



Department of Justice, Peace and Human Development Office of International Justice and Peace

Background on the Sustainable Development Goals September 2015

“This Agenda (The SDGs) is a clear sign that,...the international community has come together and affirmed its commitment to eradicate poverty in all its forms and dimensions and to ensure that all children, women and men throughout the world will have the conditions necessary to live in both freedom and integrity.” Position Statement of the Holy See on the Outcome Document of the United Nations

Background

On September 25, 2015, Francis will address the United Nations General Assembly as part of his visit to the United States. One of the most important items on the General Assembly agenda in September will be adopting the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) for 2016-2030. The SDGs are the follow-on framework to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that covered the period 2000–2015. The MDGs, originally adopted by UN member states in the 2000 Millennium Declaration, were later refined by UN officials in an attempt to develop a more holistic and people-centered approach to global poverty reduction and human development. The MDGs broadened the dominant market-driven conception of development expressed in terms of GDP per capita, to a basic human needs approach that promoted life expectancy, mother and child health, education, literacy and other measures of human welfare. The MDGs set precise targets designed to measure success and make adjustments during its 15 year duration.

The adoption of the MDGs radically changed the discourse on development from a focus solely on macro-economic growth to one based on improvements in the quality of life for poor persons. This focus on basic human needs correlates well with the Church’s understanding of integral human development. Having formally recognized the imperative to make poverty reduction the focus of world efforts, the MDGs also created a unifying international agenda.

The world made good progress towards the MDG goals. Goal 1, calling for halving the number of people living in extreme poverty (under \$1.25 a day), was met by 2015. Out of 18 targets, those dealing with malaria, tuberculosis, safe drinking water, and gender parity in primary education will be met. There have been improvements in all health indicators. The likelihood of a child dying before age five has been nearly cut in half over the last two decades. That means that about 17,000 children are saved every day (Millennium Development Report 2014).

Unfortunately, progress on many of the goals has been unequal across regions. China, India and Asia have made up the bulk of the improvements while Africa has lagged behind. Of the 18 targets, Africa is on track to meet only one -- reversing the spread of HIV/AIDS. Africa’s lack of progress is due in part to the fact that the goals and targets were averages and ignored the preexisting disparities between Africa and the rest of the developing world. Another general flaw in the MDGs was that they set targets, but did not develop a road map, nor process, to reach the goals. The UN made the assumption that economic growth and aid would be enough for developing governments to reach their targets. Government priorities did not always match the MDGs and weak governance, corruption and conflict greatly reduced outcomes.

The UN implemented a more open and expansive process to develop the SDGs, starting in 2012 with the Rio+20 summit and a committee representing 70 countries. This broad worldwide input inflated the number of goals from 8 to 17 and the number of targets rose from 18 to 169. The draft SDGs maintain slightly revised versions of the 8 MDGs and add new goals and targets. Goal 16 aims to promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. This goal may help address the structural problem of governance that hindered progress on the MDGs. Three other goals call for the developing and developed nations to ensure sustainable growth, consumption, industrialization and production patterns in order to reduce global environmental degradation. Three other goals promote action on climate change, and protection of land and sea resources.

Some criticize the excessive number of goals and targets. UN General Secretary Ban Ki Moon clustered them into six “essential elements:” dignity, prosperity, justice, partnership, planet, and people. Others point out that the costs will be higher than donors will be willing to fund. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development reports that the world total of all international assistance in 2013 hit a record level of \$134.8 billion. A panel of experts calculates that Goal 1, target 1, ending extreme poverty alone will require \$66 billion a year, or almost half of total global assistance. Other experts believe that adding targets that developed countries must reach will provide an excuse for them to reduce development assistance to countries in need.

USCCB Position:

The Holy See and its Permanent Observer Mission to the UN have spoken out often on both the MDGs and the SDGs, emphasizing integral human development and the importance of keeping the human person at the center of the SDGs. This engagement includes supporting goals and targets that provide access to development assistance and working to oppose those that seek to push funds towards reproductive health policies favoring abortion. The Holy Father in *Evangelii Gaudium* has highlighted the importance of social justice and the role that faith-based organizations can and should play in implementing poverty alleviation programs like those suggested in the SDGs. Pope Francis also underlines the importance of promoting peace and reconciliation to address conflict that has thwarted progress in the past. The Holy See has continuously critiqued the idea that population growth is responsible for poverty, rather than the social and economic conditions that threaten human dignity. In his Encyclical, *Laudato Si*, Pope Francis wrote: “Instead of resolving the problems of the poor and thinking of how the world can be different, some can only propose a reduction in the birth rate. At times, developing countries face forms of international pressure which make economic assistance contingent on certain policies of ‘reproductive health’. ... To blame population growth instead of extreme and selective consumerism on the part of some, is one way of refusing to face the issues” (50).

Since the SDGs are shaped at the international level by the United Nations, the Holy See is the lead Catholic institution. USCCB and CRS monitor the international assistance funding allocated by the United States government to ensure that it promotes integral human development, prioritizes people living in poverty and covers the United States’ fair share of the global need. USCCB and CRS have promoted programs that build the peace and prosperity that the SDG framework attempts to prioritize. The Conference will continue to follow the lead of the Holy See as the SDGs are adopted and implemented.

RESOURCES: Visit <http://www.usccb.org/issues-and-action/human-life-and-dignity/poverty/global/index.cfm>. Contact: *Steve Hilbert*, USCCB Office of International Justice and Peace, 202-541-3149, shilbert@usccb.org.

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