

Transforming Our World with New Sustainable Development Goals

By Ramón Cruz

In September 2015, leaders from around the world met at the United Nations Sustainable Development Summit in New York to welcome a new global vision for the future. The UN had finally, after years of discussion, agreed on seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that set targets for the next fifteen years of the global struggle to end poverty, achieve gender equality, ensure food security, protect the environment, and fight climate change.

The agreement, laid out in the publication *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, represents the next step in international development goals after the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were retired. In the end, the perspectives of 193 nations and civil society were taken into consideration, and the seventeen SDGs with 169 targets will have a deep and broad impact on the lives of billions of people, increasingly populous cities, and the vital ecosystems that sustain life on earth.

The Institute for Transportation and Development Policy has been involved in this process since the beginning, and the agreement references transport in several targets. This includes

cutting the number of deaths and injuries from road traffic accidents globally by half, and a goal dedicated to making cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient, and sustainable. In addition, the building of resilient and sustainable infrastructure is included in several goals dealing with a range of themes from industrialization and innovation to gender equality and the promotion of agriculture.

Now that consensus has been reached, the challenge shifts to finding the means to implement these goals. The UN estimates that it will take more than US\$170 trillion to finance them over the next fifteen years. For those of us working toward the advancement of sustainable and equitable transport and urban policies through

The evening of Sunday August 2nd representatives of 193 countries and several hundred advocates from civil society welcomed a new global vision for the future with euphoric standing ovation.





The document is a major accomplishment for the United Nations system, which works under the principle of consensus. More often than not, it is difficult to reach consensus when 193 different perspectives are taken into consideration.

advocacy and technical expertise, the SDGs represent a new and stronger opportunity to advance our mission in three main ways.

First, in order to properly measure SDG progress and hold governments accountable, defining the right indicators and setting targets will be critical. One of the successes of the MDGs was that those goals allowed all countries to follow one system of indicators—which helped with transparency, accountability, and focus.

One of the main criticisms of the indicators was that measurement was hampered by a lack of data, complicating both measuring progress over time and setting baselines. Because of that, many of the proposed indicators for the SDGs include a primary indicator that is simple to measure from day one and easy to understand. This can be complemented by additional discretionary indicators that may have more nuance, but are harder to measure. Once these indicators are globally agreed to, it will be easier to identify “low hanging fruits,” fund initiatives, monitor their impact, and determine where interventions should be focused. This in itself is a big step toward solving these problems and will be a great tool for advocacy.

Second, funding can be targeted and used more efficiently. As seen with the MDGs and other international processes, when the global community sets specific goals, multilateral institutions, international development agencies, and philanthropic sources align their strategic efforts with the language within these goals. In this way, everyone will be “rowing in the same direction.” The downside to this is that whatever issues are not included in the documents are not taken as priorities and therefore are more difficult to fund.

The transport sector has experienced this in the past, as, for example, with the Kyoto Protocol and the Clean Development Mechanism. This dynamic of excluding transport seems to have changed since Rio+20 and especially with this agreement. The multiple mentions of transport should offer an opportunity to ensure that innovative sustainable urban projects that have not been at the center of international development discussions in the past are considered in the future and the increase of funding for those projects is the proof of that.

Third, by setting standards, this agreement provides an opportunity for national governments to align their objectives with the SDGs and share a similar language and guidelines with their regional peers. It also gives civil society a tool to hold national governments accountable to these goals by comparing themselves with regional peers, writing about the agreement in the press, and making it an issue during elections. Ultimately, this dynamic could result in better governance and more transparent initiatives that civil society and the international community could monitor.

Even though many social issues such as poverty or gender inequality still exist, one can state that the MDGs helped move forward this agenda and in many instances countries greatly advanced in comparison to where they were at the turn of the century, when the MDGs emerged. Similarly, in 2030, we hope to live in a world that is moving toward greater equality and sustainability for all.

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