

# Achieving Diverse Development Goals: How can Different Goals be Pursued Together?

In 2015, the international community adopted 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to focus development policy globally. The Goals range across diverse fields of public policy from industry, finance and agriculture to education, sanitation, social protection and environmental stewardship. How should actors from public, private and community sectors strive to ensure that the SDGs are all pursued together and with equal vigour, rather than piecemeal? Development professionals based at IDS and the University of Sussex explored these questions using foresight methods. Their deliberations shed light on the challenges of creating a future for humanity that will be more sustainable, secure, inclusive and egalitarian.

At the same time as the international community agreed to pursue the SDGs, IDS adopted a strategy for 2015–20 underpinned by three key challenges of our time: *reducing inequalities*, *accelerating sustainability* and *building secure and inclusive societies*.

Development professionals might like to imagine that these three themes, like the 17 SDGs, represent harmonious and mutually supportive components of an integrated, holistic development enterprise. But what if these individually desirable aspirations for human development are potentially in conflict or tension with each other?

For instance, if people around the world become more economically equal at the levels of consumption currently enjoyed by the citizens of the richest countries, then the goal of ecological sustainability may be very hard, perhaps impossible, to achieve.

How then may the disparate goals of international development be pursued in concert rather than piecemeal? And how might different development efforts need to be coordinated or sequenced in order to maximise the potential benefits and avoid antagonistic interactions between them?

Development professionals from IDS and the University of Sussex came together in a series of three deliberative foresight workshops to consider these questions. They used an adapted scenario method to explore potential tensions

and conflicts, as well as complementarities and mutually reinforcing dynamics, which might emerge in the future between the three challenges set out in the IDS strategy.

## Scenario building

Scenario exercises are used to explore the interactions among socio-cultural, technological, economic, environmental, political and regulatory trends and developments, which the participants expect to drive and influence future developments in a given field of interest. This project brought together a group of experts in international development studies to explore the interaction of the three defining challenges.

The workshop participants were challenged to consider first the possibility of negative interactions and dystopian outcomes. For example, a negative outcome for one theme (e.g. greater inequality) might be associated with positive outcomes for the other two themes (e.g. more sustainable, secure and inclusive societies). In the second stage, participants considered how the three themes might be integrated and pursued together in a harmonious way.

## Why progress towards one goal may undermine another

The scenarios highlighted several ways in which development goals may interact. For example:

- Can humanity secure greater equality without accelerating unsustainable levels of consumption and pollution? People who are affluent at present will likely object if their own living standards are undermined. Achieving sustainable levels of consumption for all, which are also politically feasible, is likely to require both technological change (e.g. in energy generation and storage) and behavioural changes in consumption and resource use, underpinned by attitudes of humanitarian solidarity and social responsibility.
- Should values such as human security and inclusion, and poverty reduction, be prioritised before worrying about environmental sustainability? If environmental sustainability is given a lower priority, can humanity avoid the insecurity and social division associated with ecological breakdown? This dilemma highlights the need to sequence development policies and programmes, and to address different development goals coherently and strategically.
- Stability is a positive value linked to human security, because it provides the certainty and confidence people need to pursue their livelihoods and make plans for the future. However, too much stability may impede the innovation and change we need to achieve sustainable development. Policymakers have the challenge of creating stability while still allowing entrepreneurs of various kinds to *destabilise* the status quo.
- Inclusion in the frameworks of society is not sufficient to guarantee either procedural or substantial equality or fairness of treatment. To guard against individuals being included on adverse terms, the freedom of withdrawal should remain open.
- A more equal world is probably unattainable in a context of widespread insecurity because powerful people will be able to obtain greater security for themselves at others' expense. On the other hand, egalitarian principles underpin the freedom of individuals and groups to pursue opportunities on equal terms, which may enable them to advance their wealth, status or power compared to others in society. Over time, such inequality may undermine security by fostering dissatisfaction and resentment against the prevailing order and the groups or individuals that benefit from it.

## Policy recommendations

Some policy-relevant insights are already emerging from this exploratory work:

- For policymakers, a key message is to avoid easy assumptions that Sustainable Development Goals are necessarily harmonious and mutually reinforcing.
- Achieving positive outcomes on different indicators simultaneously requires delicate and strategic balances to be struck, through careful planning and sequencing of policy measures, investments and regulations.
- If this kind of strategic planning is not done, there is a risk that advances towards one target (such as greater equality) may produce perverse consequences (such as unsustainable rates of consumption).
- It may be possible to avoid negative interactions of this kind by combining strategies operating on technical, institutional, behavioural and attitudinal levels.
- To achieve balanced progress will require careful thought, reflection, dialogue and anticipation, for which foresight methods may be one useful tool.



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## Further reading

Glover, D. and Hernandez, K. (2016, forthcoming) *Integrating Sustainable Development: A Foresight Analysis of Interactions among Competing Development Challenges*, IDS Evidence Report, Brighton: IDS

Nilsson, M.; Griggs, D. and Visbeck, M. (2016) 'Policy: Map the Interactions between Sustainable Development Goals', *Nature* 534: 320–22

IDS (2015) *Engaged Excellence for Global Development: Strategy 2015–20*, Brighton: IDS, [www.ids.ac.uk/about-us/our-vision-and-strategy](http://www.ids.ac.uk/about-us/our-vision-and-strategy)

## Credits

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