

* Essays

Sustainable development and global health governance – From the Rio+20 to the post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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Abstract

The authors examined the document resulting from the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), known as Rio+20, that was held in June 2012. They analyzed the role of green economy in the process of development and poverty eradication and the requirements for balanced governance of the environmental, economic, and social dimensions. The final document from the UNCSD, which is titled “The Future We Want”, advocates an inclusive multilateral system. It also proposes establishing a high-level intergovernmental political forum from the Commission on Sustainable Development and strengthening the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), highlighting the need for a broad participation of the programs, funds, and agencies from the United Nations, including financial institutions. The document recognizes health as a precondition and the result of the three dimensions of sustainable development, and it highlights the importance of setting coherent goals that are integrated with the post-2015 UN Development Agenda and the three health-related Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The member states insisted on fulfilling the commitments related to the Official Development Assistance (ODA), including dedicating 0.7% of the gross domestic product (GDP) from developed countries to support developing countries. These member states emphasize the possibility of obtaining additional resources through the South-South cooperation and triangular cooperation as an expression of solidarity

between countries. They also highlight the importance of flexibility in the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) Agreement to better use the technology needed for development. Finally, the member states approved the establishment of a working group (WG) to develop a proposal for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will be incorporated into the post-2015 development agenda and should have technical support from all UN agencies (World Bank [WB], the International Monetary Fund [IMF], and the World Trade Organization [WTO], including social agencies such as the World Health Organization [WHO], among others). The result of this effort will be presented to the UN General Assembly (UNGA) in 2013, which allows time to influence the formulation of the post-2015 MDGs and to improve human health conditions, in particular.

Keywords – Rio+20; sustainable development; global health governance; post-2015 MDGs; Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), South-South cooperation

Introduction

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), which is known as Rio+20, was held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil from June 20-22, 2012. Representatives from 191 member states of the United Nations and observers participated, including several heads of state or governments and a large number of ministers (RIO+20, 2012a). The main outcome of the conference was the official report that was titled "The Future We Want" (THE FUTURE..., 2012a), which includes the health dimension as an important component that deserves a more comprehensive analysis in the context of sustainable development, as described herein.

The final declaration from the Rio+20 Summit recognizes that "health is a precondition for, a result of, and an indicator for all three dimensions of sustainable development". The Rio Declaration will have an important role in the post-Millennium Development Goal (post-MDG) debate because of its decision to establish Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

The conference renews "the commitment [of the Member States of the United Nations] to sustainable development and to ensuring the promotion of an economically, socially, and environmentally sustainable future (...)". It recognizes that "eradicating poverty is the greatest global challenge facing the world today and an indispensable requirement for sustainable development", including the promotion of "empowerment of the poor and people in vulnerable situations", "eliminating barriers to opportunity, enhancing productive capacity, developing sustainable agriculture and promoting full and productive employment and decent work for all, complemented by effective social policies, (...)". It also promotes "social protection floors", with the goal of achieving the internationally agreed-upon development goals, including the MDGs.

Despite the fact that the UNCSD has not been able to start new processes, significantly modify the structure of international governance, or establish concrete objectives and goals, the Conference reaffirmed commitments and key concepts and created future opportunities so that the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) and other multilateral forums could shape the true legacy of Rio+20.

Main Themes at Rio+20

A 'green economy in the context of sustainable development (SD) and poverty eradication' was one of the central themes of the conference. The document recognizes that there are different approaches and tools available to implement a green economy, which, ideally, should be guided by the Principles of Rio 92, Agenda 21, and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. It should also contribute to achieving the internationally agreed-upon development goals, including the MDGs.

Although agreeing with the established principles, including no disguised restrictions on international trade and avoiding unwarranted conditions on official development assistance (RIO+20, 2012b), the concept of a green economy that was assumed by the official document was severely criticized by environmentalists and activists because of its exclusively economic dimension. It maintained the current modes of production and consumption, which are the real cause of the current economic, social, and environmental crises. The concept of a green economy that was established in the document is restricted to only establishing an environment conducive to the international business of 'green technologies', which is usually dominated by developed countries (WHAT..., 2012; THE GREEN..., 2012).

Another important theme from Rio+20 was 'governance for sustainable development'. Although a concrete proposal to transform the current structure of global governance for development and the environment was not presented, the final document notes that the future institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD) should include balanced environmental, economic, and social dimensions. To strengthen the institutional framework, it is necessary to strengthen coherence, reduce fragmentation, and avoid duplication while increasing efficiency and transparency. The document also advocates strengthening coordination and cooperation; promoting full and effective participation from all countries in the decision-making process; engaging high-level political leaders; promoting an interface between science and policy; increasing participation and effective engagement from civil society and other stakeholders; and promoting the review and evaluation of progress in the implementation of all commitments related to sustainable development, including those related to the means of implementation.

The Rio document advocates an inclusive, transparent, reformed, strengthened, and effective multilateral system that can tackle today's pressing global challenges for sustainable development. It recognizes the universality and central role of the United Nations and strengthens the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC).

The final Rio document asks the UNGA to establish a high-level intergovernmental political forum that would be constructed from the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and its experiences and methods for inclusive participation. It promotes a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development that will eventually replace the CSD. The high-level forum should be able to strengthen the interface between science and policy through a comprehensive report on sustainable development.

The document calls for the UNGA to adopt a resolution in its 67th session (September 2012) that will strengthen and modernize the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP). The proposal includes establishing a universal membership to the Administrative Council,

strengthening the UNEP's engagement with the main coordinating agencies of the United Nations, promoting the development of skills, facilitating access to technology, and strengthening its regional presence.

Finally, the document recognizes that sustainable development should be duly considered by the programs, funds, and specialized agencies of the United Nations and other relevant organizations, including international financial institutions. It also recognizes the importance of having integrated data and information on the three dimensions of sustainable development and urges countries to strengthen their national, subnational, and/or local institutions and the organizations and processes that are relevant to all stakeholders that promote SD.

Health

The final declaration recognizes that "health is a precondition for and an outcome and indicator of all three dimensions of sustainable development" (THE FUTURE..., 2012b).

The main highlights regarding health in the final document from the UNCSO are summarized in Figure 1 (THE FUTURE..., 2012; RIO..., 2011). In addition to the three MDGs directly related to health, all of the other MDGs are also related to the subject. The diagram below expands the MDGs and shows the current challenges and results of sustainable development that may result in more inclusive, equitable, economically productive, and healthy societies.

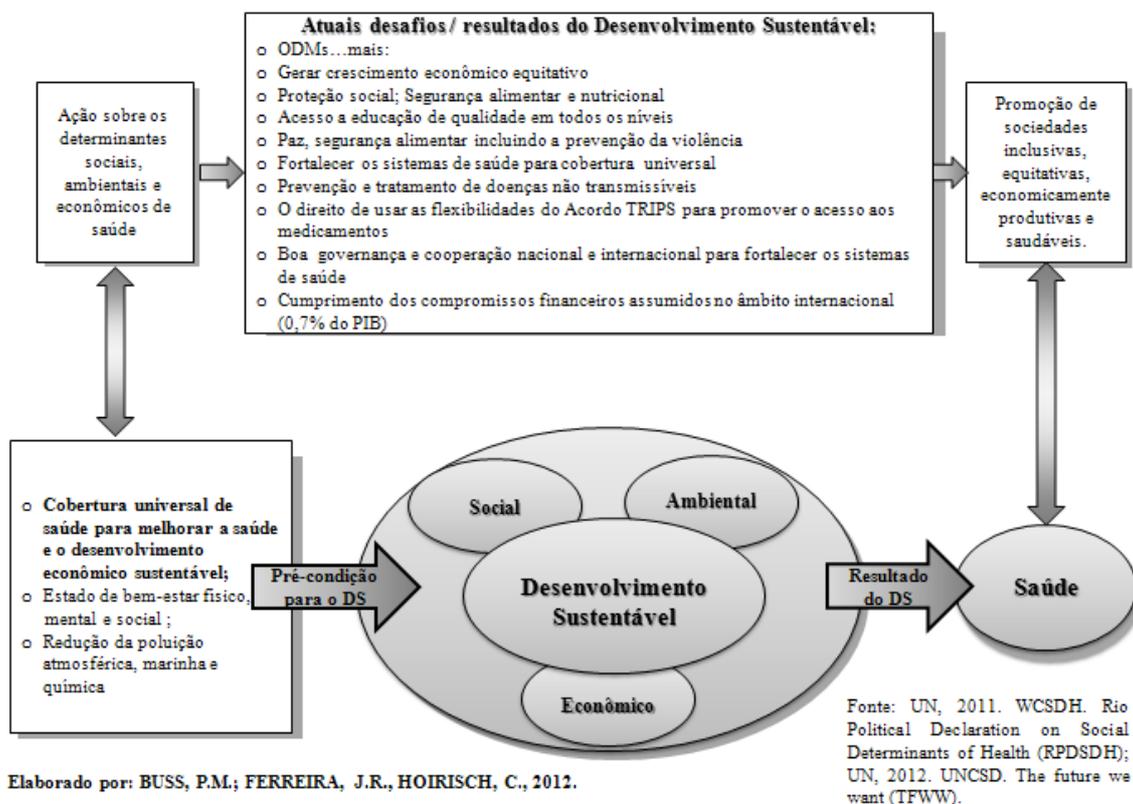


Figure 1 - Health is a precondition for and an outcome and indicator of all three dimensions of sustainable development.

In addition to the health-related commitments established during the UNCSO, many of the other extra-sectoral questions explained in the Declaration have effects on the health and well-being of the world population, as follows: poverty eradication; water and sanitation; food

security, nutrition, and sustainable agriculture; employment and decent work; social protection as a right; transportation; sustainable cities and adequate human settlements; education, gender equality, and women's empowerment; climate change; desertification, soil degradation, and drought; chemicals and waste; (sustainable) consumption and production; and other social and/or environmental themes. A detailed analysis of each of these 'extra-sectoral determinants of health' should be part of the planning process for sustainable development in every country and in considering their impact on human health.

The Rio document recognizes the importance of establishing SDGs that should be coherent and integrated to the post-2015 UN Development Agenda. A question exists as to whether the SDGs should be the successors of the MDGs, and if not, how they should be integrated harmonically and productively. According to the document, the development of the SDGs should not divert focus or effort from meeting the current MDGs.

The document stresses that the SDGs should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, ambitious, global in nature, and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different situations, capacities, and levels of development of countries and respecting national policies and priorities. The goals should focus on priority areas so that sustainable development is achieved.

Financing

Regarding the future financing of sustainable development, the Member States urge the international financial institutions, the Member States of the United Nations, and other interested stakeholders to continue providing financial resources through specific mechanisms to promote sustainable development and poverty eradication in developing countries. It also urges them to establish an intergovernmental process under the UNGA through a wide and open meeting. The process should evaluate the financing needs; consider the effectiveness, coherence, and synergies of the existing tools and frameworks; and evaluate additional initiatives, which can serve as options to finance the sustainable development goals.

The member states recognize that it is crucial that all commitments related to the Official Development Assistant (ODA) are met, including agreements from the developed countries to dedicate 0.7% of their respective gross domestic products (GDPs) to developing countries. There are references to obtaining funds from a "variety of sources" or "new partnerships and innovative sources of financing", which is a sign of the low importance and reduced amount of financing from developed countries to developing countries (RIO+20, 2012b). These references indicate that new and additional sources of resources were not agreed upon. The only reference to additional resources that are tied to responsibility is the paragraph about the South-South cooperation and the triangular cooperation (SOCIAL WATCH, 2012a). Therefore, the South-South cooperation should be seen as an expression of solidarity among countries based on their shared experiences and goals. Both forms of cooperation support a development agenda that takes into account the needs and expectations of developing countries.

In the technology section, the terms of agreement mention a technology transfer to developing countries on favorable terms, including on concessional and preferential terms "as mutually agreed upon". There are general references regarding a technology transfer, but the discourse

is evasive when it refers to sensitive issues, including the rights to intellectual property. This is because the developed countries argued during the course of negotiations that technology is a private good and should be acquired for its full price. References were made to the 'right to use' the flexibilities under the TRIPS (Trade-Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights) Agreement to protect public health and the Doha Declaration on the TRIPS Agreement and Public Health, which reaffirmed the flexibilities of the TRIPS. The declaration stated that the Member States could circumvent patent rights to improve access to essential medicines (SOCIAL WATCH, 2012b).

Perspectives

The current discussion about SDGs should be aware of the following two processes conducted within the United Nations: the implementation and analysis of the MDGs still in progress and the post-2015 United Nations Development Agenda. These two processes will contribute to the post-2015 framework that will eventually follow the MDGs. Therefore, they should be taken into consideration as a potential framework for the SDGs.

In the UNCSD, the states agreed that a working group (WG) should be established to develop a proposal for the SDGs in the post-2015 development agenda. The group is composed of 30 representatives from the United Nations member states from different regions with the goal of guaranteeing a just, equitable, and geographically balanced representation. The WG will ensure full stakeholder involvement and expertise, thereby guaranteeing diverse perspectives and experiences. It will work between September 2012 and September 2013 and will submit a report to the 68th session of the UNGA (2013) that contains a proposal for the SDGs for their consideration and appropriate action.

The panel is co-chaired by the presidents of Indonesia and Liberia and the prime minister of the United Kingdom. The other members of the panel are figures from Brazil, China, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, India, Benin, the United States, France, Germany, Sweden, the Netherlands, Japan, Jordan, Kenya, Latvia, Nigeria, Russia, South Africa, Republic of Korea, Timor-Leste, Turkey, and Yemen and one *ex officio* member, who will be the Special Advisor to the Secretary General for the post-2015 goals and will serve as a liaison with the United Nations (UN SECRETARY, 2012).

To offer the technical support necessary for the process and work of the open WG, the secretary general of the United Nations established a team with representation from all relevant UN agencies and programs (including the World Bank [WB], the International Monetary Fund [IMF], WMPI, the World Trade Organization [WTO], and the "social agencies of the UN, including the WHO" [World Health Organization]) and expert panels (REALIZING..., 2012; UN SYSTEM..., 2012). A UN System Task Team will coordinate an official post-2015 political process and will make technical contributions that include a critical evaluation of the MDGs and emerging challenges for development (how the world has changed since 2000), a redefinition of a global partnership for development (how the new framework should be expanded and who the actors will be), and an evaluation of possible formats for the post-2015 agenda.

The task force's first report on the post-2015 Development Agenda has already been published (REALIZING..., 2012) and will serve as a guideline for the High-Level Panel's work (UN High-

Level Panel) (Figure 2) (UN POST-2015, 2012a). The report recommends that the new goals be extrapolated from the successful aspects (strengths) of the MDGs. They should be universally applicable but should allow for adjustments in the goals depending on the regional, national, and subnational conditions, in accordance with international standards. They should be based on fundamental principles of human rights, equality, and sustainability. Based on the lessons learned from the MDGs, the framework established after 2015 should maintain the format of the objectives, goals, and concrete indicators (REALIZING..., 2012). While the MDGs apply to developing countries, the SDGs should be directed at both the developed and developing countries.

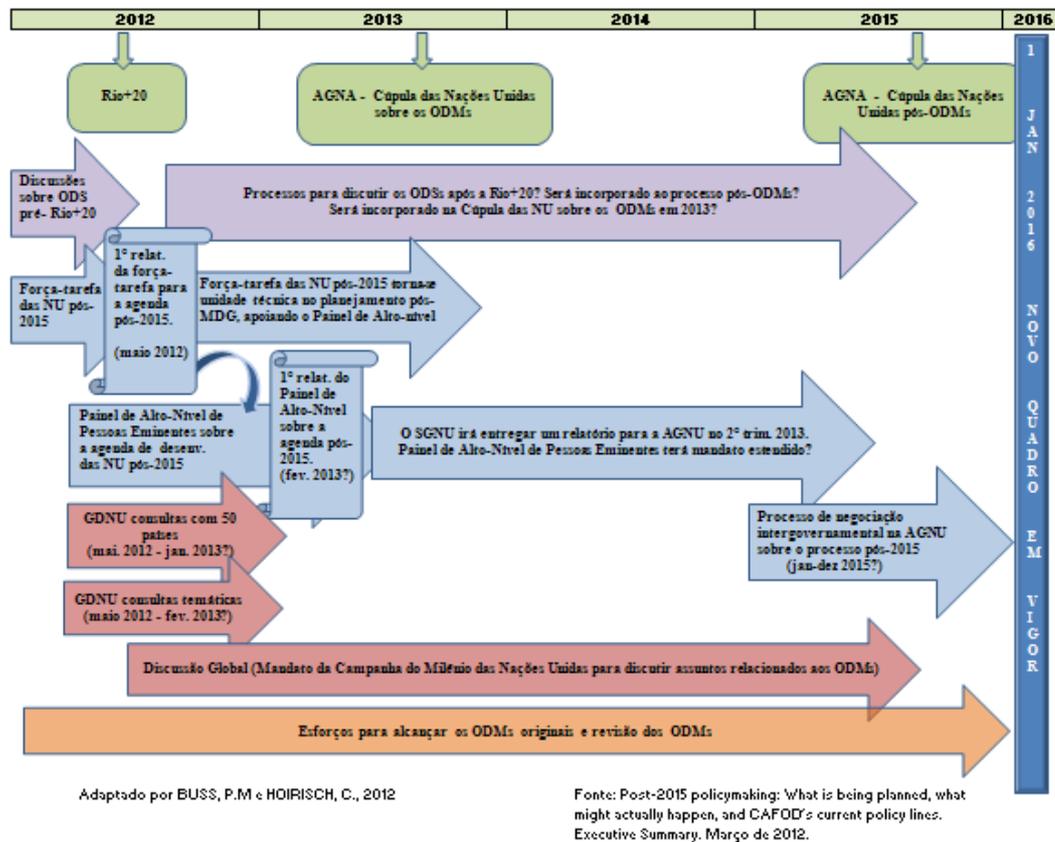


Figure 2 – Outline of processes for SDGs (in green), post-2015 framework (blue), consultations for the post-2015 agenda (red), and the implementation of the current MDGs and revision of the MDGs (orange) (UN POST-2015, 2012a).

In preparing the report, the panel should take into account the following: (i) the Millennium Declaration, which is the final document from Rio+20; (ii) the perspectives of the task force's report on the system of the United Nations to prepare the post-2015 UN Development Agenda, along with the lessons learned and improved practices for the MDGs, as previously mentioned; (iii) the recommendations from different national and thematic meetings at a regional and national level regarding the post-2015 agenda, which will be coordinated by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG); and (iv) the task force from the United Nations and the Special Adviser to the Secretary General for the post-2015 agenda, among others (UN SECRETARY ..., 2012).

National consultations will be organized into WHO geographic regions (Africa, Americas, Eastern Mediterranean, Europe, Southeast Asia, and West Pacific) in 50 southern countries

until January 2013 (UN POST-2015, 2012b). The goal is to influence the intergovernmental process by expanding the voices of the poorest members; as a result, clearer and more pertinent recommendations are expected for the governments. The UNDG will facilitate regional/global consultations with academics, the media, the private sector, civil society, and others to discuss cross-cutting thematic issues in the post-2015 global agenda. Among other aspects of health, the subjects to be considered include issues related to MDGs 4, 5, and 6, in addition to non-transmissible diseases, environmental sustainability, growth and employment (including social protection), education, inequality, and all levels of governance.

The outcome of the national consultations and thematic meetings will be consolidated in a single report to be published in the first trimester of 2013. In the second trimester of 2013, the panel will present its recommendations to the secretary general, who, in turn, will submit a report to the member states. The report will serve as input to the secretary general's report regarding a special event to monitor efforts to reach the MDGs (UN Summit on MDGs) in September 2013 (REALIZING..., 2012), which will provide a good opportunity to reach an initial consensus on a framework for the post-2015 development.

Between the United National General Assembly in 2013 and the year 2015, it is important that efforts to reach an intergovernmental consensus are intensified while continuing an inclusive and open process to refine the content and framework of the future development agenda. The health dimension in particular, which is now included in the final document, should be strengthened to ensure a contemporary view of the SDGs, with a broad influence on the post-2015 MDGs to improve human health. Therefore, a leading role is expected from the executive board of the WHO (January 2013) and the World Health Assembly (May 2013).

Discussion and Conclusions

The proposed political process is complex for the post-Rio+20 environment before 2015 and beyond. If the obstacles from Rio+20 are not resolved, it is possible that these uncertainties will drag on for an unreasonable amount of time. These obstacles resulted mainly from conflicts of interest between developed and developing nations about the guidelines to be adopted regarding green economy and even the new institutional framework that would support sustainable development.

Another component that certainly affects the immediate and long-term perspectives is the global economic crisis. The United States, Europe, and the richest countries in Asia have not expressed great interest in opening their coffers for the \$30 billion global fund that should have been announced at Rio+20. As the crisis persists, there is a risk that the most creative and brilliant proposals achieved in the next rounds of negotiations will be nothing more than rhetorical arrangements with no practical effectiveness.

The concern of many is that the slow progress in advancing intergovernmental political negotiations in the coming years will lead the world to a state of irreversible environmental insolvency. Therefore, a strong investment is being made in an organized global civil society that, by combining multiple convergent interests (activists for climate, ecological agriculture, economic slowdown, health equity, and many others), can internally pressure every country to take coherent positions in the global plan, which could lead to agreements for a post-2015

agenda that increases redistribution without environmentally attacking an already fragile planet.

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