

OWG Final Outcome Document Falls Short of Commitment to Development Justice for Post-2015

**Campaign for Peoples Goals for Sustainable Development
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The co-chairs of the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals finally released the outcome document to feed into the UN Secretary General's Report to the 68th UN General Assembly. The document outlines 17 sustainable development goals, ranging from poverty eradication, food security, ensuring quality access to numerous basic services, means of implementation, and environmental sustainability among many others.

Prior to the publication of the outcome document, the OWG also released two "focus areas" drafts (February 21 and March 19 2014) which reflected the sense of the Member States' inputs to the formulation of sustainable development goals. These documents were further refined at subsequent OWG deliberations and supposedly formed the basis of the new outcome document.

While recognizing some of the positive proposals of the outcome document, it nevertheless contains glaring omissions, gaps and provisions with potentially deleterious implications that need to be criticized and opposed.

We also warn against a decontextualized reading of the OWG outcome document which promote the illusion that governments are committed to tackling the multiple crises of our time even as they continue promoting the same old development model and policy package that brought about the crises in the first place.

The good intentions of SDGs will not be achieved while neoliberalism and the global capitalist development model is intact.

The OWG outcome document is not lacking in good intentions. Indeed, one can identify goals on health, education, water and sanitation, and sustainable industrialization, ecosystems, ocean, and sustainable consumption and production as generally positive.

It is necessary to stress however, that the next global development agenda for post-2015 will not be implemented in a vacuum. Examining current policy trends and strategies pursued by governments, Washington-based international financial institutions, development agencies, and the business sector, we get the following picture:

1. Accelerating privatization with the aim of capturing sectors that were previously public domain, such as water and sanitation services, education, health, pension systems, etc.
2. Trade liberalization by eliminating hindrances to the expansion of unequal trade between developed and developing countries and the concentration



of power in the hands of transnational corporations controlling the trade in goods and services

3. Investment deregulation by facilitating foreign direct investments, speculative capital, and systematic undervaluation of currencies of the South
4. Empowering corporations with new privileges and rights to attack nations by forbidding states from interfering in economic affairs and reducing their role to narrow police functions
5. Subjecting Nature to the laws of the market and actual enclosure of the global commons by the corporate sector

Therefore it is essential to examine the OWG's proposed goals and targets for sustainable development and the emerging Post-2015 development agenda within this larger context. Whatever lofty goals and targets being proposed will have to contend with existing policy measures and objectives that will determine their realization or non-realization.

The outcome document targets extreme poverty and inequality, but ignores extreme wealth.

Goal 1 in the OWG outcome document comes under the ambitious banner: *End poverty in all its forms everywhere*. However, the target that immediately follows under it limits its meaning to eradicating only extreme poverty as measured by the World Bank-defined \$1.25/day poverty line. This is anything but ambitious. This poverty indicator is far too low to cover the cost of purchasing essential needs and goods needed to escape poverty. The "graduation" of 1.29 billion people living under this starvation rate will not make their dire and miserable conditions any more acceptable.

The outcome document rightly proposes progressively increasing the income growth of the bottom 40 per cent of the population at a rate higher than the national average. However, it fails to include the need for an equitable redistribution of income, in light of labor's shrinking share in the GDP in contrast with the ever expanding profits of corporations. It does not have any proposal on the establishment of progressive tax systems, including elimination of VAT for essential needs and the implementation of innovative finance measures such as financial transaction tax, currency transaction tax, carbon tax, or billionaire's tax.

The goal dedicated to reducing inequality within and among countries (Goal 10) is a welcome inclusion. However, it misses on the fundamental truth about inequality. Even as it proposes ensuring equal rights and access to economic resources, assets, and finance, it does not link this goal as a response to the monopoly control of the wealthy few over investment resources and finances; the corporate capture of



natural resources; and the neocolonial plunder of the global South's resources by wealthy developed nations and their multinational and transnational corporations.

The current inequality dilemma is not simply about ensuring that all men and women have equal rights to access and own resources. Equal property right has long been the cornerstone of free market ideology, and we have seen how this "right" has resulted to the unlimited accumulation of wealth in fewer hands.

Fighting inequality, therefore, goes beyond ensuring individual rights to property (which is in fact, already being guaranteed under the existing ownership regime). It also means ensuring that the total output of wealth created by humanity's collective labor is equitably shared and utilized to benefit society as a whole, ensuring that wealth is not overly concentrated in the hands of a few.

Social protection is placed in the backburner.

Evidence suggests that universal social protection has strong redistributive effects. Though various social protection measures have been integrated in the outcome document at SDG target and indicator levels, the absence of a stand-alone goal on SP endangers it being lost and placed in the backburner. A goal on universal social protection is essential as it increases the chance of governments and their development partners concentrating on investing in national systems of social protection, including social protection floors.

But the critical fault of the document is that it ignores the entrenchment of neoliberal policies which for the most part have undermined human development indicators in most regions and weakened governments' capacity to ensure the progressive realization of people's rights. For instance proposed goal 3 "Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages" will have to deal with the current drive of governments towards privatization, public-private partnerships, and patents monopolies in international agreements and bilateral, regional and international free trade agreements.

The same criticism can be said about proposed goal 3 on equitable quality education" and proposed goal 6 on water and sanitation. As various critics of the MDGs have pointed out, UN development agencies have long promoted the same goals. While progress was made in initial years, ground has been lost since the reduction in public expenditures and the privatization of these sectors.

The OWG outcome suffers from the critical absence of measures that would expand public and democratic ownership of essential industries, utilities and services. Public ownership remains crucial to delivering social justice and economic democracy, emphasizing economic decision-making as a collective initiative that should be open to broader scrutiny and participation than we have currently. Responding to the economic problems facing societies – problems about social services provisioning or general macroeconomic problems such as determining what goods and service should be produced to serve whose needs, or how to achieve full employment and tackle poverty – requires collective and public



stewardship of resources and decision-making, framed around the democratic deliberation of people's interest and welfare rather than private interests capturing economic decision-making institutions.

The outcome document does not uphold food sovereignty.

The outcome document seeks to increase agricultural productivity and incomes of small farmers, but does not have a target ensuring land is owned by the tillers. It also lacked any target addressing the mass acquisition of land in developing countries and LDCs conducted by agro-TNCs and investors from developed countries.

This is an unacceptable omission as rural land redistribution and tenure security remain the top agenda of poor farmers, especially in the global South and are vitally linked to their food sovereignty.

It is lamentable that some of the more progressive recommendations and statements made by some of the country-delegates, especially from the G77 bloc, in the OWG sessions have not been considered in the targets and indicators of the focus areas document. For example, no reference was made about the strong stance taken by the G77 bloc against the increasing financialization of the agriculture sector that is posing severe threats to the economic and social right to food and nutrition of vulnerable populations in developing countries.

The corporate-driven market forces and policies that are enabling big companies to capture seed markets by introducing genetically modified seeds have been proven to have dreadful impacts on the environment, human health and the livelihoods of farmers. These impacts are more pronounced in poor developing nations where farmers are small and marginalized communities, governments are weak, corruption is prevalent and it is much easier for these companies to make their way and monopolize the seed market. The G77 bloc's strong emphasis about the need for a proper *regulation* of agricultural commodity markets to avoid excessive volatility and speculative activities was weakly reworded in the outcome document to proper *functioning*.

The outcome document lacks definite targets to ensure environmental justice

The chapeau noted that there is a consensus about the need to hold global atmospheric rise below 2 degrees Celsius. Curiously, this was not indicated as a target for climate change mitigation goal. There is mention of phasing out fossil fuel subsidies but only insofar as they distort the markets. It fails to adopt a global target for capping the burning of fossil fuels even as the UN Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change has already concluded that 80 percent of the world's current fossil fuel reserves need to be kept in the ground to prevent the catastrophic scenario of a planet heated by more than 2 degrees Celsius. Neither are there concrete targets for promoting community-owned and managed renewable energy sources.



Another missing is a target ensuring the effective regulation and governance of synthetic biology, especially the development of biofuels and transgenics, to protect public health and the environment and prevent human rights, violations including land grabs. The document “Principles for the Oversight of Synthetic Biology” which was signed by 111 civil society organizations contain useful recommendations to achieve this and would have been an opportune time to translate these insights into actionable targets.

Target 15.9 advocates the integration of national accounting of biodiversity and the ecosystem into national and local planning and poverty reduction strategies. While, nature valuation may not necessarily take the form of market valuation, it cannot help but be taken to mean as a legitimization of the commodification of Nature, especially with the UN’s push for “Green Economy” and schemes like ecosystem offsets like carbon trading, carbon markets, and UN REDD+.

Market-based schemes such as Payment for Ecosystem Services ignore the multidimensionality and integral nature of ecosystems and disregard the adverse social implications of commodifying nature – including the displacement of communities most dependent on natural resources for their livelihoods and culture. They also offer false assurances of environmental sustainability in the sense that they do not really aim at reducing emissions and curtailing the polluting activities of corporations. Moreover, they also undermine indigenous peoples’ tenure rights to their land and environment. The authors’ of the outcome document could have taken this chance to deliver a stand against PES and such measures that seek to commodify the commons and subject Nature to further market pressures.

The outcome document is also deficient in reviewing unsustainable and destructive large scale development projects, viz, mining, large dam projects etc. that result in widespread devastation and environmental and social injustices.

Finally, the outcome document fails to include a target compelling business to account for social and environmental costs and require them to report on sustainability practices. Instead, it only “encourages” companies to integrate sustainability information into their reporting cycle, relying on the sector’s goodwill and honesty. Civil society organizations have long been calling for stronger regulatory frameworks for corporations, including drawing up a code of conduct for transnational corporations, legally binding rulings against TNCs, and setting up minimum standards for the disclosure of information of TNC activities.

The outcome document promotes labor-export policy and “migration for development”

The outcome document correctly highlights the importance of decent work and employment for all. However, it neglected to address existing policies of labor market flexibility and deregulation, especially in the context of cash-strapped developing economies pursuing foreign investments where employment is made vulnerable, cheap and docile and where workers’ union rights and collective bargaining rights are completely trashed.



The chapeau echoes the Declaration of the High-Level Dialogue on International Migration and Development stance on promoting migration as a development opportunity. Target 10.c aims to reduce transaction cost of migrant remittances while 10.7 calls for the facilitation of migration and implementation of planned and well-managed migration policies.

The document ignores that the phenomenon of migration, especially for those coming from developing countries, is brought about by unjust structures and policies of governments and international institutions that impoverish the vast majority of the world's population, forcing them to migrate out of necessity and desperation, rather than choice. Governments and international development institutions and platforms like the UNHLD and the Global Forum on Migration and Development (GFMD) become party to the injustice inflicted on migrants by promoting the neoliberal labor export strategy as a means to alleviate poverty and to mobilize resources for "sustainable development."

Developing country governments seek to institutionalize labor export to increase remittances to arrest their sinking economies and project the illusion of growth. Remittances are increasingly being used by the sending-country government to pay its fiscal deficits stemming from unequal trade relations with the developed countries, cover foreign loans or used as guarantee for more foreign borrowings. It leads to jobless growth as the billions of dollars are not utilized to promote national development goals like industrialization and agriculture modernization that could generate employment.

The outcome document promotes more trade liberalization and ignores calls for democratic transformation of global governance institutions.

The goal on means of implementation has become a battleground over the sharp differences between developed and developing countries. The outcome document reflects these conflicting visions and compromises between the two camps over structural themes on trade, finance and technology transfer.

The result is that while the document appears to concede to some of developing countries' demands on policy and systemic levels, it also retains policies such as trade liberalization, deregulation, and aggressive foreign direct investments – the very same policies that have aggravated wealth polarization and underdevelopment in many countries, especially in the developing world, today.

According to a report drawn by the Third World Network's (2014), developing countries led by G77 and China asserted developing countries' full use of TRIPS flexibilities for technology transfer, especially of sound technologies, under goal 17 of the means of implementation and in access to medicines and vaccines. Developed countries, on the other hand, fiercely resisted the adoption of flexibilities in TRIPS for developing countries, arguing that if TRIPS had to be mentioned it had to be the general implementation of TRIPS.



In the final document, TRIPS flexibilities under goal 17 of means of implementation are deleted. Instead, the TRIPS flexibilities were included in target 3(b) under Goal 3 on health. While this may be an important concession, this simply rehashes the WTO Doha Declaration's recognition of developing countries' right to use TRIPS flexibilities in relation to providing medicines for all and protecting public health.

An attempt at concession towards least developed countries and developed countries appears to be made with the introduction of a target to increase exports of developing countries and doubling the LDCs' share of global exports by 2020. However, this is a dilution of the original assertion by developing countries that specifically calls for the improvement of developing countries' market access. For example, goal 17 target 3 lacks a language on removing "tariff and non-tariff barriers" which developing countries have long been calling for.

Target 17.10 argues for an "open and non-discriminatory multilateral trading system under the WTO including through the conclusion of negotiations within its Doha Development Agenda." In concrete experience, this has meant the warrantless imposition of free-market rules on developing countries and the forced dismantling of mechanisms to support domestic capital accumulation and marginal economic sectors and consumers as these have been viewed protectionist and discriminatory against foreign monopoly corporations.

The outcome document promotes the non-discriminatory and parallel elimination of subsidies in world agricultural markets. This proposal fails in promoting economic justice as this does not address the economic imbalance between developed and developing countries caused by developed countries' consistent protectionist stance while pressuring developing countries to liberalize. For example, developed and least developed countries (LDCs) have long been reducing their tariffs and using minimal subsidies in the past or have been asked by the International Monetary Fund (IMF) to reduce subsidies as part of the IMF structural adjustment program (SAP) of liberalization.

Goal 17 target 4 adopts developing countries proposal to provide assistance to developing countries in attaining "debt sustainability" through debt financing, relief, and restructuring and "address the external debt of highly indebted poor countries (HIPC) to reduce debt distress." However, this omits and dilutes the stronger stance of G77 (Muchhala, 2014) which calls for the establishment of a "transparent and independent mechanism to prevent and address debt crises and its impacts, while taking into account the role of credit rating agencies and the predatory effects of vulture funds." Additionally, the G77 calls for the cancellation, rather than simply to "address," HIPC debt.

Target 16.8 agrees about the need to broaden and strengthen the participation of developing countries in institutions of global governance but does not elaborate on how to exactly achieve this. Furthermore, there is no recognition about the need to reform global governance institutions, especially the Washington-based global financial institutions, to address their democratic deficiencies and increasing susceptibility to corporate influence and power.



Furthermore, the final outcome text removed the initial reference to the creation of a High-Level Political Forum (HLPF), thus frustrating the possibility of the HLPF being adopted by the UN General Assembly when it decides to consider the OWG outcome document. It must be remembered HLPF was originally agreed upon by governments in the Rio+20 document *The Future We Want* as replacement to the UN Commission for Sustainable Development as the main institution for guiding, implementing, and monitoring sustainable development measures,

This accurately captures the observation made by analysts “how intergovernmental negotiations can barely manage to retain the language of previous processes and outcomes, let alone move the language forward to encompass broader and deeper issues” (Muchhala, 2014).

The outcome document uncritically endorses private sector-led development.

The outcome document completely drops **global partnership for development** as a mode of collective action of developed and developing countries on key development issues, with the developed countries taking the lead in providing resources and the means of implementation. Rather, it substitutes a revamped version of **partnerships** especially with the private sector. Target 17.6 of the means of implementation goal, for example, uncritically endorses public-private partnership (PPPs).

There is a need to closely examine PPP as a means to finance development priorities for post-2015, especially when concrete experiences by many countries point to its many negative effects. In many instances, PPPs have been wielded as a pretext for creating a smaller public sector by clearing the way for the consolidation and privatization of government-run agencies and corporations. PPPs have also resulted in massive lay-offs of government employees. In some cases, taxpayers even end up financing corporate take-over of public infrastructure and delivery services as provided by conditions offered by governments to entice the private sector. Finally, there is the serious concern about the lack of adequate accountability mechanism and policies to ensure justice in violations by private parties.

PPPs form part of the general trend of partnerships with the private sector in an effort to revive the all-too familiar market-led strategy dominant among policy makers since the advent of the Washington consensus in the 1980s. And yet we have seen how the profit-maximizing logic and market competition among private enterprises have led to cutting down on wages and erosion of the collective rights of workers; food insecurity among the poor due to higher prices of goods and services; and the aggravation of social inequalities and environmental emergencies caused by big business’ operations.

In the current context of depressed economic conditions, PPPs serve to socialize the risks and guaranteeing the profits of private investors. Moreover, the focus on business as the forerunner of the new development agenda and the aggressive push for “partnerships” lead to the obscuring of the ultimate obligation of



governments in providing public goods and services and promoting people's rights. The provision of public goods becomes unreliable as it increasingly becomes dependent on voluntary and ultimately unpredictable sources of financing. This adds pressure to privatize this provisioning, thereby flouting the rights-based understanding of people as rights-holders and governments as duty-bearers compelled to account for their human rights obligations under international and national laws.

The outcome document neglects to address foreign occupation as a major stumbling block to world peace and security.

A major stumbling block to world peace today is foreign occupation which is primarily driven by countries' quest for new resources and markets. Rich and powerful states repeatedly violate with impunity UN resolutions and declarations against foreign subjugation, domination and occupation. Multinational corporations loot on colonized nations' natural wealth, resources, and labor power as spoils of neocolonial wars. Entire populations are displaced and women and children of colonized countries are subjected to gross violations of human rights.

The Group of 77 developing countries and China repeatedly urged a specific target on ending foreign occupation rather than simply being acknowledged in the chapeau. Developed countries however resisted the inclusion of foreign occupation in the document or even being mentioned in the chapeau, communicating veiled threats to topple the entire process itself.

The outcome document completely sidelines human rights

Overall, the outcome document does not recognize, ensure and protect human rights for all which should be a core principle and objective of a just, transformative and sustainable post-2015 global development agenda.

This is despite the accompanying 4-page chapeau reaffirming Rio+20's commitment to uphold human rights.

The outcome document emphasizes through dedicated goals and interlinkages with cross-cutting thematic priorities education, food security, water, sanitation and achieving environmental sustainability. However, they fundamentally lack the needed human rights orientation to guarantee states' accountability and strengthen the claim-making power of people as rights-holders.

With the exception of the universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights, the outcome document has ultimately failed to employ human rights as the underpinning principle for the realization of sustainable development goals. Notably, the initial proposal of the OWG progress report on ensuring that "business globally respects fundamental human rights, in line with the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights" is likewise missing. Overall, the outcome document lags far behind previous internationally-agreed treaties and declarations on human rights, including the right to self-determined development of marginalized indigenous communities.



All in all...

The OWG outcome document is another missed opportunity to introduce a just and sustainable development agenda for post-2015. Even as it tries to comprehensively cover everything under the sun with staggering 17 goals, it still falls short of advocating necessary structural reforms delve deep into the roots of injustice, deprivation, marginalization and ecological disasters today. In the end, the outcome document appears to be just like an expanded version of MDGs with revamped targets.

We therefore urge Member States and the Secretary General this coming 68th UN General Assembly to go beyond aspiring to meet targets and minimum thresholds and spark the debate on alternative development models and paradigms. As the world nears the crucial phase of setting the agenda for negotiation among governments and other stakeholders to achieve global sustainable development goals, it is imperative that a much transformative and bolder perspective and recommendations are adopted to attain an equitable and just post-2015 era.

Works Cited

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