TST Issues Brief: CONCEPTUAL ISSUES[1]

I.   Stocktaking

One of the main outcomes of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012, was the agreement by Member States to launch a process to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). The Rio+20 Outcome provides that the goals should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable, while taking into account different national realities[2]. It also calls for the goals to "...address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages. They should be coherent with and integrated into the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015."

The outcome document further specifies that SDGs should:
-   be a useful tool for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development;[3]
-   address and be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development, guided by the outcome document;
-   contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major summits in the economic, social and environmental fields;
-   serve as a driver for implementation and mainstreaming of sustainable development in the United Nations system as a whole.[4]

The challenge facing the international community is to establish global sustainable development goals that fully respect all the Rio Principles; take into account different national circumstances, capacities and priorities; are consistent with international law; and build upon commitments and the many goals and targets the international community has already agreed upon, in particular the MDGs.

The MDGs demonstrated that international goals, targets and indicators can galvanize action and political will towards a core set of development priorities. As the OWG considers sustainable development goals, governments can draw on the lessons learnt from the MDGs. In general, the MDGs are widely recognized for serving as a rallying point for different actors in combating poverty in its various forms and manifestations. The MDGs did not provide specific guidance on the kinds of actions needed to attain the goals. Some argue that the lack of specifics on *means* and actions to achieve the MDGs reflects a neglect of structural causes of such problems as poverty, inequalities and hunger; others see this focus on *ends* as a strength, allowing maximum policy space to individual countries, thus "respecting national policies". Another lesson learned is that it is better, in many cases, to frame the goals in terms of meaningful outcomes, such as a measure of actual learning rather than merely years of schooling, as well as to disaggregate them, e.g., on a gender basis as in the case of education. It is recognized that data constraints are a major factor in the framing of goals, though goals themselves can catalyse investment and capacity building for data collection.

The simplicity and brevity of the MDGs are also seen as having contributed to their success. On the other hand, holding countries with very different starting points to undifferentiated global targets has

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[2]. United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Outcome Document: *The Future We Want*. A/RES/66/288.
[3] A/RES/66/288, para 246.
[4] Ibid.

been criticized. Also, there are questions whether it is appropriate to measure countries' performance solely in pass/fail terms, ignoring the rate of improvement. The table below summarizes some of the strengths and weaknesses of the MDGs, as well possible implications for SDGs.

Table 1: Weaknesses and strengths of MDGs

Strengths	Weaknesses	Possible implications for SDGs
o Multilateral reference point for diverse actors o Normative shift: poverty is morally unacceptable o Importance of a global partnership for development	o Define human development outcomes, rather than the opportunities/capacities to overcome poverty o De-emphasize structural determinants of development and economic growth o Environment/sustainability and economic dimensions poorly integrated o Do not address all three dimensions of sustainable development, nor inter-linkages o Exclude some important issues outlined in the Millennium Declaration, e.g. peace, governance, human rights o Focus limited to developing countries and aid, not universal	o SDGs should articulate SD in a unifying manner o Need to reflect role of development, growth and structural transformation in poverty eradication o Three dimensions of SD adequately integrated in framing of SDGs o Difficulty in framing security/governance goal, but may need to reflect concerns related to violence and conflict-affected countries. o Build on existing framework, broaden forms of international cooperation
o Targets and indicators to guide and motivate policy decisions; promoting accountability o Simple, clear and concise targets that are easy to communicate	o Failure to account for differences in initial conditions o Limited unifying theory on the underlying structural causes of poverty; weak on social justice – rights, equality, vulnerability and exclusion o Perceived to be unbalanced in treatment of national and international responsibilities o Imprecise targets were set for some dimensions, e.g. several MDG 8 targets and target for reducing the number of slum dwellers	o Need to address underlying societal drivers like consumption, lifestyles; also address values o Reflect equality, inclusion and rights approaches o SDG process is multilateral, and universally applicable but detailed targets probably from expert process
o Incentives for more and better data on poverty	o Focus on monitoring can eclipse analysis of reasons for success/failure o Little attention to quality o Measuring 'on-track' and 'off-track' progress failed adequately to account for considerable progress made in countries despite not reaching the target o Relatively weak accountability mechanisms	o New data needs including on quality; beyond GDP o Need to disaggregate data to reflect underlying inequalities o More clarity on how to tailor global targets to national realities and conditions o Need for science-based information building and knowledge sharing

Source: adapted from Sumner & Tiwari (2010); UNTT (2012)[5]

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[5] A. Sumner, M. Tiwari, *Global poverty reduction and to 2015 and beyond: What has been the impact of the MDGs and are the options for a post-2015 global framework?* (2010); United Nations system task team on the

There is a general agreement that the framing of the SDGs should be broader than that of the MDGs, while recognizing that the SDGs are only a tool to focus and mobilize efforts and to measure progress towards sustainable development, and not an end in themselves. Poverty eradication must remain the overriding objective. Furthermore, there is an urgent need for sustainably managing the natural resources and ecosystems that support development.

The social dimension of the MDGs – the eradication of poverty and promotion of health, nutrition, education and social development – needs to retain its prominence in the post-2015 development agenda, while greater emphasis needs to be placed on addressing inequalities both within and among countries. There is also a need to make specific provision for countries lagging behind, as well as for the inclusion of marginalized groups of society in the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of the SDGs.

Over time, the concept of development has broadened to encompass not only growth or income considerations but also human development, and, more recently, freedom and personal security. The argument has been made that progress towards development goals will severely lag without progress on issues such as peace and security, elimination of violence, gender equality and women's empowerment, inclusive politics and human rights, and rule of law.

II.   Overview of proposals

Several groups or institutions have already proposed frameworks, as well specific potential development goals. In addition, preliminary views of Member States are summarized in the Secretary-General's initial input to the OWG[6]. A comprehensive list of all the proposals can be found on a number of websites.[7] Elements of some indicative proposals for goals are described below.

A key feature of SDGs is that they are to address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development. The important point is that the ensemble of SDGs should achieve the requisite balance; it need not be achieved – and may not be appropriate – in every goal.

One representative proposal envisages three categories of goals to reconcile people's aspirations of well-being and prosperity with the imperative to protect the natural resources on which human life depends: [8] goals to meet basic human development, e.g. education, with very few implications for environmental sustainability; goals where human development outcomes and environmental sustainability must be considered together, e.g. food, water, and energy; and goals on promoting global public goods in the area of resource use. Along similar lines, another proposal seeks to address four interconnected objectives: economic development (including the end of extreme poverty), social inclusion, environmental sustainability, and good governance including personal security.[9] There are also sets of goals designed to facilitate progress towards MDGs and to guide work in fragile and

post-2015 development agenda, *Review of the contributions of the MDG Agenda to foster development: Lessons for the post-2015 UN development agenda*, Discussion Note (2012).
[6] Initial Input of the Secretary-General to the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals (A/67/634).
[7] http://tracker.post2015.org/index.html and
http://www.sustainabledevelopment2015.org/einventory/searchinventory.php
[8] *How to build sustainable development, goals: integrating human development and environmental sustainability in a new global agenda* (ODI, 2013) http://www.odi.org.uk/sites/odi.org.uk/files/odi-assets/publications-opinion-files/8290.pdf
[9] *A Framework for Sustainable Development* (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2012) http://unsdsn.org/files/2012/12/121220-Draft-Framework-of-Sustainable-Development.pdf

conflict-affected States, such as the Peacebuilding and Statebuilding Goals (PSGs).[10] Many of the proposals for future SDGs call for gender equality and women's empowerment to be a stand-alone goal and to be integrated across goals.

A preliminary report, "*The Global Conversation Begins*" was published on 21 March 2013, based on consultations on the post-2015 development agenda involving more than 300,000 people and 36 national consultations.[11] In addition, MyWorld2015.org is gathering global preferences online.

Overall, most proposals are in favour of a set of limited, measurable and concrete goals, keeping the set-up that made the MDGs successful. Most proposals aim to eradicate poverty in the context of sustainable development, with poverty and environmental sustainability as "two sides of the same coin". There is also a wide view that the future framework should take into account issues that are not dealt with adequately or at all in the current framework, such as jobs, social protection, inequalities and exclusion, governance, security, conflict, violence against women, civic engagement, culture, and education beyond and prior to the primary level. Further, many stakeholders are calling for universal goals with national targets and timelines and implementation adapted to national and sub-national circumstances, in addition to a core set of common indicators across the different dimensions of sustainable development. Finally, there are strong calls for the next agenda to be more clearly people-centred, people-led and accountable, in both its design and implementation.

III.   Possible suggestions on the way forward

Consistent with para 247 of the Rio+20 Outcome Document, the framework for the SDGs should, among other things, address the questions below.

1.   What are the characteristics of the conceptual framework that underpins the SDGs?
SDGs should embody a conceptual framework that guides the world towards poverty eradication and universal human development while respecting the Earth's limited and fragile natural resource base. Crucially, many elements of such a conceptual framework are already detailed in the Rio Outcome document as well as other conference outcomes and international agreements. The UN Task Team's 2012 publication, *Realizing the future we want for all*, enlarges on these points from the perspective of the UN system.

The overarching goal is sustainable development guided by a vision of where we wish to be in 20-30 years. What are the negative features which should be addressed (e.g., extreme poverty, hunger and malnutrition, infant, child and maternal mortality, water scarcity, vulnerability, including to natural hazards), and what are the positive elements that should be reinforced (e.g., access to education, universal access to health, productive employment and decent work, access to energy, productive capacities and employment opportunities, resilience, protection of the natural resource base and ecosystems, etc.). On the basis of these considerations, the international community can take the next step to formulate transformational development goals: universal goals that create a common vision and solidarity.

In line with the broad conceptual framework, one option is that the SDGs address the drivers (root causes) of changes, the social, economic and environmental drivers towards long term sustainability. A more integrative or systemic approach, rather than a single-issue based approach, could promote the identification and consideration of causal pathways and linkages. Another option is to focus on clearly

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[10] International Dialogue on Peacebuilding and Statebuilding http://www.newdeal4peace.org/peacebuilding-and-statebuilding-goals/
[11] http://www.worldwewant2015.org/the-global-conversation-begins

stated development outcomes, rather than "drivers of change" or "processes". The options can also be combined.

2. How to prioritize SDGs?

The articulation of the conceptual framework can determine ways to prioritise goals. Such a framework could, among other things, outline how social, economic and environmental dimensions are linked, and identify policies that could strengthen linkages to foster sustainable development pathways. Similarly, consensus-building on selection criteria early on in the process could also facilitate the prioritization process. Selection criteria could include, among others, clear links to MDGs and potential to build on what has been achieved so far in implementing MDGs, addressing the unrealized targets and groups so far excluded from progress, building on existing and/or national goals to minimize the transaction costs, and availability of reliable trend data sets.

Admittedly, it may be difficult to find priorities that are equally relevant for all countries. Options to address this issue include: (i) implicitly or explicitly choose goals that are priorities for different sets of countries; and (ii) formulate goals sufficiently broadly that they cover all countries, but still allow differentiation in targets and indicators by country. The two options could also be combined. In particular, option (i) on its own carries two risks: it would lead to an overly large set of goals, and the goals would not be universal as detailed in the Rio Outcome document. Alternatively, prioritization of SDGs could be left to the individual countries which will assess their own stage of development, the key development gaps they face, the extent to which they can deal with those gaps, and the socio-economic development objectives they have set out in their own national development strategies.

3. How do we address universality while taking into account countries' different levels of development and national circumstances?

"Global in nature" and "universally applicable to all countries" are distinct concepts. The MDGs were global in nature, but most were not universally applicable to all countries. The framework of the SDGs should be universal, but at the same time adaptable to national priorities, capacities and levels of development. The SDG discussion also reveals that the issue of social equity and inequalities within countries (intra-national equality and equity) has gained currency, reflecting concern that the goals should work to the benefit of the lowest quintiles and most excluded groups, which was not always considered explicitly with the MDGs. The broader, international dimension of equity, articulated in the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR), will also need to be considered, especially in the differentiation of targets and insofar as targets have a bearing on protection of the global commons.

Options could include: (i) Common set of goals coupled with the adoption of differentiated targets and/or timelines calibrated to level of development and national circumstances; (ii) Common set of goals with multiple targets and indicators under each (a dashboard or menu) from which countries themselves could prioritize when devising their own development agenda, in keeping with their level of development and national circumstances. In both cases the goals would be universal while the exact targets would be determined at the national level. Each of these options could be underpinned by the adoption of a core, relatively small set of common indicators on which all countries would commit to report (including some of those on which country data is already widely available under the MDGs).

4. How to address the means of implementation/enablers?

Many countries will require external support in order to implement the SDGs. Therefore, the issue of means of implementation must be given due consideration, including ODA, trade, investment, technology transfer, and capacity building. It will have to be decided whether the means of implementation are included as a separate goal (as in the case of MDG 8), or as part of each newly-defined SDG. The lessons learnt with respect to MDG 8, on the Global Partnership, will need to inform

the discussion on this point. At a minimum, the means of implementation should be consistent with commitments countries have already made in other fora; and could express explicitly the ambition to improve global governance mechanisms to manage better the essential global public goods. The work of the Expert Committee on a Sustainable Development Financing Strategy can be expected to feed in, at the appropriate time, into the discussion on means of implementation for the SDGs. There is also a need to recognise the key role of science, technology and innovation as a means of implementation in achieving sustainable development.

5. How could the goals balance and integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development?
Achieving this balance could be done for example by: (i) Integrating the social, economic and environmental dimension within each SDG, possibly through associated targets. One of the weaknesses of this approach is that the economic dimension is, in existing initiatives, insufficiently covered, and usually reflected in the form of efficiency targets. (ii) Compiling a set or cluster of SDGs that each address different dimensions of sustainable development. In this model overall balance would be sought in the whole set of goals. The weakness of this approach is that it addresses all dimensions of sustainable development as separate pillars and does not explicitly acknowledge the inter-linkages among them. At the very least, such inter-linkages would need to be considered in the framing of appropriate targets. (iii) Combining the best aspects of both above-mentioned approaches. One way of developing the SDGs could be to develop a few key goals that would combine all three dimensions of sustainable development within each goal and to complement these with narrower goals that stress one or another dimension in particular.

6. How to build on existing goals and targets?
In addition to the MDGs, there exist many international development goals for specific sectors or topics (e.g. education, energy, biodiversity) whose time horizon runs into the post-2015 era. In the interests of policy coherence, the relationship between SDGs and these sectoral development goal sets needs to be addressed explicitly. There are probably three main options for this: (i) A new SDG could be based on existing sectoral sets. However, elevating one goal from the sectoral set implies downgrading the other goals. This option is thus only viable if there is clear agreement on the priority goal. (ii) A second option is to create sector-specific aggregate SDGs. However, such an overarching goal could be overloaded, too complex to be effective, and vague. Hence, under this option increased efforts have to go into formulating concrete, simple goals. (iii) A third option would be to group the various aspects covered by different sectoral goal sets within comprehensive goals. By way of illustration, access to clean water and sanitation could both be covered by a goal on access to essential services. This option has the additional advantage that it demonstrates a clearer value-added of the SDGs as it creates synergies among issues and may better highlight the integrative perspective of sustainable development. To the contrary, the main effect of the first two options would be to elevate sectoral issues in relative isolation.

7. How do we measure progress?
Depending on how the SDGs are framed, there may be a need to develop new measurement methodologies/tools and to utilize both quantitative as well as qualitative indicators. With respect to some areas of concern where the capacities of Member States diverge widely, it could be fruitful to explore the adoption of a "pledge and review" process. Countries would stipulate, in line with their needs and capacities, which goals and/or targets they plan to achieve nationally and when. However, while the selection of nationally-determined goals and/or targets may promote buy-in, it has a negative trade-off with respect to the feasibility and accuracy of global monitoring.

As much as possible, the data and information requirements to report on the implementation of specific goals and targets should be defined before their final selection. However, there should be recognition that setting goals can stimulate the development of new or improved data and tools for measurement; therefore, the agenda need not be strictly constrained by what is currently available.

Moreover, the SDGs discussion is a prime opportunity to explore critically needed complements to GDP for the evaluation of economic performance. SDG monitoring should be based, as much as possible, on a cascading monitoring system from local to subnational, national, regional and global; use existing robust datasets, including more freely available geospatial data, wherever possible; and establish baselines against which to monitor progress. A range of data sources should be exploited, qualitative as well as quantitative. Population data and projections will need to inform development targets, strategies and policies at all levels.

IV. In Summary

The above proposes some options to stimulate discussion on the critical conceptual issues that could inform the formulation of SDGs, as well as the selection of associated targets and indicators. These critical conceptual issues were distilled from the Rio Outcome Document. Many other questions could be added, e.g., (1) how to ensure convergence with the post-2015 agenda (2) how to engage business and civil society?

As detailed in the Rio Outcome Document, SDGs are only a tool to help the world move towards poverty eradication and long-term sustainability; not every facet of sustainable development can – or should – be covered by the SDGs. Achieving sustainable development requires a transformation of economies and societies, including fundamental changes in production and consumption patterns. An inclusive green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication can also contribute to this transformation. Sustainable development also requires recognizing and strengthening intangible assets such as people's participation, consciousness and sense of responsibility. In addition, it is essential to recognize the impact that cross-cutting enablers such as gender equality, a universal, rules-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system, as well as access to technology generally, including information and communication technology, play as catalysts to achieve all three dimensions of sustainable development.

In developing the SDGs, it is critical to tackle the challenges of achieving poverty eradication and universal human development, while ensuring humanity does not exceed critical ecological thresholds with attendant risk of economic and social setbacks. The success of the SDGs will be judged by both the legitimacy and accountability of the process – intergovernmental, with meaningful stakeholder input and participation – and the outcomes. In this regard, human rights, equity, inclusive governance, women's empowerment and gender equality, protection of the most vulnerable, peace and social justice are intrinsic to sustainable development, and therefore the SDGs should be consonant with the broader post-2015 development agenda.

Finally, MDGs and SDGs are not competing concepts – the SDGs, correctly formulated, will accelerate and continue the work begun under the banner of the MDGs, achieve greater economic and social inclusion, and also emphasize the integration and balance among economic, social and environmental aspirations. Thus, there should be a unified, people-centred development agenda for the post-2015 period, with sustainable development at its centre.