SUMMARY OF THE KAPUSCINSKI DEVELOPMENT LECTURE

DEVELOPMENT GOALS – BRILLIANT PROPAGANDA?

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Under the label 'Sustainable Development Goals' (SDGs) a new global agenda of international cooperation for development will replace soon the much praised and equally much criticized Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). A draft document will be adopted in September 2015. It is the most ambitious global effort so far, doubling the number of original goals and proposing over 150 targets. However, especially in the initial phases, such documents need to be thoroughly scrutinized and criticism addressed before the implementation of certain policies may prove costly and counter-productive.

Weak sides of the Sustainable Development Goals

Most importantly, like the MDGs, the SDGs in their current format still fail to address the agency and accountability: Who is supposed to do what? Who is accountable for what? So far, these questions have not been properly addressed. Furthermore, we have tended to give the most difficult tasks to the least capable agents.

Unfortunately, the lack of proper links between goals, measurable progress and accountability make the global agenda on development look rather as 'Sustainable Development Wishes' than Goals, a fact that undermines both the global efforts and their credibility. The SDGs should identify clearly whose goals they are supposed to be and should clearly specify the responsibility of capable agents. This problem comes hand in hand with a second structural issue, which is methodological.

Problems with measurement

Within the MDGs framework the measurement tools for assessing development indicators have been highly problematic. Structurally, the problem occurred largely due to establishing the means of proper accountability. The actors that were supposed to implement the agenda were also those that had to make the assessment of the progress.

This is particularly visible when it comes to poverty assessment. Instead of improving the assessment capacity for policy-making, the measurement tools for poverty were just satisfying the need of policy-makers to report progress in development goals without these actually being done.

Problems remain even in the case of improved quantitative methods for measurement, and they are due to the lack of a proper distinction between the assessment of goals as principles and the assessment of their implementation, but also due to difficult conceptual problems and the operationalization of poverty.

Has poverty reduction been a real success?

On paper, in percentages, it seems as if we indeed almost halved the number of the poor people in the world between 1990 and 2015, but if we look at absolute numbers, for instance of undernourished people, there is a significant increase.

The problem of poverty measurement is also highly visible in qualitative terms. For instance, the assessment of poverty based on a standard number of calories intake, such as the one done by the FAO, does not take into account the different number of calorie needs depending on the type of lifestyle in different parts of the world. Also, such definitions exclude the number of deaths due to undernourishment and thus do not properly assess the whole extent of poverty's most critical dimensions.

At the same time, the continuous shift in design and the weak measurement tools have covered the fact that in absolute terms the number of poor people has significantly increased, a reality that contradicts the positive assessment in reports on the goals.

Beyond numbers, when it comes to poverty, this means qualitatively that overall we are worse off than during previous centuries because, unlike then, nowadays poverty is structurally avoidable and we still fail to approach the problem properly. More importantly, it is irrelevant whether we are better off overall in terms of poverty compared to previous periods if we still have large numbers of poor people. The moral question is, then, what we can do now, not what has been achieved.

How to improve setting and measuring goals?

The SDGs are an ambitious project, but as they are currently formulated they continue to miss a proper assessment dimension. This needs to be address at both academic and policy levels.

There are several solutions to the problems we have looked at:

Most urgently, we need independent, outsourced methods for measuring poverty, inequality and the assessment of development goals. This means that actors traditionally associated with reports on the progress of development goals and who are also in charge with helping drafting the strategic agenda for development, such as the UNDP, should do just the latter.

Academics should be more involved in designing and peer-reviewing different measurement tools for the assessment of the SDGs, helping thus ease the political pressure and the amount of work that the UN System faces in this area.

For political accountability, there are also solutions that have been already tested:

For instance, in the case of poverty, the Academics Stand Against Poverty (ASAP) initiative does poverty audits in elections (i.e. tracking the poverty related promises during the electoral campaigns and how they are dealt with after the election).

This can increase the pressure on the political elites to keep their promises, to formulate better / achievable policies with measurable targets and also raise awareness on development issues, such as poverty, at both the local and global levels.

For specific measurements on poverty and inequality, the GINI coefficient may not be enough. An alternative, more sensitive indicator is the PALMA ratio (i.e. an income inequality that measures the ratio between the share of gross national income possessed by the richest 10 percent and the share of the gross national income of the poorest 40 percent of the population.

Irrespective of the technical specificities that are required by the SDGs, the main message should remain the same: world inequality needs to be a priority for the global agenda on development and we need proper, independent tools for assessing the progress in our policies related to it.