UN Millennium Development Goals replaced by new ‘distraction gimmicks’

Patrick Bond [1]

Wednesday, September 30, 2015 - 03:00

Last weekend in New York heralded another of the annual UN heads-of-state summits at which inappropriate targets, processes and evaluation systems were reconfirmed. Politicians joined multilateral bureaucrats to congratulate each other for hitting many of the MDG targets during the 2000-2015 period. Now there are 17 new SDGs with 169 new targets and more than 300 indicators to aim for by 2030.

But since most state elites are not truly committed to these, the big question is whether SDGs can motivate activists working in the trenches against the systems of power that create poverty, hunger, disease and climate change. The UN, in contrast, shies away from considering or attributing causes, preferring to focus on symptoms.

As a result, the poverty-creating and ecology-destroying features of the world economy will proceed entirely unhindered by UN hot air. Tellingly, there are no concrete mandatory greenhouse gas emissions-cut goals in the SDG “13 – Climate action,” which simply encourages the Paris UN climate summit in December to adopt voluntary pledges. These are, frankly, useless. Mandatory cuts are vital if catastrophe is to be avoided.

And illustrating the UN’s bean-counting contortions, the very first SDG [3] is, “by 2030, eradicate extreme poverty for all people everywhere, currently measured as people living on less than $1.25 a day.” That measure comes from heartless World Bank economists, and gives us a 2015 world poverty count of just 1.2 billion people [4]. But what if you need not just food but minimal healthcare, a roof over your head and clothing? The UN Conference on Trade and Development says the target should be $5 per day [5].

At one invaluable watchdog group, “The Rules,” Jason Hickel debunks [6]: “The drafters of the SDGs know this fact. So why stick with the discredited $1.25 measure? Because it’s the only one that will allow them to get anywhere near their goal of eradicating poverty by 2030. If we measure poverty by the more accurate $5/day line, the total poverty headcount rises to 4.3 billion people, more than 60 percent of humanity.” That’s 370 million more people than in 1990.

Here in South Africa, World Bank economists claimed [7] late last year that at $1.25/day, extreme poverty rate is suffered by just 16.5 percent of our 55 million residents, half what it was before considering state grants to children and the elderly. Moreover, added the Bank, “Thanks to effective use of fiscal policy to achieve redistribution, the Gini coefficient on income falls from 0.77 to 0.59,” a fib obvious to anyone aware of the vast state corporate welfare benefits which Bank staff brazenly ignored [8].

Bank statistics were then repeatedly used [9] by a local gaggle of neoliberals to drum-beat for
greater austerity, and so in February, Finance Minister Nhlanhla Nene obliged by shrinking the real value of grants by 3 percent. Yet at the same time, a poverty rate of 53 percent was calculated by StatsSA using $1.88/day as the bare survival level. A few weeks ago, University of Cape Town researchers counted $2.50/day costs of 2100 kilocalories of food and other essential expenditures and reckoned that poverty is closer to 62 percent.

“Torturing the data until they confess” is what neoliberal poverty experts apparently feel is necessary in defence of their dark arts. In 2006, Africa's leading political economist, Samir Amin, described MDG-talk as “intended to legitimize the policies and practices implemented by dominant capital and those who support it, i.e., in the first place the governments of the triad countries [US, EU and Japan], and secondarily governments in the South.” As for MDGs cutting extreme poverty and hunger by half, said Amin, “This is nothing but an empty incantation as long as the policies that generate poverty are not analyzed and denounced and alternatives proposed.”

In the journal Gender & Development, Caribbean political economist Peggy Antrobus of Development Alternatives with Women for a New Era renamed MDGs, Major Distraction Gimmicks. For feminists, said Antrobus, “the exclusion of the goal of women’s sexual and reproductive rights reflects the power of the forces of religious fundamentalism.” The MDGs’ focus on the outcomes masks the process, she told an interviewer for Alliance: “We ought to be helping people to understand how these things are the consequences of structures that are profoundly unjust.”

She continued: “the current macro context in which these MDGs have emerged contains the twin demons of religious and economic fundamentalism. Both have at their core the subordination and exploitation of women’s time, labor, and sexuality for the benefit of patriarchal power on the one hand, and capitalism on the other. “

But the point here is that creative people constantly fight neoliberalism, racism, patriarchy and climate catastrophe, even if the UN ignores them and their efforts. Likewise, in our critique of the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP) a decade ago, my colleagues Dennis Brutus, Virginia Setshedi and I pointed out that its opening newsletter was silent on “organic anti-poverty activism in the Global South, such as – in no particular order – labor strikes, popular mobilizations for AIDS-treatment and other health services, reconnections of water/electricity, land and housing occupations, anti-GMO and pro-food security campaigns, women’s organizing, municipal budget campaigns, student and youth movements, community resistance to displacements caused by dam construction and the like, anti-debt and reparations movements, environmental justice struggles, immigrants’ rights campaigns, political movements to take state power, etc, etc.”

We continued, in a critique that applies even more to the UN, “It’s as if the formidable recent upsurge of unrest – 1980s-90s IMF riots, high-profile indigenous people’s protests since Zapatismo in 1994, global justice activism since Seattle in 1999, the Social Forum movement since 2001, anti-war demos since 2001, autonomist protests and the Latin American left’s revival – never happened, don’t exist, aren’t worthy of acknowledgment much less integration and amplification.”

Since then, add the North African uprising and the Occupiers of 2011, the rise of the Southern European and Irish left (and maybe in the UK and US too, judging by electoral trends), the anti-race/class/repression movement in the US, NGO campaigning against illicit financial flows, climate campaigners against major polluters, anti-extractivist struggles across the South, and more recent mass protests against socio-economic injustice and authoritarianism in Brazil, Burkina Faso, China, India, South Africa, Turkey and so many other sites of struggle. At such moments you can count on World Bank and UN officials to run in the other direction.

Another direction the SDGs dare not venture towards is asking why poverty and ecological chaos are repeatedly reproduced as the flip side of wealth: in short, uneven development. In ‘hacking’ the SDGs, The Rules campaigners ask three uncomfortable questions that SDGites dare not consider: “How Is Poverty Created?; Who’s Developing Whom?; Why Is Growth The Only Answer?”

Hopefully these are the questions that journalists and the general public also start asking their national poverty officials. And hopefully the tough critiques from The Rules and scholar-activists such as Amin and Antrobus are given more air time. Otherwise, without attention to poverty causality,
without the activists who make social change possible, and without intellectual critics unintimidated by officialdom’s back-slapping, these SDGs are unsustainable distractions whose definitions of development and environment continue being twisted beyond recognition.

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Article-Summary:
The ubiquitous ‘development goals’ chosen by the United Nations – first Millennium (MDGs) in 2000 and now Sustainable (SDGs) – were and are and will be a distraction from the real work of fighting poverty done by social justice activists, including Africans.

Category: Governance [24]

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Published on Pambazuka News (https://www.pambazuka.org)

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