

Sustainable Development Goals 2016-2030: Easier Stated Than Achieved

Govind Singh

Editor, Journal of Innovation for Inclusive Development, Centre for Earth Studies &
Department of Environmental Studies, Indraprastha College for Women, University of Delhi

In 2001, the new millennium had arrived with hope and promise of a better world. This was because the last September of the previous millennium had witnessed a large gathering of world leaders in a Millennium Summit. World leaders, in consonance with the United Nations (UN), felt that the new millennium should begin with ensuring that no human being should have to live in dehumanizing conditions. The conclusion of the Millennium Summit, the UN Millennium Declaration (UN, 2000), led to the adoption of eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to be achieved by 2015. These were, 1) eradicate extreme poverty and hunger; 2) achieve universal primary education; 3) promote gender equality and empower women; 4) reduce child mortality; 5) improve maternal health; 6) combat HIV/AIDS, malaria and other diseases; 7) ensure environmental sustainability; and 8) build global partnership for development.

The MDGs were to be achieved by 2015 and several of the targets set aside against each goal were in fact achieved. According to the concluding MDGs Report, the number of people living in extreme poverty had declined by more than half, to 836 million in 2015 (Way, 2015). Significant improvement in primary education enrollment, gender disparity, health care and environmental performance have also been highlighted in this Report. However, the Report does not hesitate to accept that despite these successes, the poorest and most vulnerable people were left behind (Way, 2015). Gender inequality, widening gap between rich and poor, poverty and hunger, conflicts and climate change & environmental degradation are some continuing challenges being faced by humanity even after a decade and a half long struggle to achieve the MDGs. Thus, a need was felt by the UN to define a new set of goals with

a new deadline. This led to the emergence of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) as part of a 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (UN, 2015).

The 17 SDGs can be briefly summarized as, 1) no poverty; 2) zero hunger; 3) good health and well-being; 4) quality education; 5) gender equality; 6) clean water and sanitation; 7) affordable and clean energy; 8) decent work and economic growth; 9) industry, innovation and infrastructure; 10) reduced inequalities; 11) sustainable cities and communities; 12) responsible consumption and production; 13) climate action; 14) life below water; 15) life on land; 16) peace, justice and strong institutions; and 17) partnerships for the goals. The SDGs are focused on the 5 Ps of people, planet, prosperity, peace and partnership. They also have an underlying objective of ensuring development for all, not just for a chosen few. However, while the goals are comprehensive and their associated targets practical, the SDGs may not be as easy to achieve as they are to state. This is because of some inherent inadequacies in the understanding and adoption of the concept of sustainable development.

The idea of sustainable development, defined as development that meets the needs of the present generation without compromising the ability of the future generations to meet their own needs (Brundtland, 1987), has been around since it was first put forward in 1987. In the last three decades of its existence as an international policy guideline, sustainable development has not been able to alter the development paradigm in its favour. To cite a few examples, the atmospheric carbon dioxide (CO₂) concentration has been on the rise since industrial revolution. CO₂ is a potent heat-trapping (greenhouse) gas and in excess, causes global warming. The CO₂ concentration has continued to rise unabated even after 1987. In fact in 2015, normalized atmospheric CO₂ concentration crossed the 400 parts per million (ppm) mark for the first time since its rigorous measurements

Email: contact@govindsingh.com

began in 1958 (NASA, 2016). Far from reducing, atmospheric CO₂ concentration is not showing any signs of stabilizing even three decades after the introduction of the concept of sustainable development.

Further, according to the Our Common Future Report (Brundtland, 1987) which first defined sustainable development, three sectors need to come together in order to achieve the aforementioned. These are the economic, social and environmental sectors in their broadest sense. However, three decade analysis of the adoption of sustainable development will reveal that the onus of ensuring it has been skewed on only the environmental sector. The other two sectors have contributed little, though consistently, towards ensuring a shift to the sustainable development paradigm. This needs to change now, especially if we are to seriously work towards achieving the SDGs. Every sector needs to contribute towards achieving each sustainable development goal, neither of which can be met in isolation.

This necessitates the promotion of multidisciplinary and transdisciplinary research across different sectors. Like the SDGs, multidisciplinary research is also easier said than done. It requires participating individuals to be highly trained in their own disciplines and also develop multidisciplinary and innovative skill set. This requires the global research community to develop holistic and

innovative approaches towards achieving the SDGs. This is also the backdrop for the initiation of this Journal of Innovation for Inclusive Development (JIID), in the ongoing first year of the SDGs timeframe. JIID will both promote and provide a platform for researchers from different disciplines to come together and to share their research contributions. JIID will give greater emphasis to research contributions which further our understanding on how to ensure that no one gets left behind in the achieving of the SDGs. It is hoped that JIID will pave the way for developing transdisciplinary approaches in the Himalayan task of achieving the SDGs, perhaps our last hope in the fight against inequitable development, climate change and environmental degradation.

References

- Brundtland, G.H., 1987. *Our Common Future*. Oxford University Press, New York (USA).
- NASA, 2016. Website: <http://climate.nasa.gov/vital-signs/carbon-dioxide> (Accessed on 10 August 2016).
- United Nations. 2000. 55/2. United Nations Millennium Declaration. A/55/L.2.
- United Nations. 2015. *Transforming our world: The 2030 agenda for sustainable development*. A/RES/70/1.
- Way, C. 2015. *The Millennium Development Goals Report*. United Nations, New York (USA).