FOUNDATION FOR DEMOCRACY
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

… deepening democracy to create a more sustainable society, economy and environment

The critical role of effective, accountable and inclusive institutions in implementing the Sustainable Development Goals

Provocation

Cat Tully   **October, 2015**

Cat Tully is Director of FromOverHere and a Trustee of FDSD.

Introduction

Who would have thought after Rio+20 in 2012 that an ambitious, confused, multi-level consultation process led by the UN would deliver a consensus among 193 member states, with the aim of transforming the future of our planet and its people? In September 2015, to a standing ovation, the General Assembly agreed a new Agenda for Sustainable Development. The agreement, a vision for all countries to achieve 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), has profound implications for democracy and sustainable development, as well as equality, capital, innovation, security and regulation – assuming that we as a global community decide to implement it. The role of widespread participation and effective, accountable and inclusive institutions will be critical.

The process, designed by the Open Working Group (OWG), to arrive at the Goals, itself showed the value of deliberative and participatory approaches. Only by remaining open to external views, inclusive of the concerns and contributions of all members, and engaged with expert evidence, was the OWG able to navigate the complexities of international policymaking. Actors at the national level would do well to bear this in mind.

As a youth activist leader from Ghana, Emmanuel Edudzie, Executive Director, Youth Empowerment Synergy recently reflected, broad-base ownership of the SDGs has been overwhelming. In contrast to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) – prepared largely by 'experts' at the UN, World Bank and OECD – just about everyone feels their voices are in there somewhere. While the MDGs were criticised for being elitist and top-down, the SDGs can be described as a 'People's Agenda' for development.

This is the power of transparency. This is the power of accountability. This is the power of participation.

The challenge now, as many participants in the SDG process will tell you, is *how* we resource, implement and achieve this aspirational vision.

The importance of SDG 16

The last two goals point to a solution – with Goal 16, in my view, being the most important.

> *Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.*
>
> Of particular relevance to this discussion are:
> *16.6 develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels*
> *16.7 ensure responsive, inclusive, participatory and representative decision-making at all levels*
>
> Goal 17. *Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development.* This includes appropriate financing, policy and institutional coherence, effective multi-stakeholder and public partnerships, as well as effective data collection to support delivery and accountability.

Seen as contentious for a variety of reasons, Goal 16 faced the most danger of being removed or watered down during the negotiations. Multilateral objectives around 'good governance', for example, were strongly resisted by some nation-states as an attack on sovereignty.

But Goal 16 survived. And, in my opinion, it is *the* node of transformative potential in the framework. Together with the means of implementation in Goal 17, as well as the Follow Up and Review paragraphs of the SDG outcome document, Goal 16 gives an insight into how we might actually hold leaders to account, and achieve all 17 goals by 2030.

When Stakeholder Forum painted a picture of Sustaineo, a fictitious country that achieves its SDG goals by 2030, the key transformative features were decision-making processes and governance. This transformation is needed across the planet, and it needs to happen quickly. Without a strong, united constituency to spearhead and advocate for it, Goal 16 could easily be ignored and underfunded. It could be hijacked by special interests (well-meaning or not), or become so highly politicised that it loses legitimacy. Or it could fall into that dreaded pitfall facing all process objectives and become a mere technocratic tick-box.

But this Goal is truly transformative, not least because of the failures of top-down, command-and-control approaches to complex global challenges including cybercrime, climate change and unsustainable consumption patterns. Ours is a world of complexity, interdependence and uncertainty that evades centralised responses, scorns predictions, and needs solutions fundamentally different to the tried and tested ways that do not work.

From top-down to system stewardship

As I wrote in "Stewardship of the Future – Using Foresight in 21st Century Governance", governments must provide system stewardship – not command and control – in order to respond to the speed and magnitude of change and volatility, to engage people, and to address the lack of confidence in the centre's will and ability to come up with real solutions to the poverty and climate crises facing humanity. System stewardship shows how governments can lever their mandates of legitimacy and platforms of coordination to inspire, liberate and harness the ideas and human assets that citizens need to solve their own problems.

The SDGs' success hinges on governments opening up and transforming themselves into effective, accountable and inclusive institutions. This can be done. At the city level, for example, Medellin, in Colombia, has shed its reputation as one of the most violent places in the world through a combination of innovative governance and leadership that depends on strong participation from all citizens, especially those most traditionally excluded.

Bill Easterly shows what is at stake if the agency and views of citizens are not put at the very heart of the SDG framework. Without broad participation, he argues, it will look "Senseless, Dreamy and Garbled". Action from citizens, civil society and the private sector creates granular change. But these actions need to be connected to and within wider plans at the national and international levels in order to cause genuine transformation. This must be enabled by governments and institutions, not blocked.

In "Stewardship of the Future", I outlined the (interlinked) features of a government that can act as an effective system steward: open processes; the use of clear national strategic narratives to drive coherence; and an ability to focus on the long-term as well as the short-term. Governments at all levels need institutions, cultures and public services that enable this form of emergent strategic planning. It is urgent that we move to this new paradigm of government. Otherwise, we risk, as Max Everest-Phillips writes, stagnating in the "crisis within public administration" that exists around the world as the old approaches fail to deliver.

The best way to respond is to experiment and innovate through a plurality of approaches.

The good news is that various countries have already begun. Wales, for example, is using the Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act to ensure all public bodies reflect the principles of long-termism, prevention, integration, collaboration and involvement in their decision-making.

Enabling SDG 16 to transform the relationship between citizen and state

So, will governments adopt a maximalist version of Goal 16 to transform public services and decision-making? Or will they adopt a minimalist version, where governments simply report against indicators rather than break open public policymaking? Goals 16 and 17, and the Follow Up and Review process, require a clearer form of strategic planning at the centre of government.

Montenegro, Rwanda, Tunisia, Mexico, Malaysia and Indonesia are all trying to evolve their own approaches. These countries and others need processes for systematically and continuously reviewing SDG-driven change. They also need to bring in agents of change, experts, people at the periphery and dissonant voices including those who are most affected by poverty, climate change and inequality. Finally, they must acknowledge the interlinkages among goals, and welcome into the decision-making process those who can contribute ideas, solutions, energy, authority and youth, as well as new partnerships, capital and property.

Crucially, these processes must be clearly linked to resources, Ministries of Finance and the Economy, and donor programming. Delivery mechanisms within governments will require the devolution of powers in many areas, as well as joint-working across ministries and agencies that are not currently resourced or rewarded to do so. Finally, we need robust and realistic targets to measure impact, as well as independent and reliable data points to assess performance. This will require a deepening and widening of the data ecosystem beyond the state, and a level of transparency and scrutiny that can be difficult and uncomfortable for some countries.

Here, then, are some of the activities we need to see over the coming year to support Goal 16:

- *The critical importance of Goal 16 as a means of delivering the rest of the framework needs to recognised and prioritised.* Donors, the financing ecosystem and the UN system need to unite behind countries over the next year to build effective institutions and processes that can lead to coherent nested approaches. A real risk is that top-down, donor- and funding-led 'favourite' SDGs will dictate tactical priorities, and that plans for implementing programmes on particular goals are developed independently from each other.

- *A real agenda for financing this work.*

- *A stronger ecosystem of actors from the global south and north, including private actors, mobilising behind and supporting this Goal.*

- *Better quality evidence, legitimate research, robust case studies and new ideas – all supported by international organisations.* This will require a humble approach of supporting innovation, design and testing, as well as the sharing of experiences and case studies. (For further information see my summary of the "Future of Public Services" event in Singapore 2014 and The Chisinau Outcome Statement on "Strengthening Capacities and Building Effective Institutions for the Implementation of the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda" at Chisinau.)

- *A strong ecosystem of data and independent agents where there is genuine and helpful tension to hold government to account.* Pluralistic peer-to-peer learning could be used to measure governance. (The Investors in People standard (IIP) and the Global Centre for Public Service Excellence are two examples. For a parallel example, see the OECD Environmental Policy Performance Report process.)

- *Quick examples of best practice, with support for pilots internationally to rapidly identify and critically analyse any transformational impact on decision-making and outcomes.*

Having outlined what I do want to see, I leave you with something I DON'T want to: Goal 16 becomes a line or number in a plan that gets reported on a yearly basis – and doesn't change practice.

Let's choose the right option. Let's make the SDGs real for citizens. And let's use them to finally transform and re-energise the relationship between citizens and our state.