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COMMENT

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The UN Blueprint for the Post-2015 Development Agenda > Enabling optimism or true transformation?

The UN responds to the global crisis with a radical proposal. Instead of a traditional donor-recipient approach, it focuses on policy coherence and calls for governments and the private sector to enable global reform. In the absence of strong political commitment, the question remains as to what extent it will succeed.

In September 2015 the United Nations (UN) General Assembly is to agree on a new global agenda for international development (2015-2030) as the era of Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) comes to an end. Over 50 development experts from different UN entities and other international organizations were tasked with reporting on the lessons learnt from the MDGs, and with proposing a fresh blueprint for the future. The resulting document, “Realizing the Future We Want for All”, is serving as the first reference for consultations across the globe.

Two intertwined challenges make this UN-led endeavour particularly difficult. The first of these relates to the magnitude of the international development agenda and the work that still needs to be done. Several of the MDGs remain unrealized, while priorities that were not sufficiently covered by the current framework compete for attention and resources. Most notable of these are employment and livelihoods, peace and security, as well as human rights and environmental concerns. However, the second challenge is almost as huge as the workload ahead, namely, the almost paralyzing degree of passivism and disinterest among political leaders.

It is this raft of problems that the UN Task Team is aiming to tackle. At the core of the blueprint lies the notion of enabling development through shared responsibility between countries and actors. This marks a shift from a pessimistic focus on the developing countries’ own problems to a wider view whereby developed nations and private sector actors would play a much bigger role.

To make this happen, the UN Task Team is structuring the proposal around three core values for all stakeholders to share. These are human rights, equality and sustainability. The envisioned post-2015 agenda in itself consists of four key dimensions. These include 1) inclusive social development, 2) inclusive economic development, 3) environmental sustainability and 4) peace and security. Each of these dimensions will be completed with concrete goals, targets, indicators and means of implementation now that the complex consultation process has run its course.

Yet the ground-breaking suggestion that the UN team is making relates to the factors that underpin each of the four dimensions. The UN System Task Team calls them “enablers”. These enablers can be understood as prerequisites that

need to be in place in order to achieve any of the future development goals. They are included to guide policy-makers and private actors to act more coherently. For instance, the achievement of inclusive economic development-related objectives calls for fair and stable global trading and financial systems as well as affordable access to technology and knowledge. By the same token, the fate of environmental sustainability goals will be determined by the way in which we use natural resources. Peace and security also hinge on good governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights. Moreover, the four dimensions are interconnected. This implies that failures and successes in each sector influence one another. The same interdependence is highlighted between national and international levels.

The UN Blueprint broadens the conventional approach to development well beyond the tradition donor-recipient relationship and development cooperation. It also points to the underlying weakness of the current international agenda and discusses failures to address the root causes and incoherencies behind poverty and unsustainability. In so doing, the UN Task Team has reignited the debate over “Global

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partnership for development”, which has been the largely unfulfilled MDG for developed countries to support poorer countries with effective aid, better trade rules, and access to technology and knowledge.

Hence, the overriding strength of the UN Blueprint is that it connects the present MDGs for developing countries to the wider frame of sustainable development. While advocating an agenda for global transformation, the UN Task Team acknowledges the power of the present MDGs to galvanize international attention and much-needed development assistance for the poorest countries. Indeed, the MDGs have had a positive impact on decreasing absolute poverty, and improving access to primary education, as well as to clean drinking water. Yet much more is needed to stay on track and to ensure the full attainment of all MDGs. Among them are the still unrealized objectives of better nutrition as well as lower child and maternal mortality rates, which cannot be reached by development aid only.

Regarding the larger sustainable development perspective, the obvious challenge lies in the fact that in reality, the “enabling” factors are largely missing. Indeed, many of them are more like “disabling” obstacles to development. For

instance, the current consumption of natural resources is far from sustainable. By the same token, there is no such thing as a fair global trading system yet, let alone a stable financial one. The rule of law and respect for basic human rights do not prevail. The same applies to the whole list of enablers.

The UN Task Team acknowledges that the approach requires a new mindset and the will to remedy incoherent action. In the light of the ongoing situation, there is a real risk that this point will be missed and the holistic vision will remain incomplete. Yet, the key to global transformation lies in the enablers. Now the ball is in the court of UN member governments, high-level bodies, and private sector and civil society actors. Do they have what it takes to make it succeed?

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