ever plan for planetary health and human development. The 169 targets that flesh out the goals are ambitious, precise and (mostly) achievable. And the 224 indicators aim to describe the 'who, what, where and when' of a global vision for a sustainable future. Together they set out a roadmap for the five 'Ps': People, Planet, Peace, Prosperity and Partnership.

The SDGs succeed the Millennium Development Goals which helped crystallise and drive remarkable progress in many parts of the world. Since 2000, more than a billion people have pulled themselves above the extreme poverty line of USD 1.90



A view of the General Assembly following the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda. The 17 SDGs established by the 2030 Agenda were prepared in a thorough and inclusive international negotiation process following the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development in 2012 (or Rio+20 Summit) and replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).

per person per day. The proportion of families living in extreme poverty fell from 26.9 per cent in 2000 to 9.2 per cent in 2017. Overall, people are living healthier and better lives than at any time in history.

Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, a United Nations developed prescription for the developing world which ran from 2000 to 2015, the SDGs are universal. This universality could be considered a recognition that all countries have made progress, but that all countries can also do better. The SDGs challenge the traditional idea of development where 'developed' countries provide aid to poorer, 'developing' states.

Instead, they recognise that all countries are somewhere on a spectrum of development. All countries have a responsibility to improve the lot of their own citizens. And the ways they do so can be compared, even if the starting points, and methods are far apart. This is a subtle but profound distinction. Sweden has to promote clean mobility just as much Swaziland. Cameroon needs to improve primary education, but then so do Canada and Chile. The SDGs remind us that all countries are on the same journey.

A NEW CHALLENGE FOR FOREIGN POLICY

The SDGs and foreign policy share many objectives: lowering forced migration, preventing conflict, reducing the need for humanitarian aid, countering violent extremism, and promoting foreign trade and economic empowerment, to mention just a few. If

While traditional foreign policy has often been reactive, the SDGs embody an approach that is fundamentally preventative.

they are fully implemented, the SDGs will have monumental foreign policy implications. They promise to change the political economy of resource use, alter trading and development relationships, and improve human security.

However, while their desired destinations – peace, security, prosperity – look very similar, the routes that the SDGs and foreign policy employ to achieve their objectives may, at the outset, appear different. The SDGs embody an approach that is fundamentally preventative, putting in place the investment, capacities and governance to forestall problems.

Traditional foreign policy, on the other hand, has often been reactive, fighting fires as they appear. However, these distinctions are narrowing, as foreign policy experts are increasingly recognising that effective foreign policy needs to be both preventative as well as responsive.

THE RUBBER MEETS THE ROAD

The SDGs underwent a lengthy consultation process prior to their conclusion in 2015. But, as exhaustive as their development was, it is in their implementation that the real test lies.

The SDGs are non-binding, and thus require strong political will and leadership for their achievement.

Now is when investment needs to be scaled up. Now is when political priorities must relentlessly focus on achieving the targets and stubbornly working on all of the indicators.

However, the mechanisms to make that happen are extremely weak. The SDGs are non-binding. At best, they are held in place by a mixture of soft power, patchy domestic legislation and weak peer pressure mechanisms like the Voluntary National Reviews where countries present their own progress for international comment.

As the celebrations around the signing of the goals fall into memory and the politicians who signed them have moved on, there is less and less moral pressure on leaders to adhere to them. Empty promises are easy for politicians to make, especially

when the reckoning of their success or failure in 2030 will be beyond the ends of many of their careers. Increasingly, the politicians tasked with implementing the goals are not those that agreed to them. More than ever, the SDGs need sturdy political will and brave political leadership to ensure the ambitious promises are delivered.

THE GOALS ARE FACING HEADWINDS

The implementation of the SDGs faces daunting challenges. Some of these are of their own making, but other challenges have reared their heads in the fast-changing political environment that has roiled global politics since 2015 – in particular the rise of a form populist politics that appears to reject multilateral cooperation as a desirable goal of foreign policy.

The first problem is that we still do not have the right tools to properly monitor our collective progress in implementing the SDGs. Nearly four years after the goals were signed, only around 100 of the 224 indicators are fully agreed. These are the so-called 'tier 1' indicators, which have an internationally established methodology with data regularly produced for at least 50 per cent of countries and the 50 per cent of the populations where the indicator is relevant. Even where we have indicators and data, the most vulnerable populations, often those in fragile and conflict-affected countries, are rarely included in the collection of data. In essence, this means that the SDGs are already more than one quarter of the way through their implementation but that there is still no agreement on how to judge progress for dozens of the targets. This could undermine the credibility of the goals as well as the efforts needed to achieve them.

SDG implementation faces daunting challenges, namely the lack of proper tools to monitor implementation, the wide-ranging nature of the SDGs and the rise of populism globally.

The second is the inherently wide-ranging nature of the SDGs. On the one hand they create a holistic, one-stop plan for a better world. But on the other, their breadth – covering everything from extreme poverty to international partnership via a hundred other issues – means that the SDGs often seem like they are trying to be all things to all people. They verge on becoming diffuse and vague. The danger is that when everything is a priority, nothing is prioritised.

Few people can actually recite the 17 goals from memory, even professionals in the development world who work on SDG-related projects every day. Moreover, the range and complexity of the policy issues they tackle means talking about the goals often descends into obscure technical jargon further and further removed from what the man or woman on the street might be able to relate to. This is important because implementing the SDGs is primarily a domestic challenge for every country,



Over three years down the road, the speed of transformation is lagging. 2.6 billion people have gained access to improved drinking water sources since 1990, but 663 million people are still without.

and a large percentage of the investment of time and money required to achieve the goals will need to come from domestic sources. If the SDGs are removed from daily realities, they will struggle to mobilise actions or votes.

The third, and perhaps most daunting, challenge is the rapid, worrying growth in populist nationalism around the world. One characteristic of populist politics on the right and the left is the inclination to pull back from multilateralism out of a sense that the 'common man' has lost out in the process of globalisation and that global elites are driving its shadowy agenda. Since 2015, people have repeatedly voted for populist leaders or decisions that explicitly renounce a multilateral approach to common challenges: Brexit in the UK, Trump in America, Duterte in the Philippines, Salvini in Italy and Bolsonaro in Brazil. Far-right populist parties are in power, or sharing power, in seven EU nations. Countries have pulled out of key agreements like the Paris Agreement or the Global Compact for Safe, Orderly and Regular Migration. Jair Bolsonaro has even threatened to pull Brazil out of the UN. Meanwhile, Donald Trump's hostility to the body is widely documented.

These positions attract a huge amount of media attention, but arguably a greater impact may come from the 'chilling' effect on other leaders and initiatives. Government policy in many places seems to be becoming more inward-looking, more isolationist, although it is not clear that if this is a passing phase or an enduring pivot in global politics. If this is indeed the beginning of a slippery slope towards nativism and populism at home and a beggar-thy-neighbour politics abroad, then it is entirely possible things will get worse before they get better.

PROGRESS IS LAGGING AND UNEVEN

So, it is perhaps not surprising that while there has been progress towards achieving some of the SDG targets, that progress remains very uneven. Overall the world is not moving fast enough to meet the ambitious 17 goals by 2030. The level of funding for the implementation of the SDGs is insufficient. It is estimated that achieving the SDGs will require an annual investment in the region of USD 5-7 trillion per year across all sectors and industries. The investment gap in developing countries alone is estimated at USD 2.5 trillion per year.¹ The countries where the SDGs are furthest off-track are those most affected by conflict and fragility.

Funding for the implementation of the SDGs is insufficient, and those countries that are furthest off-track from the SDGs are those that are most affected by conflict and fragility.

Meanwhile, violent conflicts and climate change have contributed to the rise of world hunger and the forced displacement of millions of people. Inequality is growing around the world. 617 million children are either out of school or coming out of school lacking basic literacy and numeracy.² Environmental degradation continues to accelerate in many places around the world. Unsafe drinking water and poor sanitation are major contributors to global mortality, resulting in 870,000 deaths in 2016. Each year between 6 and 7 million people die prematurely as a result of poor air quality.³ Food insecurity is rising: in 2017 global hunger and most dimensions of malnutrition increased for the third year in a row.⁴ On current trends, there will be more than 3 million preventable child deaths in 2030.

FORK IN THE ROAD

Clearly the promise of the SDGs is not being fully realised. We need to recognise that there is no path dependency in the SDGs. Just because they have been signed does not mean they will be automatically implemented (see essay #3 on the politics of implementation). The universality of the SDGs means they are owned by no-one in particular. As things stand, the SDGs risk becoming rudderless, without anyone ensuring that their bold promises are delivered on.

It seems the world is facing two very different possible futures: one is where the SDGs manage to stay relevant and compelling, and drive a new model for sustainable development, both at home and abroad.

But there is another future where the SDGs – perhaps a once-in-a-generation chance to implement a commonly agreed vision for a better world – fall prey to short-term and short-sighted political currents. We may look back on 2015 as the high-water mark of multilateralism characterised by a naïve trust in an overly ambitious plan for peace and development.

FOREIGN POLICY CAN, AND MUST, PROVIDE LEADERSHIP

Diplomats, practitioners and academics working in the realm of foreign policy can help determine which of these two scenarios plays out.

Even though agreeing on the SDGs was a huge achievement, ensuring the process continues is a task for concerted multilateral action. It is a highly ambitious agenda, one that can change the face of the world, and it follows that its implementation needs to be as ambitious – and maybe as unconventional – as the agenda itself. It requires people who can work across geographical, linguistic and cultural boundaries: In other words, foreign policy professionals.



More than ever the SDGs need bold leadership to bridge the divide between current realities and sustainable, just visions of the future.

There are many inherently international targets in the 2030 Agenda, such as 10.6 and 16.8 (global governance), 13 (climate change), 16.4 (illicit finance, arms) and various targets on trafficking (5.2, 8.7, 15.7, 16.2). But even national targets can be supported by the international community, if national action alone is insufficient as is the case with regulation of trade in minerals used to finance insurgents, environmental damage, child labour and many other transboundary issues.

Leadership is the ability to translate vision into reality. More than ever the SDGs need bold leadership to bridge the divide between the world as we find it and the world as we would want to find it. Foreign policy professionals could help by:

1. **Reframing and underlining the SDGs as being in the enlightened self-interest of countries around the world;**
2. **Working to implement the goals in the most fragile and conflict-affected places;**
3. **Addressing the political economy of the implementation of the SDGs; and,**
4. **Bringing in more foreign policy instruments to help implement the SDGs.**

The final section of this essay explores each of these ideas in turn.

1 SDGs as enlightened self interest

Sustainable development is a prime example of an issue where the enlightened self-interest of nations requires global cooperation. Foreign policy practitioners can present a powerful case for the SDGs being a necessary investment in crisis prevention – a cost-effective form of ‘planetary health insurance’. Foreign policy practitioners can help to reframe the debate around the SDGs away from the old clichés around development and the transfer of foreign aid and instead articulate what a transformative change towards a more sustainable world would look like.

In this age of increasing political polarisation, multilateral cooperation (often dubbed ‘globalism’ by its critics) is under fire by those worried about the perceived weakening of national sovereignty, the homogenisation of cultural identity and the rise of globalised unaccountable ‘elites’. In this discourse there is a risk that the SDGs will be seen, and rejected, as emblematic of a partisan political agenda. Historically however, governments on both the left and right of the political spectrum have realised that working together with others, rather than in isolation, is the only real way to deal with shared problems.

Foreign policy experts can articulate a compelling and credible case for action on the SDGs.

Multilateralism is just the recognition that common problems are often best solved by collective action – but the benefits of that action accrue to every country. There is a tendency for the pro-SDG crowd (mostly comprised of staff working for the UN and international and national NGOs) to travel in relatively small circles, speaking only to those already convinced of the need for action and glossing over some of the reasons that the goals are not being implemented.

Achieving the SDGs requires reaching beyond this small constituency and convincing a wider group of people to act. What is needed is a constituency in favour of the SDGs that includes citizens, governments, faith groups, the private sector, non-governmental organisations, social movements and academia (see essay #6 on the role of the private sector). Diplomats can play an important role in mobilising that constituency and helping people recognise that their common interests lie in cooperation.

One step in this direction is to highlight the tangible benefits of cooperation. Who delivers the message is important. Foreign policy practitioners already work on the frontlines of many of the world's problems. They can articulate a powerful argument for why the SDGs are necessary. Ultimately this can help move the discussion away from the idea that the SDGs are somehow a partisan, left-wing, liberal agenda. Foreign policy can create a convincing narrative about the need for action.

2 Understanding and addressing the political economy of the SDGs

Meanwhile, it is important to recognise that the implementation of an agenda such as the SDGs promises to reshape the world. This has potentially far-reaching effects on domestic, regional and global politics. Not all of these will necessarily be universally positive for all stakeholders. The implementation of the SDGs could, occasionally, have unintended consequences that foreign policy may need to address (see essay #4 on the trade-offs in SDG implementation).

Foreign policy can provide the necessary information and innovation to minimise the negative impacts and maximise the opportunities of SDG implementation.

For example, a major transition to cleaner forms of energy production and use will likely increase demand for minerals such as lithium and tantalum, which might increase the likelihood of conflict or significant environmental degradation in countries that produce those minerals. All these complex interactions mean it is important to understand the political

economy of the SDGs. Foreign policy can play an important role in understanding how these forces could affect local and regional politics. Ultimately, foreign policy can provide the necessary information and innovative approaches that can help to ensure that negative impacts are minimised and new opportunities are maximised.



Progress on the SDGs, particularly in countries that emerge from crisis and conflict, is required to reinstate livelihoods, and eventually, strengthen resilience.

3 Ensuring the SDGs deliver change in fragile and conflict-affected states

Foreign policy practitioners have a particularly important role to play in helping implement the SDGs in fragile and conflict-affected states (see essay #2 on reducing violence and essay #5 on investing in fragile contexts). These are the countries where progress on the SDGs is already lagging. Foreign policy can work to ensure that fragile and conflict-affected countries fully participate in SDG-related processes. Foreign policy professionals can also help to work out what sort of interventions might be most effective in fragile and conflict-affected states, and ensure that they are implemented in a conflict-sensitive and risk-informed way. Finally, they can help to facilitate and foster the sort of transboundary and regional cooperative frameworks that can support action on the SDGs.

For example, in Mali environmental challenges such as droughts and desertification are making peace harder to attain, and fragility is having regional spill-over effects. Here, foreign policy can contribute by supporting policymakers in developing national security strategies and migration policies to address some of the underlying natural resource related risks.

4 Using the full range of foreign policy instruments to deliver on the SDGs

Success in foreign policy, as in any endeavour, requires the right tools for the job. Foreign policy has a number of tools at its disposal that could help to promote the SDGs and facilitate their implementation. Foreign policy professionals can use a range of existing platforms to promote the SDGs – including the G7, G20, EU Committees, OECD, Bretton Woods institutions. Ultimately, this could help ensure that the SDGs become more than one additional item in the in-tray of development ministers, but rather something that is part of the discussion across all parts of government. This is also necessary at sub-national levels, given that cities and local governments are likely to become significant players in the 2030 sustainable development agenda.

Many tools in foreign policy already exist to promote the SDGs, at the international, national and sub-national levels.

But foreign policy can also ensure that the SDGs are woven, wherever possible and appropriate, into the very fabric of trade agreements, mediation processes, cultural relations, customs unions, security pacts, political dialogues and negotiations over the mandates of international organisations. France, for example, announced in late 2018 that it would not support the signature of trade agreements with countries not adhering to the Paris Agreement on climate change. The EU itself has noted that it cannot meet its pledge to deliver on the SDGs and help fight poverty, climate change and environmental degradation globally, if its key trading partners forgo them. The same is true across the entire sweep of the SDGs, and bold leadership from foreign policy is necessary to ensure that the SDGs, and the member states who signed up to them, live up to their promise.

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