

Interactions between the SDGs, Pathways for Sustainability Approach and Opportunities for Activism

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June 2016

Background

The recent United Nations Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have been heralded as providing an enhanced development pathway which places demands both on the developed and developing worlds. The wide scope and yet cross cutting nature of the inherent 17 goals demands close collaborations amongst different stakeholder and interest groups to make them successful in the long term. Such collaboration equally translates into applying a multidimensional approach to addressing the goals. The pathways to sustainability approach is one such plausible approach which provides a tool for activist researchers to engage with the processes involved in implementing the SDGs for enhanced impacts.

1.0 Introduction

In September last year (2015) world leaders gathered to adopt a new set of goals to eradicate poverty, safeguard the planet, and ensure prosperity for all as part of a novel sustainable development agenda. These Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which replace the erstwhile Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) come with specific targets to be realized over the next 15 years with 2030 as the deadline. Given the scope and reach of the goals, everyone needs to be engaged from bottom up to top-down: governments, the private sector, civil society. The Official Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted on 25 September 2015 revolves around the following 17 overarching global goals:

1. **Poverty** - End poverty in all its forms everywhere.
2. **Hunger and Food Security** - End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture.
3. **Good Health and Well-Being** - Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages.
4. **Education** - Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all.

This is one of a series of reports on the relationship between research and activism, produced following the ESRC STEPS Centre Summer School 2016. It informs and is part of a web-based resource on research-activist links. We are grateful to the [Fondation Charles Léopold Mayer pour le Progrès de l'Homme \(FPH\)](#) for their support of this initiative.

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5. **Gender Equality and Women's Empowerment** - Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls.
6. **Water and Sanitation** - Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all.
7. **Energy** - Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and clean energy for all.
8. **Economic Growth** - Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all.
9. **Infrastructure, Industrialization** - Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation.
10. **Inequality** - Reduce inequality within and among countries.
11. **Cities** - Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable.
12. **Sustainable Consumption and Production** - Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns.
13. **Climate Change** - Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts.
14. **Oceans** - Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development.
15. **Biodiversity, Forests, Deforestation** - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.
16. **Peace and Justice** - Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.
17. **Partnerships** - Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development.

1.1 A Quest for a Multidimensional Approach

Such lofty goals of eradicating extreme poverty; fighting inequality and injustice as well as solving climate change will demand the collaboration of governments, international organizations, world leaders and the average person. The diverse range of stakeholder and disciplines necessitated by such crucial collaborations reflect the argument for a multidimensional approach as encapsulated in the STEPS pathways for sustainability approach amongst others. Moreover as ambitious and overwhelming as they may sound, these mutually interactive goals can be largely premised on effective governance. Governance demands a strong and effective institutions (Goal 16) and requisite framework to harness the unique potentials and resources of each stakeholder (Goal 17) in the overall context of sustainable development. It is equally in these two thematic areas that the pathways for sustainability approach and related activists have invaluable roles to play in shaping the agenda and discourse. Consequently it is worth discussing how can pathways for sustainability serve as vehicles for activists in struggles to achieve SDGs and how do such pathways interact with these goals?

1.2 Activist Research and the SDGs

The SDGs, officially known as *Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, are an intergovernmental set of aspirational Goals with 169 targets. The SDGs which represents the Post 2015 Development Agenda feeds into the Principles agreed upon under Resolution A/RES/66/288, widely known as The Future We Want. There are dominant themes in the SDGs, and the pathways approach helps to complement and challenge the dominant themes in the goals so they can be addressed more effectively. The Pathways approach can help us question the merit of the goals; how they are measured or assessed to see if they match or fit effectively? This will help stakeholders better appreciate the problems in each goal and how the interplay of other factors equally impinge on these goals, eg one health. For example linking environmental sustainability with poverty reduction and social justice, and making science and technology work for the poor has been a core focus of the STEPS approach which draws parallels with achieving the SDGs. In our contemporary times where resources are scarce the need for such cost effective and yet robust approaches are timely and their importance cannot be overemphasised. We can consider two critical thematic areas in the global south using the multi-dimensional approach as afforded by the pathways approach:

1.2.1 Poverty Eradication

Poverty goes beyond income to include health, inequality access. This suggests a multidisciplinary or multidimensional approach to effectively addressing this. That is why some institutions such as International Food Policy Research Institute (IFPRI) argue that the interventions of the SDGs lack the requisite ambition. In the report "An Ambitious Development Goal: Ending Hunger and Undernutrition by 2025", They explain that there is the need for increased focus on eradicating hunger and undernutrition and that rather than targeting to end poverty by 2030, this objective can be realized earlier by 2025 (5 years less). This equally betrays the avenues for activist researchers to engage with such possible loopholes in the SDGs early to assess their merit and recommend the necessary remedial measures.

Hence alluding to results from China, Vietnam, Brazil and Thailand, the report suggests a multidimensional approach to realising this target: agriculture-led, social protection– and nutrition intervention–led, or a combination of both of these approaches. By drawing on the lessons of these countries and cross-pollinating ideas, other developing countries have an opportune chance to design and implement successful context-specific interventions to address hunger and undernutrition. Activist researchers who understand local dynamics can well shape the dialogue and agenda in this regard. This is because there are both economic and moral reasons for striving to end hunger and undernutrition. In countries where large numbers of people lack the food and nutrition security they need to lead healthy and productive lives, it is difficult to break out of poverty or sustain economic development. Research shows that undernutrition limits people's educational achievements and productivity, which in turn leads to large global economic losses. Furthermore these economic concerns, eradicating hunger and undernutrition involves ending an important dimension of human suffering. It is hence a global ethical imperative that must be given top priority. This can be realised when activist researchers

highlight the need for more prominence for these themes, their debilitating effects and suggest the appropriate avenues for interventions.

Moreover, in several countries across the globe especially in the global south, eradicating hunger and undernutrition necessitates a combination of agricultural, social protection, and nutrition strategies. Agricultural growth contributes directly to reducing hunger and undernutrition by enhancing farm households' capacity to produce and purchase more nutritious foods, lowering food prices for poor consumers, and raising demand for rural labor. Given the turf wars due to competing interests of stakeholders in protecting their interests often such linkages are overlooked, which activist researchers can help to bridge such interests and demonstrate the overriding concerted front needed.

A multinational study indicates that in many countries suffering from food insecurity, agricultural growth translates into reductions in underweight and stunting. The examples of China and Vietnam portray how in agriculture-based economies where smallholders dominate, growth strategies focused on these smallholders may do the most to reduce poverty and hunger. Within agriculture, investments should be targeted at subsectors with heavy participation of poor and hungry people. The poor are often equally powerless and overlooked even when interventions are targeted at them, this is an avenue for activist researchers to give voice to such marginalised groups and articulate their concerns to the appropriate quarters for redress.

Since growth alone is not enough to eliminate hunger and undernutrition, well-designed and well-implemented social protection strategies are also important. As Brazil's example shows, social safety nets, such as conditional cash transfers, can engender more inclusive growth by helping people build assets and protecting these assets from shocks, reducing inequality, facilitating structural reform of the economy, and increasing the effective allocation of resources. Effective social safety nets hence must come with a clear objective, a feasible means of targeting beneficiaries, a reliable mode of transferring resources, a sound monitoring and evaluation system, and transparent operations. Activist researchers can serve as watchdogs in the interest of such marginalised groups in particular and the general society as a whole in upholding probity, transparency and accountability.

The relative essence of these strategies across countries depends on the nature of the economy and where the vulnerable groups predominate. In agriculture-based economies (especially in Africa south of the Sahara), agriculture is vital to engendering pro-poor growth and reducing hunger and undernutrition. In transforming economies (particularly in Asia, North Africa, and the Middle East), growth is less attributed to agriculture, even though poverty, hunger, and undernutrition prevail in the rural areas. In such economies, growth in agriculture and the rural nonfarm economy is crucial for poverty reduction. In urbanized economies (particularly in Eastern Europe and Latin America), agriculture contributes little to growth, even as urban poverty exceeds rural poverty. In such economies, agriculture functions similar to other competitive sectors, such as manufacturing, even though it may predominate in some areas. Eliminating hunger and undernutrition in these urbanized countries will depend more heavily on targeted nutrition and social protection programs. In large countries such as India and Mexico, different states may exhibit different economic structures, further emphasizing the

need for strategies tailored to local circumstances. Activist researchers can facilitate such interventions by providing context driven recommendations which will enhance their effectiveness.

1.2.2 Health (Water, Sanitation and Hygiene)

One Health is a new phrase, but the concept extends back to ancient times. The recognition that environmental factors can impact human health can be traced as far back as to the Greek physician Hippocrates (c. 460 BCE – c. 370 BCE) in his text "On Airs, Waters, and Places". He promoted the concept that public health depended on a clean environment. One Health has evolved as a novel approach across the globe premised on cross-sectoral collaborations. The current One Health movement is an unexpected positive development that emerged following the unprecedented Global Response to the Highly Pathogenic Avian Influenza. Since the end of 2005, there has been increasing interest in new international political and cross-sectoral collaborations on serious health risks. Numerous international meetings and symposia have been held in this regard. The acknowledgement of how health cannot be divorced from the impact of environment provides an avenue for activist researchers to deal with core environmental issues to mitigate their adverse impact on people's health.

Hence in addressing the issue of health the link between health and the environment; increased public health efficacy and improved medical education and clinical care inter alia cannot be overemphasised. The pathways approach recognises that today's world is highly complex and dynamic. Environmental conditions are changing fast, as water, land and other ecological systems interact with climate change and new patterns of disease incidence. Similarly, a multidimensional approach as per the pathways is reflected in the One Health concept. The One Health concept is a worldwide strategy for expanding interdisciplinary collaborations and communications in all aspects of health care for humans, animals and the environment. The synergy produced is argued to advance health care for the 21st century and beyond by accelerating biomedical research discoveries, enhancing public health efficacy, expeditiously expanding the scientific knowledge base, and improving medical education and clinical care. Activist researchers can shape the nature of cross sector collaborations and hence the interventions to protect and save untold millions of lives in our present and future generations.

Thus the objective of enhancing health and well-being by preventing risks and the mitigation of effects of crises that result from the interface between humans, animals and their various environments makes cross sector collaborations imperative. That is why the One Health proponents have purposed to:

- promote a multi (cross) sectoral and collaborative approach.
- promote a "whole of society" approach to health hazards, as a systemic change of perspective in the management of risk.

But a “whole society” approach can be manipulated and abused as it is subject to individual interpretations. Action activist can help in protecting public interest by shaping the dialogue as to the core attributes of such. One Health thus acknowledges that the health of humans, animals and ecosystems are interconnected. It involves applying a coordinated, collaborative, multidisciplinary and cross-sectoral approach to address potential or existing risks that originate at the animal-human-ecosystems interface. Moreover, regardless of which of the many definitions of One Health is used, the common theme is collaboration across sectors. Collaborating across sectors that have a direct or indirect impact on health involves thinking and working across silos and optimizing resources and efforts while respecting the autonomy of the various sectors. To improve the effectiveness of the One Health approach, there is a need to establish a better sectoral balance among existing groups and networks, especially between veterinarians and physicians, and to increase the participation of environmental and wildlife health practitioners, as well as social scientists and development actors. These are roles which activist researchers play and can hence create more space or visibility in the One Health dialogue to make it more encompassing and effective in the long term.

1.3 Conclusion

The berth of the recent SDGs provides unique opportunities for activist researchers in the context of pathways for sustainability to engage with the processes involved in implementing the SDGs so as to make them more successful long term. These SDGs which have been lauded for placing demands on both developed and developing nations unlike the erstwhile Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) can largely be premised on good governance through effective institutions and the harnessing of the unique resources of the diverse stakeholder groups. This places activist researchers in unique positions to engage with the processes of governance and resource allocation. Moreover the cross sectoral demands of the SDGs is an avenue for activist researchers to demonstrate the relevance and importance of such multi-stakeholder dialogue in the context of sustainable development. Given the wide scope and yet cross cutting nature of the SDGs, the pathways to sustainability is one such plausible approach which provides a tool for activist researchers to engage with the processes involved in implementing the SDGs for enhanced impacts.

Resources

SDGs <http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals/>

The Pathways Approach http://steps-centre.org/wp-content/uploads/final_steps_overview.pdf

One Health <http://www.onehealthglobal.net/what-is-one-health/>

<http://www.onehealthinitiative.com/>

IFPRI: An ambitious development goal: Ending hunger and undernutrition by 2025

<http://ebrary.ifpri.org/cdm/ref/collection/p15738coll2/id/128045>