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Editorial

The sustainable development goals: The bumpy road ahead



On 24 and 25 September 2019, government representatives from around the world gathered at the United Nations Headquarters in New York to review the progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. This event was the first UN summit focused on the Sustainable Development Goals since the adoption of the new agenda in 2015. Early assessments point towards some important achievements, particularly in areas where the road had already been paved by the Millennium Development Goals (e.g. maternal and infant mortality, leading communicable diseases), and areas where progress has been slower (e.g. poverty and hunger eradication, biodiversity conservation)¹. The SDG Summit resulted in the adoption of a Political Declaration² in which heads of state and government recognized the need for greater efforts and commitments to accelerate implementation, and announced more than 100 concrete actions to advance the agenda in the form of new or enhanced policies and projects.

This is a crucial moment to reflect on the SDGs. Efforts towards the implementation of SDG-related initiatives have been mounting, but we are still at a relatively early stage when adjustments and redirections are still possible. It is thus an ideal time to put forward ideas and evidence that could inform ongoing debates about the SDGs and their implementation.

This special issue of *World Development* is part of the SDG Perspectives Series, a collaborative, interdisciplinary endeavour whose aim is to interrogate the gap between academic and policy discourses underpinning the 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. The articles offer rich overviews on key goals, and provide examples, research evidence, and empirical data that illustrate important challenges and new lines of enquiry. By narrowing down the discussion on specific aspects of the SDGs that deserve particular attention, the special issue offers a nuanced perspective on the potential and limitations of the 2030 Agenda.

The articles propose new viewpoints to longstanding development challenges. Fukuda-Parr and Muchhala (2020) highlight the key role that Southern actors and realities of the South played in shaping fundamental concepts of the SDGs. The 'mobility equality' approach proposed by Hackl (2018) highlights the need to go beyond the narrow focus on income inequality of SDG 10 to incor-

porate different forms of social, human and digital mobility that can contribute to positive development outcomes. Papers also shed light on policy and governance changes that are fundamental to reach the goals, but that are often neglected in current debates, potentially undermining the possibility of success in many countries. Barbara Bruns et al. (2019) discuss new concerns on education quality of SDG 4 that replaced the narrow focus on schooling access of MDG 2, and stress the importance of teacher policy reforms as key factors to raising learning in primary and secondary schools. Yet, the highly contentious nature and uncertain outcomes of these reforms - well documented through empirical research on reform experiences across the world - is currently overlooked by development actors. Likewise, Herrera (2019) argues that reaching SDG 6 on water and sanitation could remain a challenge if closer attention is not devoted to local governance and institution. Herrera also discusses some tensions between SDG 6 and other goals, particularly SDG 7 on clean energy and SDG 9 on industrial development, pointing towards the need to either prioritize between goals or stagger the timing of their implementation.

The identification of linkages and tensions between goals is an important contribution of this collection of papers. Building on feminist debates on gender and work, Rai et al. (2019) argue that SDG 8 on 'sustainable economic growth and decent work for all' fails to fully address the decent work agenda by neglecting the costs and value of social reproductive work, which in turn generate contradictions with SDG 5 on gender equality. A more positive assessment of the SDGs holistic agenda is offered by Blesh et al. (2019) in their integrated literature review on the 'Zero Hunger' goal (SDG 2), which fully acknowledges linkages between health, environment and agriculture. They stress the need to organize the pathway to achieving SDG 2 around place-based, adaptive, participatory solutions that address multiple challenges linked to institutional capacities, agroecosystem diversification and ecological management, and the quality of local diets. Finally, Chimhowu et al. (2019) embrace a broader focus by looking at how the SDGs are informing (or not) a new generation of widely overlooked national development planning, whose re-emergence is signalling new global and country-specific perspective on development endeavours.

With more than a decade to go before the SDGs deadline in 2030, there is still a long (and bumpy) road ahead. This collection of comprehensive reviews analyses crucial development challenges of our time. It advocated for the need for more effective dialogue between scholars and practitioners to better understand and

¹ Report of the Secretary-General on SDG Progress 2019 Special Edition, Available online at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/24978Report_of_the_SG_on_SDG_Progress_2019.pdf

² Political declaration of the high-level political forum on sustainable development convened under the auspices of the General Assembly, available online at <https://undocs.org/en/A/HLPF/2019/L1>

act on those challenges driven by the growing complexity of a global and highly interdependent world.

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