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Sustainable development goals: Realities and illusions

SALEHUDDIN AHMED

The title of this article should not mislead you; the title is just to provoke you to think seriously and act boldly. We have to keep in mind that the post 2015 global development agenda incorporates actions which are basically normative and visionary, based on reality. But the results will come only if the actions are implemented. The global treaty does not have instruments of enforcement. The achievements depend on national and global actions.

We blame nature for environmental degradation and disasters. William Shakespeare aptly said "… when we are sick in fortune, often the surfeit (excess), of our own behaviour, we make guilty of our own disasters, the sun, the moon, and the stars." [Shakespeare, *King Lear*, Act 1, Scene II]

The Club of Rome, a think tank based in Rome in 1965 started, in an informal way, exploring the depletion of earth's resources and its impact on socio-economic development of various countries. An international team of researchers at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in USA conducted a simulation study by computer. That led to publication of the book "The Limits to Growth" in 1972. That was the first red flag raised and warnings issued on the dangers of neglecting sustainable development approach. The warnings are still valid and the message of hope still worth keeping in mind which stated that "Man can create a society in which he can live indefinitely on earth if he imposes limits on himself and his production of material goods to achieve a state of global equilibrium with population and production in carefully selected balance."

The question of sustainable development (SD) has become a catchword now-a-day. People have become interested in the concept of SD and how it can be achieved. The World Commission on Environment and Development (WCED) defined sustainable development (SD) as "development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs" ("Our Common Future" 1987, p. 43). Bangladesh 7th FYP (P. xxxvi) Part-1 defines SD as "… the needs of the present generation without compromising prospect of future generations."

The term SD means differently to different persons. There is the problem of conceptual clarity and interpretation. Many people use SD interchangeably with "ecologically sustainable or environmentally sound development." In contrast, some take SD as "sustained growth," "sustained change" or simply "successful" development. WCED stated the critical objectives of SD as: reviving growth; changing the quality of life; meeting essential needs for jobs, energy, water, and sanitation; ensuring a sustainable level of population; conserving and enhancing the resource base; reorienting technology and managing risk; and merging environment and economics in decision making (WCED, 1987, p. 49).

Within the international perspective and concern for "process" dimension, two more objectives are added: reorienting international economic relations, and making development more participatory.

The mainstream formulation of SD suffers from three major weaknesses in: establishing linkage between poverty and environmental degradation; conceptualising the objectives of development, sustainability and participation; and formulating strategy in the face of incomplete knowledge and uncertainty.

GLOBAL DEVELOPMENT AGENDA

The international community, with the leading role of UN, sets up global goals in various fields to contribute to global problem solving. UN adopted 8 Millennium Development Goals (MGDs) with 21 targets and sixty indicators in 2000 and the terminal year was set as 2015. Several countries are evaluating their respective performances. The goals of MDGs were set to be achieved in the context of complex relationship between the state and the market within the economy and also the relationship with the other countries located in both North and South of the globe.

Bangladesh has attained satisfactory progress in achieving the MDGs. Experts found that Bangladesh has some weaknesses in Goal 5—improving maternal health, specifically maternal mortality rate; weaknesses in Goal 7—ensuring environmental sustainability and Goal 8—developing a global partnership for development. Besides these, Bangladesh has some weakness in employment generation (Goal-1, Target 1.B) and malnutrition (Goal-1, Target 1.C).

In September 2015, the General Assembly of the UN adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that include 17 goals, 169 targets and 230 indicators. The motto of SDG is to "Transform our World by 2030." This is a gigantic task. Given the global situation of cooperation and declining trends in overseas development assistance (ODA), the tasks seem very ambitious with formidable implementation challenges. A glaring example is the Paris Climate Agreement or Committee of Partners (COP21) which was formulated in 2016. In this agreement all 193 countries were treated as equal stakeholders, some are solely affected by carbon emissions, some solely produce carbon emissions and some are both affected by and producers of carbon emissions. It may be pointed out that three-fourth of carbon emissions come from only 12 countries. A nail in the coffin was placed by USA in June 2017 when President Donald Trump announced the intention to withdraw from the Paris Agreement. I think voters in USA now should demand a political realignment in favour of solving climate issues. COP25 scheduled to be held in Madrid in December this year should follow more pragmatic and problem-solving approaches.

SOME FALLACIES

There are challenges both internal (within a country) and external (global) which should be addressed to achieve the SDG goals. Before I touch on some areas for scientists, researchers and academia, let me share two fallacies which are applicable for Bangladesh and many other countries.

Fallacy 1: Rapid growth will bring down poverty, increase the well-being of the people:

We can see, in Bangladesh, growth has resulted in increasing income inequality, lack of access of the poor to quality and affordable health facilities, lack of quality education at low cost (for the poor). The belief that growth first distribution later, is a wrong one. In fact, SDG Goal 1 (End of poverty in all forms everywhere) and SDG Goal 10 (Reduce inequality within and among countries) are not competing ones and no trade-off is necessary, these can be achieved together.

Fallacy 2: Participation of people in all phases of development activities is satisfactory:

The good governance of all public and private institutions must be established. Overall, democratic practices and rule of law are prerequisites for our efforts to achieve SDG goals.

SDG Goal 8 (Promote inclusive and sustainable economic growth) and SDG Goal 16 (Promote peaceful and inclusive societies) point out the importance of the above issues. However, we often see, in many countries including Bangladesh, people are by-passed, not consulted and not even considered in taking major decisions of reform and development programmes. If people do not have confidence and trust in the government, even very pious and beneficial efforts of development can spark agitation and protests by the people as evident in the recent public outcry in Paris (fuel tax), in Hong Kong (extradition measure) and in Santiago, Chile (for hike in metro price).

SUGGESTED AREAS TO BE ADDRESSED

The following areas are suggested for consideration by Bangladesh.

Inclusiveness: All people to be included in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation stages of projects.

Financing: Financing is a major challenge. In Bangladesh an estimate states that additional fund needed will be around USD 928 billion (2015-16 constant price). It will be difficult for raising such a huge fund from internal sources of Bangladesh. Financial assistance from the developed countries should come. It may be mentioned that the developed countries promised to contribute one percent of their gross national income (GNI) as overseas development assistance (ODA). But their commitment is far from the actual flow of ODA.

Localisation: Different districts, regions of Bangladesh have different problems; for example, coastal zone problems are different from "haor" and "barind" and dry areas. Urban problems are different than rural problems. The "Nature SDG Localisation Framework" is an example which the government may incorporate in the 8th Five Year Plan of Bangladesh (2021-25).

Implementation: For major implementation cross section of stakeholders namely, government, NGOs, civil society organisation (CSO), business, development partners and academia have to be included. "Institutions" to be strengthened and competent people should be placed to run these.

INTERNATIONAL COOPERATION

A country has to address issues related to poverty reduction and hunger; ability to take advantage of its openness and globalisation; acceleration of growth with equity; social security of the poor; energy need of a growing economy; climate charge; financial architecture to cater to the needs of a growing economy and financial inclusion. There may be several areas of global cooperation, which include: (i) Partners in development: The developing countries with their own resources and resources from a developed country or international agency may set up some projects in common areas of interest like health, education, energy, and climate; (ii) Sharing good practices: Experiences of one or more developing countries (graduated from LDCs) with other LDCs will also be helpful for global cooperation; (iii) Capacity building: The countries of South can cooperate in increasing the capacity of the respective countries to accelerate development process. These countries can also cooperate with other developing countries outside LDCs and with other global partners for increasing the efficiency of project formulation, implementation, monitoring and evaluation which will help increase the absorbent capacity of using external resources fruitfully; and (iv) Strengthening of networks: The institutions from different countries of South and North can strengthen their networks to exchange information and experiences to promote development.

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