



Archumankind Report

For a meaningful SDG Agenda

In the wake of the US declaration on the Paris Agreement

A. On the SDG

1. Agenda 21

[Agenda 21](#) is an indicative text approved by the Earth Summit (UN Conference on Environment and Development) held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. It is the culmination point of a large movement across the World gathering for the first time international institutions as well as state and non-state actors. It approved the then most holistic declaration on the subject of environmental protection, a 350-page document divided into 40 chapters grouped into 4 sections and signed by 178 nations.

The declaration is an indicative set of purposes with no legal binding effects. Although it was to be achieved by the opening of the 21st century – hence its name – it did not, regardless of the subtitle of ‘programme of action’, constitute a programme: it lacked an objective quantification of targets, a timeframe for their accomplishment, a plan for the mobilisation of instruments or the definition of responsibilities to be held by each actor. In spite the plentiful jargon, the concrete nexus between the several matters is seldom exploited.

In the document we find matters covered by legal acts – such as biodiversity, oceans or atmospheric emissions – side by side with other matters covered only by declaratory pieces. The declaration often uses a circular administrative language where the institutional interplay and what can only be described as a virtual reality substitute references to the real world.

Agenda 21 was developed in different fashions afterwards, namely within the frames of Millennium Goals and the present Sustainable Development Goals. Although most of the actors and public opinion had considerable expectations from the announced aims of the agenda and were mostly disappointed by its lack of materialisation, there were also those who saw the initiative as an anticipation of a future ‘world government’ overrunning independent states and curtailing individual liberties.

The ‘[Commission on Sustainable Development](#)’ was formed to ‘examine progress made in implementing Agenda 21 globally’ and it survived up to the Rio+20 Conference of 2012 when it was decided to replace it by a different organism. No proper monitoring or evaluation of Agenda 21 was undertaken.

2. Millennium Goals

The first version of the Millennium Goals, ‘[DAC Development Assistance Committee, Shaping the 21st Century: The Contribution of Development Co-operation, May 1996](#)’,



was produced by the OECD in that year. It was developed into its present form by the Millennium Summit of 2000.

The OECD report does not mention 'Agenda 21' and only refers to the Rio summit in the context of environmental matters, so much so that the Millennium Goals can be seen as an endeavour entirely independent from Agenda 21.

The OECD programme addresses the issue of the relationship between environmental preservation and development and sets some quantifiable goals and timing (2015). However, it presents a less inclusive approach to the subjects addressed than the Rio declaration.

The UN system was in charge of the monitoring of the Millennium Goals programme and it published in 2015 '[The Millennium Development Goals Report](#)'. The first substantial announcement of the report (p.4) – which, understandably, got a very high coverage in the international media – states that:

'Extreme poverty has declined significantly over the last two decades. In 1990, nearly half of the population in the developing world lived on less than \$1.25 a day; that proportion dropped to 14 per cent in 2015.'

The statement is presented as factual or absolute, in any case unmitigated; it refers in general to the database of the project, the 'World Development Indicators database'. By any standard, this seems a magnificent achievement worthy of celebration and apparently vindicating the functioning of our world system as capable of responding to the most (or at least one of the most) important goals of humanity.

Shockingly, however, some pages later (p.11) we can read:

'A World Bank study shows that about half of the 155 countries lack adequate data to monitor poverty and, as a result, the poorest people in these countries often remain invisible. During the 10-year period between 2002 and 2011, as many as 57 countries (37 per cent) had none or only one poverty rate estimate. In sub-Saharan Africa, where poverty is most severe, 61 per cent of countries have no adequate data to monitor poverty trends'

The World Bank '[Policy Research Working Paper 7252 Data Deprivation Another Deprivation to End](#)' in fact goes further than this specific quotation. According to the study: 'In Sub-Saharan Africa, only 5 of 48 countries in the WDI database [World Development Index, the database used by the MDG for its calculations] have satisfactory data availability' (p. 11). That is: the most important countries for inquiring 'extreme poverty' are also the most likely to have no reliable data on the phenomenon.

The whole of the issue was well synthesized in the opening quotation of the report:

“Nothing will come of nothing” – King Lear, William Shakespeare'



One could suggest that we are not dealing with an “invisibility” of the poor but instead with an institutional blindness to poverty: the UN institutions’ self-centred view of the World leads among other things to a total miscomprehension of the problems at hand.

For in light of the preceding World Bank analysis we can reasonably assume that such astonishing claim as the one above stated has no objective and factual basis, since no data exists in most of the countries to achieve any conclusion. The exercise can indeed objectively be described as ‘nothing coming out of nothing’.

Even if an international institution would consider that reliable data exists, there should always be an external independent audit to validate the findings and, needless to say, the maximum realistic goal in terms of poverty levels measurability would be to estimate intervals with a specific confidence level, not absolute values like the ones publicised by the UN.

This blatant failure of the MDG exercise was however not scrutinised by the international media, which instead propagated the apparently welcome but astonishing news of the rapid disappearance of extreme poverty without any critical sense, bluntly ignoring the open and easily available information about its lack of credibility.

Worse than this, the UN-NGO world did engage in a passionate discussion on the subject of the choice of indicator chosen for extreme poverty. This discussion gave indirect credibility to the data and the procedures followed. The discussion on the indicator followed is important, but here it was developed in a purely metaphysical way since no proper data or procedures to build whatever indicator existed in the first place.

3. The sustainable Development Goals

In 2012, the conference called ‘Rio+20’ delineated a new horizon for the next phase following the ‘Millennium Development Goals’: the ‘Sustainable Development Goals’ (SDG) to be accomplished in 2030. The initial 8 goals, 21 targets and 60 indicators were expanded into 17 goals, 169 targets and 232 indicators. These indicators are the ones ‘on which general agreement has been reached’ (meaning that this figure can increase).

As a critical appraisal on the serious failures of the WDI database was not undertaken, the UN did not take any measure to correct these failures; worse, it multiplied by four the number of indicators, therefore also multiplying the potential problems linked to the possible accuracy of the exercise.

If the UN was not able to properly manage the single most important indicator of the MDG exercise – extreme poverty – how can it reasonably pretend to manage hundreds of indicators within the SDG?



The UN-NGO world continued focused on the discussion about the indicators to be chosen, ignoring the question of the possibility to use them in anything close to a meaningful and reliable way. A good example is the report of 'Global Policy Watch' headed by the logo 'Promoting transparency and accountability in the Post-2015 and Financing for Development processes' and named '[2030 Agenda and the SDGs: Indicator framework, monitoring and reporting](#)'.

The language of the report is even more jargonized (and therefore less transparent and accountable) than the one present in the official UN documents. For instance, in pages 4-5:

'One option that could be explored is combining the Human Development Index with the Global Footprint Network's Ecological Footprint in order to show where countries are positioned in terms of the ecological sustainability of their development. Such a comparison, as the joint civil society statement proposed, could illustrate the continued relevance of the [common but differentiated responsibilities] CBDR principle, and point out that while countries pursue universal SDGs their pathway and priorities to reach them will be different.'

All criticisms in the document refer to the need of more rather than less indicators. For instance, in p. 2:

'Given Member State commitment "to developing broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product" and the inclusion of a specific target (#17.19) to meet this, it is alarming that there are no indicators by which to measure progress and that the proposal for an Inclusive Wealth Index was abandoned.

The gap between the gibberish UN discourse and the need to establish a meaningful and operational set of indicators which can deal with real sustainable development matters is therefore increasing, not receding.

4. On the concept

The early views on the relationship between development and environment were dominated by the concept of 'The limits to growth', the sentence chosen by the Club of Rome in 1972 as title of its report. Development and environment are here considered as antithetic, in a 'Malthusian' perspective based on the inherent contradiction between demand for growth on one side and preservation of natural resources on the other.

This point of view later evolved into the concept of 'sustainable development' following 1987's Brundtland report (Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future). Here the concept of development replaces that of growth, emerging as a more general vision not fully translated by monetary figures. The notion of complete opposition between the two processes--growth and environmental protection--is now more complex, as development is now envisioned as



a strategy for the use of natural resources in a sustainable way. The environment still appears as a condition or restriction to development, but not as a strictly opposing factor.

We think that after three decades, it might be the right time to re-think the 'sustainable development' concept. In this respect a first lead was given by the Bonn Conference 'The Water, Energy and Food Security Nexus; Solutions for the Green Economy' held in 2011.

The Bonn conference perspective was not to present the concept of 'nexus' as an alternative to 'sustainable development', but simply as a supplementary theoretical instrument to better understand it. To some point, the report is closer to the old 'limits to growth' perspective than that present in the concept of 'sustainable development'. For instance, when it considers food singlehandedly as a problem of scarcity, the report fully fails to take in consideration that obesity – in relation with the excess not the scarcity of certain types of food – became a major development issue, even in the poorer parts of the world.

However, if we replace the proposed triangle in the Nexus exercise (made of Food, Water and Energy) by the Empedocles classic treatment of matter as a combination (nexus) of water, fire, soil and air (where fire works as a proxy for energy, land replaces food and air is added) we will have a different nexus approach which is both stronger and more coherent.

Food is actually an output – one among others – and it has strong nexus to the four Empedocles elements, without which it cannot be conceived. Soil and air are as important as the other two elements. A nexus focused only on food as an output is otherwise quite reductionist to what we should be concerned with in development, even if only at the bottom of the scale.

Here we should bring into the discussion the 'human development index' (HDI) undertaken by yet another UN department (UNDP). This indicator results from an exercise where the building of human development is seen as independent of the exercise of building sustainable development.

The 'Rio declaration on environment and development' (1992) says in its first principle: 'Human beings are (...) entitled to a (...) life in harmony with nature.' This means that Rio classified 'harmony with nature' as a criterion for human development.

Twenty-five years after Rio, it is time for this criterion to be as valued as the other three existing components of the HDI ('a long and healthy life, knowledge and a decent standard of living').

This means that the preservation of nature should be seen as a goal in itself, an essential part of human development – rather than a limit, an obstacle or a conditioning factor to real development: '**integrated development**' is perhaps the



most appropriate expression describing the kind of human collective good we are looking for.

This is different from the 'sustainable development' perspective; it constitutes a more radical departure from the present perspectives of development as a function of the use of resources.

It is a combination of human development and sustainable development in a constructive vision, where a four-dimensional 'human integrated development index' could be built in close relation with the four-dimensional Empedocles vision of reality. Development would therefore mean our capacity to know, to live in harmony with our environment, to keep a healthy lifestyle and more generally enjoy life.

As long as the use of resources disrupts 'life in harmony with nature' it affects development in a negative way regardless of any quantitative limitations. Nature conservation becomes therefore a fully-fledged development criterion, much like the standard of living or any of the others, instead of a condition or an obstacle to development.

This question is also directly related to the use of the money-metric system. The core team that launched the HDI is made of economists, and economists tend to see everything as measurable by money. Using money-metrics has been also the rule in international institutions.

In order to sort out problems with cross-time comparisons, deflator indices have been used; in order to sort out cross-country comparisons, shadow systems of 'power purchasing parities' have been the norm. Market distortion on prices have been handled through 'shadow prices' supposed to translate the real value of goods and services, whereas in the case of most public investments, their cost has been taken as a proxy of their value.

Most non-economists feel relieved to have someone else to sort out these imbricate questions, whereas economists themselves tend to assimilate their highly questionable simplifying assumptions as a good replacement to reality.

All of these economic techniques – while widely used and taken at face value as providing exact numbers – are very fallible, not necessarily because of the practical difficulties in compiling meaningful data or the theoretical problems raised by interpersonal comparisons, but by the inherent impossibility of any price system to translate changes of prices into utility, that is, to translate monetary figures in actual meaningful values for human beings.

As I dedicated most of my research life to these issues, I concluded that even in the most simple circumstances (see ['The Slutsky Matrix Myth'](#) by the author of these lines), there is no known way we can translate money into satisfaction.



A money metric-based comparison of poverty levels crucially depends on (1) establishing different times-series comparisons; (2) comparisons between general consumer's price indices and poor people consumer's price indices and (3) shadow values of two currencies (power purchasing parities). We very much doubt the use of money metrics, even in this case, are more objective than any political decision on what a 'decent standard of living' may imply.

If we just follow the MDG above quoted example of the 1, 25 \$ ceiling for being considered extreme poor, from 1990 to 2015, we shall bear in mind that:

1. Price levels are set for a consumer who ideally would represent a society, not the specific consumer facing extreme poverty conditions. This is an unacceptable distortion. In the US society most consumer items have little to do with items needed within extreme-poverty environments.
2. Price levels are adapted to consumer's prices yearly inflation estimated in the very doubtful fashion described above. In the quoted example, they would have to be adapted for a time span of 25 years. This exercise implies unrealistic assumptions on the constancy and potential evolution of the average consumers purchasing basket.
3. The US currency will have to be converted to currencies circulating in third-world countries through 'power purchasing parities', an instrument which is volatile and very difficult to be estimated.

The level of distortion caused by these operations is enormous, and the final results of this very tortuous (if normally presented as simple and straightforward) proceeding are equivocal at best. In other words, even if data would have existed, we doubt very much it would have any meaningful relation with reality.

We think it would make much more sense to concretely define what makes the distinction between extreme poverty and poverty and to test by sampling the evolution of the phenomenon.

Still, we could reasonably think of their use only in relation with only one of the four criteria, 'decent standard of living'. Even here, it is doubtful it has any advantage over non-money metric criteria.

Money is very important, but not for measuring global poverty, or even comparing standards of living. The existence of fully fledged open markets operated through money are part of another crucial aspect of 'integrated development': the degree of consumer's choice, important even at the lowest levels of income.

This could indeed be seen as market freedom, a basic aspect of human freedom in general. This would be a step to enlarge the concept from the 'standard of living' to general economic, political and social satisfaction.



Regardless of these problems of method present in the 'human development index', we think it still constitutes a potential improvement of the present exercise of 'sustainable development goals'.

B. On the atmospheric emissions

The [Montreal protocol](#) is a landmark on the success of international efforts led by the UN to address the pressing issue posed by atmospheric emissions of chlorofluorocarbons.

The link between these emissions and the depletion of the ozone layer of the atmosphere was uncontroversial; the agreed measures were apparently followed in a strict way and their impact was rapid.

This might perhaps have given the idea that one could expect the repetition of this success with the atmospheric emissions of greenhouse gases (GHG). This was not to be. In a former paper on the issue ([Reinventing Rio](#)) we analyse the reasons for this.

The climate issue is considerably more complex than the question of the ozone layer alone. The composition of the atmosphere is only one among several factors which have a climatic impact. The interactions between atmosphere and climate, as well as the timeframe for the impact caused by said interactions, are not easy to predict. The models used to this effect are of the same sort as those used in economic forecasts, and this is certainly not reassuring. Whereas a clear majority of the scientific community thinks that anthropogenic rather than natural factors are responsible for Climatic evolution, the opinion is not consensual.

It can be seen as reasonable to assume that there is a potential for catastrophic climate changes caused by anthropogenic transformations in the atmosphere, even allowing for the fact that they are not proved or certain. However, aiming to establish the impact in such a precise way that (1) we can convert all GHG to tones of carbon equivalent and (2) we then translate these carbon equivalents into degrees of temperature along a multiple-decade timeframe is a far more delusional construction.

Only the first assumption is necessary to validate an action plan to curb anthropogenic GHG. One needs however to validate the above-mentioned construction if we are to accept the full 'United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change' (UNFCCC) as agreed in Paris. For we are talking about a complex set of measures which include: estimation of sectoral and country carbon equivalent emissions as well as plans to curb them; sophisticated global Carbon markets; cross-sectoral and cross-country mitigation plans of action, and other such instruments. Even more unrealistically, we are then to find a time-line connection between this complex action plan and the average temperatures on our planet's surface.

The most reasonable option to address the problem expressed in its simple form is to think of alternative technological ways of obtaining goods and services that do not



originate GHG. In broad terms, anthropogenic GHG are caused by the animal occupation of the planet (including humans), the use of natural resources dilapidating nature, and energy production based on fossil fuels.

Of the three, only the last two factors are normally being considered (although Malthusian concerns with overpopulation have been recurrent). The second factor is not a concern relating specifically to GHG emissions but has to do with environmental conservation more generally. Therefore, attentions have been centred on the third factor.

Regarding the replacement of fossil fuels, the first old alternative was nuclear power. However, nuclear power has now been receding rather than increasing as an alternative energy source.

Our planet did experience several radical climate changes in the past, even in the recent past, yet it did never experience a nuclear holocaust. It is very hard to understand how key decision players could have ever even considered nuclear power as an alternative to fossil fuels on the basis of environmental concerns.

That this has been the case only shows to what point we have seen a hyperbolic consideration of GHG impact in relation to other pressing environmental risks.

Otherwise, we have witnessed a constant and impressive progression of the competitive position of renewable energies, namely as concerns wind and sun power as well as the battery technologies necessary to support these. Lately, several countries have announced their intention to fully or partially discontinue the direct use of fossil fuels in land transport systems during the period from 2015 to 2050.

The ban on the use of fossil fuels in road transport rather than in other domains is in direct relation with their toxic emissions to urban populations, rather than GHG in general (most in particular CO₂). Otherwise, technological innovation aiming at general economic efficiency seems to be the driving force behind this movement.

The truth is that the use of the so-called alternative energies and the fall of its cost in relation to the traditional nuclear or fossil-fuel energy sources have been constant. The relation of the phenomenon with the international framework for combatting GHG is at best indirect.

The driving force behind this movement seems to be three-fold: to decrease toxic emissions in urban centres; technological progress; and, now, competition to lead new standards. As regards the first, the obsession with CO₂ did little to address the issue, and actually was at times counterproductive: for example, highly polluting diesel cars were favoured in Europe to the detriment of those powered by different fuels on the basis of their smaller CO₂ emissions. Investment on fundamental and applied research, as well as on dissemination of its results (RDD) is a residual concern within the UNFCC framework, yet this was by far the most crucial factor. The driving force for the change



now is on the competition between companies and countries to be the first to promote their electric (or hydrogen) moved cars and to be in an advantageous position to set the standards of the future car industry.

As we explained in our [Reinventing Rio paper](#), public subventions to the use of polluting, conventional forms of energy far outstrip the weight of public subventions to the use of alternative forms of energy, and most in particular to the most needed and efficient RDD efforts. Most of the public expenditure for promoting renewable energies has concentrated on inefficient schemes such as cross-subventions (feed in tariffs).

Air and sea transport enjoy a general subvention favouring the use of polluting energy sources and face very little pressure to diminish its impact or invest in RDD aimed at alternative energy solutions. The same is true of other areas that can make the difference in the world energy framework. Although it is widely known that the incorporation of alternative energy requirements in the building industry can transform completely what remains the most important energy consumption sphere, little has been done in RDD investment in the field.

The most authoritative projections on the market share of renewable energies have been produced by the '[World Energy Outlook](#)' of the 'International Energy Agency'. Unfortunately, this agency has systematically proved to be unable to predict with accuracy the real alternative energy scenarios (as was shown for example in an [analysis](#) dated from 2014). The body is apparently more focused on producing doomsday-like climate scenarios than accurately predicting the evolution in the use of alternative energies.

It is doubtful that the UNFCCC framework, which failed to be crucial in changing the situation within the road transport business, will be more important in sorting out solutions in other domains.

C. The US declaration

On June 1st, 2017, President Trump declared the intention of the US to withdraw from the Paris agreement of UNFCCC. The declaration received mass media coverage and was strongly contested by most public opinion and institutional international actors, including the UNFCCC secretariat.

For three months, this declaration overshadowed anything else in connection with sustainable development, giving the impression that the Paris agreement was the ultimate recipe for the salvation of our planet, that the American withdrawal would nevertheless ruin it, or that the declaration would make the US coal-oil and gas business to be great again.

Public opinion was completely swollen by the theatrics and completely failed to assess in an objective and balanced way what the declaration meant.



The UNFCCC is a mandatory treaty but it does not bind member states to imperative, quantified limitations on their GHG emissions. This was done by the Kyoto protocol, which was approved in 1997, entered into force in 2005 and elapsed in 2012. The Copenhagen Summit of 2009 was supposed to approve an extension of these quantified targets for the subsequent period, but it failed to do so; only the Doha (2012) amendment extended it to 2020. Afterwards, the issue was to be dealt with by the Paris agreement.

The Paris Agreement, although quite prescriptive in the setting of a complex bureaucratic framework designed to control national emissions, falls short of any imperative quantified emission limitations imposed to any member state. It fundamentally repeats the objectives of the initial UNFCCC.

One should first take in consideration that US President's June declaration will only be implemented three years after the US will formally indicate its desire to leave the agreement. This will fall virtually on the date of the election of a new US president.

This places the issue as a major battle ground within the context of the next US presidential elections and will mean, in practical terms, that it will have any legal consequences at all only if President Trump is re-elected. The hyperbolic critics of President Trump's declaration are therefore making him two important favours: (1) they are accepting the electoral playground he chose and (2) by painting the declaration as a world catastrophe, they are implying he will manage to implement it, which means he is likely to be re-elected.

Secondly, it is difficult to assess in practical terms what the real difference in terms of impacts for the US government guidelines on GHG emissions of a UNFCCC Treaty with and without Paris agreement will be. One may say that a lot depends on the moral message conveyed rather than on the implications of the actual content of the law. Still, and exactly for this reason, it would make more sense for those who believe in the value of the UNFCCC to stress that it does clearly bind the US to make the utmost for reducing GHG emissions, instead of implying that the withdrawal of the US from the Paris agreement allows it to do whatever it wants.

The first point – completely overshadowed in the public debate – is by far the most significant; it also underlines the fundamentally electoral meaning of the whole of the controversy.

The key reason why President Trump's 'populism' was able to win votes lies in its capacity to turn in its favour a sizable chunk of the traditional working class. In a very good report, the [Economist](#) explains in detail why the heart of the US coalmining industry (exemplified by the third electoral district of West Virginia) went from the staunchest pillar of the Democratic Party to the staunchest supporter of President Trump:



‘even those who suspect that coal is not about to make a comeback give the president points for taking their side against those uncaring city-dwellers. “We haven’t had a president say he wants to put coalminers back to work since Carter,” says Mr Bissett in Huntington. “People notice.”’

The issue goes well beyond the supposedly rational discussion on the GHG or even the prospects of the coal industry; it is directly related to the deeply felt lack of respect paid by the liberal elites – and Vice-President Al Gore might be the best symbol in this regard – to the dirty, hard-working hands of the people.

President Trump’s electoral instinct tells him this is the best playground for him to dispute the next elections, and this is why he is very happy the issue became his trademark: alone against the rest of the World, the US leader shows how he (contrarily to the liberal elites) does care for the common people’s best interests..

Most likely President Trump, much like the Mr Bissett’s opinion quoted by the Economist, does not really believe in the great future of coal or oil. However, he knows how important it is to show he cares for the people making so much of their lives out of it. Thanks to the enormous publicity bombardment on the Paris agreement, he can be now sure that whatever will happen, his popular credentials will remain unassailable.

This sort of populism is not exclusive of the US, and it is certainly not by chance that the most solid electoral territory of the French National Front is the old French coal mining basin. All the polls agreed that the National Front became the dominant political force of the working class.

A very important part of the population finds it unacceptable that its standard of living and working opportunities are dwindling, whereas its elites seem to be concentrated on what they consider abstract or distant concerns such as global warming or the well-being of foreigners.

The more an elitist machine will shout these concerns and accuse the ‘populist’ electoral basis to be the culprit of the evils of our planet, the more we are bound to see the disruption of the social contract sustaining our democratic systems.

But the over-reaction to President’s Trump declaration, other than being a bonus for his electoral objectives, is especially detrimental to the coherence and prospects of the sustainable (or, as we suggested, ‘integrated’) development.

The Paris agreement does not impose quantifiable obligations to member states. Instead, it is embroiled in the speculative mechanics relating to the transformation of GHG into CO₂ equivalents, and of the latter into a decade’s time-frame for the prediction of average planet degrees of temperature. In these two respects, it is quite different from the Kyoto protocol; within the UNFCCC domain, we do not see it either as a major step forward regarding concrete obligations to the member states.



The most serious problem of the Paris Agreement, aggravated by the theatrics surrounding the declaration of June 1st, is that it erased from the main stage all the other fundamental topics relating to the sustainable development agenda.

Suddenly, all other threats to life in our planet – including the nuclear holocaust we have all reasons to believe is by far a bigger threat than a change in climate – disappeared from the public's opinion agenda and concerns, including those relating to the sustainable development goals. This is the real drama we should be concerned with.

We have heard opinions saying that the very loose and weak references made to other domains of development – such as poverty – in the Paris agreement are positive steps for the consideration of the issues at hand. They are not! They simply emphasise how secondary everything else is when compared to the CO₂ equivalent emissions.

D. Available options

From what we analysed so far, we conclude that, *ceteris paribus*, the SDG exercise will plunge in a sea of indifference within public opinion and meaningless bureaucratic jargon within the institutional framework. Worse, it risks agonising during a very long period of time, since it is supposed to end only in 2030, therefore causing severe and prolonged damage to a more realistic and therefore productive sustainable development agenda.

The institutional inertia embedded within the UN construction is enormous. It is quite difficult to change its course, most in particular if we are speaking on fundamental aspects of its working methods and objectives. Taking in consideration what we analysed so far, it is definitely important to work on integrated development outside the SDG framework. Parallel efforts for integrated developments that do not ignore but are also not subordinated to the UN construction are most welcome, no less so because they will press the UN machine to get out of its fantasy self-centred world and look at reality.

The most important of these is [ISO 26000 on social responsibility](#), an impressive achievement that however has been nearly forgotten since its completion in 2010. Although it compares favourably with the SDG or even the human development exercises in its internal coherence and span, ISO 26000 has been mostly ignored, to the point where the old vocabulary it replaced (like the one on Corporate Social Responsibility) is still in wide use.

Using the jargon of economics we could say that ISO 26000 is a micro approach whereas the SDG is a macro approach. ISO 26000 can potentially be used by all institutions, and in as much as this will be the case, it will achieve a 'bottom-up' reform in the global ambitions of other exercises. The SDG by contrast is a typically top-down



exercise, down from the UN on the top to state machines and further to eventually everyone.

One of the most revolutionary features of ISO 26000 is that it is not supposed to be certified by external certifying agencies, but verified by actors – individual or collective – at every level. This revolutionary characteristic might have been the crucial cause of its failure. The ‘ISO’ machine transformed itself more and more into a certifying industry and, apparently, an ISO without certification became financially uninteresting and therefore negligible.

As we are now in 2017, an exercise terminated in 2010 needs revision as much as fresh impulse. Notwithstanding, only a genuine impulse from civil society (that is, the genuine civil society, not the outer ring of international institutions) can revive the ISO 26000.

The second possible course of action can be inspired in what the OECD did with the Millennium Goals back in the 1990’s. The Human Development Index exercise could develop into an integrated development exercise – ‘human development’ is an expression that encompasses this integration – following some of the leads we suggested earlier in this text.

This would of course mean it should get out of the strict ‘economist’s jargon’ and reasoning, encompassing wider human dimensions and without falling in the SDG deleterious traps.

The third course of action implies the reform of SDG procedures. This is not an alternative to the two other courses of action already mentioned. Quite on the contrary, as only pressure from competitive mechanisms can make the UN machinery consider any reform process at all.

For such a reform, the first priority should be the creation of a fully independent audit and evaluation external authority.

Such an authority should be formed by highly qualified and respected personalities who by their present and prospective positions are not dependent on the UN or member states’ diplomatic machinery.

This authority should have full access to the proceedings and should produce annual reports on the SDG work, evaluating both the structure created and its accomplishments.

This assessment should force the SDG exercise to pick meaningful and assessable goals, targets and indicators. This could be done by denominating them as ‘priorities’, not necessarily by getting back to the initial exercise of choosing goals, targets and indicators. For the collection and evaluation of the latter, a clear timetable and a structure comprising external assessment would also be necessary.



The SDG work could also choose an experimental ground to make tests. A small less-developed country easy to analyse in isolation and willing to cooperate fully and transparently with external assessing authorities could be the best option.

At this point, we would like to suggest East Timor.

Brussels, 2017-09-08

(Paulo Casaca)