

Promoting policy coherence and system-wide actions for a world without poverty: gaps, challenges and progress for the UN system

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Introduction

The challenges posed by slow progress towards achieving the SDGs by 2030, especially those targeting multidimensional poverty, is well-summarized in the aide memoire for the meeting and several UN reports, not least the SDG progress report to the General Assembly Summit last September. This paper therefore focuses on promoting policy coherence and system-wide actions to accelerate global actions for a world without poverty.

Building institutional coherence across the system is vital if the UN is to be able to provide the support Member States have requested. Eradicating poverty in an interdependent world requires global collective action and that is what the UN was set up to organize. As we start on the task of discussing how the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2027) can be made effective, the context the UN finds itself in as it reaches its 75th Anniversary in 2020 is important.

First, the crisis of multilateralism and what the UN can do about it.

Second, the connection between the need to accelerate progress on the 2030 Agenda and the system-wide plan of action for the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty.

Third, the way the plan of action can help mobilize the potential of the network of expertise on multidimensional poverty eradication within the UN system in support of national sustainable development strategies.

The UN and the crisis of multilateralism

The Secretary-General and many others have spoken about a crisis in multilateralism. In his address accepting the Charlemagne Prize last May, Mr. Guterres said “multilateralism is under fire precisely when we need it most”.

The construct of international institutions built up since 1944 seemed, especially after the fall of the Berlin Wall, to be an inevitable process in which nation states gradually agreed to share responsibility for an increasing number of their policy commitments. Even though this system, with the UN at its apex, often worked with difficulty and had many critics, a widely-shared sense of social purpose was embedded within the architecture of international institutions deepened by the practice of cooperation. This had legal and equally important political dimensions. Parties of the centre left and centre right shared the view that countries should work within the UN and other international organizations because it served their citizens' interests best. They alternated in government in many countries especially those of the major Western powers, as we used to call them. John Ruggie in his much-cited, article "Multilateralism: the anatomy of an institution" described this as a "permissive domestic environment".¹

Recently, Robert Keohane, looking back on his life's work on what he terms "institutionalized multilateral cooperation", admits that he overlooked the significance of domestic distributional politics to the stability, evolution and effectiveness of the multilateral system.² Since the global financial crisis of 2008/9 and the subsequent anaemic economic recovery, domestic support for multilateralism has eroded in a number of countries from shifts towards a populist nationalism. This has complicated decision-taking in multilateral institutions producing a near gridlock.

There are, of course, specific national explanations for these political trends but perhaps one common feature is the polarizing effect of increased social and economic inequalities. Baldwin analyses how the twin processes of globalization and automation have left many workers and their communities in industrialized countries feeling left behind.³ The sense in these communities of having been unfairly treated by governments is exacerbated by the relatively rapid growth of knowledge economy poles in other regions. Iversen and Soskice explain how "embedded knowledge-based liberalism" enabled the ICT revolution that is still underway but created new geographical and educational cleavages.⁴ They argue that knowledge economies build

¹ Multilateralism: the anatomy of an institution, J G Ruggie, International Organization, 46 3 1992

² Understanding Multilateral Institutions in Easy and Hard Times, Robert O. Keohane, Annual Review of Political Science, 2020 Vol 23 1

³ The Globotics Upheaval, R. Baldwin, Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 2019

⁴ Democracy and Prosperity, T Iversen and D Soskice, Princeton University Press, 2019

up complexes of co-located skill clusters of well-educated workers and researchers that attract companies and create a spin-off service economy.

These hubs are creating jobs and raising real wages whereas in declining industrial and rural areas job opportunities and incomes are stagnant or declining with commensurate effects on communities. The processes described by these authors are not limited to advanced economies and similar trends are underway in China, India and other countries. For emerging and developing countries, knowledge-based economic development is widening existing geographical inequalities stemming from the large share of agriculture in employment and persistent rural poverty.

These social and economic trends can result in political cleavages which have led to the election of governments that are highly sceptical of multilateral engagements and the weakening of support for the UN. In response, Germany and France launched “An Alliance for Multilateralism” in September 2019 at the UN General Assembly. It has gathered the support of 64 other countries.⁵ However, the governing parties of the sponsors and many of their supporters are facing serious challenges at home from populist nationalists.

The crisis of multilateralism makes UN action to support poverty eradication and the narrowing of inequalities both urgent and difficult.

Accelerating UN action on poverty eradication in the decade ahead

The urgency of accelerated action was a theme of the Secretary-General’s statement to the September 2019 Leaders’ Summit on the SDGs in which he issued a global call for a decade of action to deliver the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. “We must look at the 2030 Agenda not through the prism of the economy of the last decade, but the economy of the next decade, seizing the potential of the Fourth Industrial Revolution and safeguarding against its dangers.”

At the 2018 General Assembly, the Secretary-General had presented a system-wide plan of action for the Third United Nations Decade for the Eradication of Poverty (2018–2027).⁶ His report explained the logic for the system-wide plan of action as a means of “encouraging collective action on a global scale, *[to create]* a multiplier effect *[that]* can accelerate progress towards poverty eradication in all countries.” Further

⁵ <https://multilateralism.org/the-alliance/>

⁶ A/73/298

“given the range of poverty-focused actions already under way or planned by entities of the United Nations system, including as part of the integrated follow up to the 2030 Agenda, it is vital that the objectives of a system-wide plan for the Third Decade be carefully specified in terms of means of action as well as outcomes to maximize effectiveness and avoid duplication.”

The report argued that transforming current growth paths is a necessary condition for achieving poverty eradication and all the other Sustainable Development Goals. Such transformation requires coherent and integrated policy frameworks nationally and internationally. The main operational objective of the system-wide plan of action is to promote integrated programmes by the United Nations system that support Member States in moving development trajectories onto a sustained and sustainable path of poverty reducing growth. Such programmes make it possible to combine the different fields of expertise of the United Nations organizations so that the impact is multiplied.

Drawing on the Secretary-General’s report, the 74th General Assembly adopted in January 2020 a resolution on Implementation of the Third United Nations Decade on the Eradication of Poverty (2018-2017).⁷ It noted the system-wide plan of action and reaffirmed that “the objective of the Third Decade is to maintain the momentum generated by the implementation of the Second Decade and to support, in an efficient and coordinated manner, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and its Sustainable Development Goals, especially Goal 1, and their objective of leaving no one behind and reaching the furthest behind first, as well as other internationally agreed development goals.”

Concern that progress towards the SDGs is lagging has led Member States as well as the institutions of the UN system to focus on accelerating international collective action on poverty and inequality in support of national sustainable development strategies. Implementing the system-wide plan of action is a tangible and realistic means of demonstrating that the UN has the capacity to organize such collective action.

Mobilizing the UN network of expertise on poverty eradication

The action plan focusses on the potential value-added to ongoing UN system action that could be mobilized by a Third Decade. It proposes the promotion of

⁷ A/RES/74/234

integrated actions that exploit potential synergies in existing programmes and plan for further joint actions in successive cycles over the period to 2027. Such a focus would serve to reinforce the emphasis in the 2030 Agenda on the interconnections between the SDGs and thus the importance of integrated and coherent policy approaches for the acceleration of progress towards the eradication of poverty.

The action plan is based on the need to tackle poverty in its many dimensions. This suggests that looking for ways in which policies and programmes can be integrated could yield mutually supportive outcomes. An example is the value of collaborative action by ministries responsible for education and employment in improving the transition of young people entering the labour market into decent jobs. Support from the several UN entities with relevant expertise could help governments, business, worker and civil society organizations to accelerate progress in preventing young people becoming left behind in a lifetime of working poverty or unemployment.

The emphasis on identifying ways in which joint actions could be developed from already planned programmes of UN entities is also predicated on the harsh reality that little or no extra resources are likely to be available from Member States for the action plan. Demonstrating that nevertheless the UN system is able to think and act creatively as a network can help support multilateral answers to global problems.

This logic of enhancing policy coherence is also the underpinning the Secretary-General's reform of the UN development system. He has described it as "a quest to leverage the unique and diverse expertise of United Nations entities towards a more integrated and cohesive United Nations development system that is more effective, efficient and accountable to Member States as they implement the 2030 Agenda."⁸ Beginning in 2019, a strengthened system of UN resident coordinators and country teams is working with countries to support national sustainable development strategies. Action plan can add to integrated policy tools available to country teams.

The action plan supports this drive to improve the integration of UN system policy advice. It proposes 10 principles to guide the work of the system. Two of the operational principles are: support for nationally owned strategies and strengthened

⁸ Implementation of General Assembly resolution 71/243 on the quadrennial comprehensive policy review of operational activities for development of the United Nations system, 2019, Report of the Secretary-General A/74/73–E/2019/14

capacities; and bringing together the special expertise and policy portfolios of UN entities to focus on integrated system-wide action that enhances efficiency, coherence, impact and adaptability to emerging trends.

Seven means of action are proposed in the action plan:

- joint research;
- monitoring and reporting on indicators for poverty eradication-related goals;
- dissemination of information through a system portal;
- promoting integrated programmes;
- decade focal points in each organization;
- capacity-building for national and UN officials;
- incentivizing planning for integrated programmes.

Seven policy themes are identified as drivers of the structural transformations envisaged in the 2030 Agenda:

- productive employment and decent work in the context of a changing global scenario;
- expanding social protection systems to underpin inclusive poverty-reducing development;
- human capability development: addressing the non-income forms of poverty;
- the future of food and sustainable agriculture;
- reducing inequalities;
- addressing climate change and the intensification of natural hazards;
- fighting poverty in fragile and humanitarian contexts.

For each of these themes potential deliverables and action steps are suggested. For example, regarding climate change gender equality and women's empowerment strategies can be systematically incorporated in climate change responses at the local, national and international levels. Also risk-informed and shock responsive social protection systems can be set up. Promotion of inclusive sustainable production to mitigate climate change and foster green jobs is a further area for integrated action by the system.

The action plan concludes by setting out several practical steps that UN entities can take in a system-wide effort to enhance the delivery of integrated and coherent policy advice and support to Member States:

- a communications strategy that, mainly through a portal at the UN system level, helps Member States, the UN system itself and the public at large to navigate access to the rich knowledge and expertise dispersed around the UN system;
- strengthened support to national statistical capacity and monitoring systems to ensure availability of multidimensional data on poverty;
- a progress report on the action plan based on analysis of trends revealed by the poverty-related SDG indicators every two years;
- policy-oriented joint research and analysis by UN organizations on the linkages between different forms of poverty e.g. on the impact of technological change on development patterns and appropriate policy responses;
- enhancement of collaboration and team-working skills of public officials of the UN system and Member States e.g. through the programmes of UN training institutions;
- the formation of a network of focal points in UN entities to work together on implementation and updating of the action plan.

Looking ahead

Achieving the goals set in the 2030 Agenda was already a daunting task when it was adopted in 2015. The slow progress and setbacks since then make accelerated action even more urgent. It is equally vital to demonstrate the practical necessity of a well-functioning multilateral system, with the UN at its apex, for the organization of collective and thus more effective action in an interdependent world. The action plan sets out a practical agenda for contributing to the strengthening of the capacity of UN to support Member States in their national sustainable development strategies. It complements the UN drive on implementation of the 2030 Agenda and reform of the system of UN resident coordinators and country teams. The 2018-2027 time frame of the Third Decade is the central phase of the 2030 Agenda. Policies need to impact during this period to achieve progress by 2030. The action plan can help the UN to grasp the opportunity to turn the tide on troubling economic, social, environmental and political trends and get on course to eradicate poverty and realize the SDGs.