

SDGs AND FRAGILE STATES: THE CASE OF HAITI

Peter Sollis

Haiti, an original signatory of the UN Charter and the site of the organization's first development planning effort in 1949, illustrates the numerous challenges facing poor countries and the UN development system in moving beyond the rhetoric of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

As the United Nations finalizes the SDGs, a paramount issue is their relevance for countries most in need of support, those occupying the bottom of the poverty-league tables. To dilute expert over-influence associated with the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), the UN consulted widely to fashion the SDGs. Yet, are the SDGs so comprehensive that they are impracticable? An assessment of national execution capacity is essential to determine which SDGs are priorities, highlight implementation opportunities, and identify sustainability constraints facing national authorities and the UN alike. The UN development system is well acquainted with Haiti, and its history suggests major challenges ahead.

IS MORE LESS?

Whereas the MDGs were derived from the Millennium Declaration through UN agency deliberations,¹ the SDGs resulted from a multi-year consultation consisting of a UN System Task Force; a High-level Panel of Eminent Persons (HLP); regional and national consultations in 88 countries; a global thematic consultation reflected in “A million voices: The World We Want”; dialogues on implementation culminating in a report “Delivering the post-2015 Development Agenda” as well as an intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG), with 84 countries represented, responsible for the final design of the SDGs that will be finalized in September 2015 by the General Assembly.

The likely doubling of goals from 8 MDGs to 17 SDGs and quadrupling of targets from 21 to 169² reflects the evident escalation in ambition, which is echoed in the draft outcome document for the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD): “Our goal is to eradicate poverty and hunger in this generation and to achieve sustainable development by promoting inclusive economic growth, protecting the environment, and promoting peace and inclusive societies,”³

Pivotal changes of content and emphasis are clear from the different stages of building the post-2015 agenda. The HLP identified “five

transformational shifts,” by nature multi-dimensional and cross-cutting, whereas the OWG proposal reverts to more comfortable territory associated with sector focused, technical proposals that dilute the underlying principles proffered by the HLP.

As the UN process of reflection, discussion, consultation, and agreement moves inexorably towards the September 2015 Summit to adopt “an ambitious and transformative” post-2015 development agenda, what awaits the SDGs in Haiti?

HAITI: BACK TO THE FUTURE

Haiti is both an ideal case for scrutiny and an exception. No country has a longer experience with the UN development system. Indeed, Haiti's post-war development odyssey is intimately associated with the creation, expansion, and refinement of the UN's overall development mandate and operations. An original signatory of the UN Charter, Haiti was abreast of post-war peace and prosperity ambitions as illustrated by the fact that in 1947, as part of a worldwide initiative, UNESCO agreed with the Haitian Government to co-finance a pilot fundamental education project in the Marbial Valley, near Jacmel.⁴

Then, in 1948, Haiti became the first UN member to request and receive a comprehensive survey mission. Staffed by technical experts from the UN Secretariat, UNESCO, FAO, WHO, and the IMF, the mission published its 327-page report in 1949 that detailed the situation pertaining at the time and future prospects.⁵ By 1950 a UN permanent representative was installed in an office financed equally by the UN and the Haitian Government. The representative's remit to provide advice to modify the report's recommendations to fit local priorities and methods is a task that, 65 years later, still resonates. Indeed, making the SDGs operationally relevant is all too reminiscent.

Elevated to “bible” status in Haiti,⁶ the 1949 report was considered a model to emulate elsewhere.⁷ It established development planning in



Map No. 3855 Rev. 4 UNITED NATIONS
June 2008

Department of Field Support
Cartographic Section

Haiti and the belief that technical assistance targeting key areas of public policy and services would trigger accelerated development. For over a decade and half, the report was the framework for economic and social plans designed to attract external capital to finance “take-off.”

Under the UN’s technical assistance (TA) program, foreign experts were assigned to the resident representative’s office, usually with annual contracts. Over the 1950-56 period, for instance, TA was provided in 23 fields, ranging from basic education, nutrition, hotel work, and monetary and fiscal issues.⁸ The most successful intervention was the pioneer WHO-UNICEF anti-yaws project that demonstrated penicillin’s large-scale disease eradication capability.

The critique at that time by observers of the UN’s TA effort remains pertinent today. For instance, UNESCO’s publicity about Marbial was “so extravagantly optimistic” that it stoked local cynicism. Meanwhile, the WHO-UNICEF anti-yaws project initially failed to differentiate between yaws and the closely related syphilis, which resulted in the impression of a syphilis-ridden country and caused offence to, and resentment in, the proud Haitian people.⁹

When UNESCO’s survey team found appalling living circumstances in the Marbial Valley, it concluded that an educational project would fail without improvements in health conditions and agricultural

productivity. Nevertheless, UNESCO remained in its silo and went ahead without solid commitments from WHO and FAO, apparently under the naïve assumption that the other agencies would inevitably cooperate. The project’s failure to transform the lives of Marbial residents underscored the requirement for the full cooperation and integration of inputs from other specialized UN agencies before not after a project’s launch. Moreover, unlike the WHO-UNICEF project that had Haitian leadership, Marbial suffered from a churn of expatriate directors.

The experimental nature of the WHO-UNICEF anti-yaws project provoked professional criticism from American Sanitary Mission doctors, at the time the only other scientific team in Haiti. Differences over penicillin dosage and operational methodology meant minimal cooperation and little sharing experiences and results. Thus, from the earliest days of the UN’s involvement in the country, it was clear that development in Haiti would be a complex and long-term process demanding continuity in personnel and program content as well as an ability to negotiate and reach consensus.

In addition, the key 1949 report itself was deeply flawed. By failing to differentiate between the interests of the elite and the peasantry, the UN did not understand how each group differed in its own understandings of economic development. Equally, by failing to

recognize local participation as a “central problem for planning in Haiti,” the nature and sequencing of development efforts faltered.¹⁰ Though the mission presented 110 specific recommendations in nine single-spaced pages, it offered no basis for identifying the most strategic priorities. All recommendations were equivalent. Consequently, when strategic reforms essential for better public decision-making such as the creation of an independent advisory and planning board and civil service modernization stalled because of pushback at the highest political level, advances in the introduction of fish farming were nevertheless lauded as progress.¹¹

THE MDGS IN HAITI

The context of MDG implementation in Haiti was exceptional, being characterized by political instability, the presence of a UN stabilization mission, re-engagement of the international development community after a period of absence, recurring natural disaster, and a lack of accurate statistics. Overall economic conditions were fragile and public service delivery as well as infrastructure maintenance weak. A series of hurricanes adversely impacted agriculture and rural families. The elaboration of a poverty reduction strategy brought debt relief and additional financial resources. Yet a weak public administration struggled to coordinate donors (themselves recuperating their capacity to operate in Haiti) and the public sector’s reduced capacity to collect, analyse and publish statistics impeded the planning and execution of key MDG-related projects and programs.

On history’s long arc, Haiti’s terrible January 2010 earthquake garnered a generous outpouring of relief and reconstruction financial resources, attracted new donors, and created optimism about a new opportunity to address deep-rooted structural issues. A sense of *déjà vu* prevailed as the plethora of technical assistance and foreign investments for infrastructure, tourism, crafts and design, minerals exploration, rehabilitation of production; they were strikingly reminiscent of 1950s measures to identify sources of growth.

The World Bank-ONPES 2014 poverty diagnosis, the first in over a decade, identifies the impact of fresh resources and continued remittances on poverty indicators. Extreme poverty dropped from 31 percent to 24 percent over the decade to 2012, and school enrolment increased from 78 percent to 90 percent.¹² Yet with 2.5 million people (around a quarter of the population) unable to cover their basic food needs, Haiti is still one of the world’s most unequal countries, as the gap grows in particular between Port-au-Prince and rural areas.

The UNDP report on MDG progress for 2013 shows similar headway towards meeting primary school enrolment and measles immunisation targets and on poverty indicators.¹³ And getting kids into school certainly meets the aspirations of poor families across Haiti. The MDG report follows a convention that it has to point out progress on all MDGs. But it is a stretch to accept the report’s proposition that other MDGs show meaningful progress. The report presents headline figures that women now occupy 20 percent of government positions to show progress on gender equality, and 19,000 hectares of forest have been planted since 1990 as moving forward on environmental sustainability. The latter figure,

for example, represents an annual planting of fewer than 1,000 hectares and says nothing about whether the new forest still exists. Indeed, such claims bring into sharper focus the real dimensions of the tasks ahead.

FAST FORWARD TO JUNE 2015

Three news events in early summer 2015 help to situate Haiti’s and the UN’s SDG-related task. On June 3, ProPublica and National Public Radio (NPR) published a report on the American Red Cross (ARC) earthquake relief program.¹⁴ This report highlighted the hubris in the ARC’s publicity around ambitious post-earthquake plans that promised to “develop brand new communities” and make a lasting impact, no doubt bolstered by a half a billion dollar budget and the significant Haitian pledge to “refund” the country. These plans foundered partially because of the ARC’s high staff turnover, an absence of a clear strategy, and the lack of expertise in long-term shelter provision, a non-core area. At the same time, even with the money at its disposal, the ARC was unable to ameliorate considerable contextual conditions by resolving severe delays in securing land titles or compensating for the lack of community counterparts.

On June 3, the United States Government Accounting Office (GAO) issued its latest review of USAID’s earthquake reconstruction program.¹⁵ It found key infrastructure projects had not achieved intended results and had met with increased costs and delays due to a lack of engineering staff, poor planning, and design faults. Rehabilitation of the State University Hospital was three years behind schedule in part because of lengthy procurement discussions between the partnership of donors—US, French, and Haitian governments. Land tenure issues, delays in the Haitian government’s approval of activity design, lack of relevant construction engineering experience among USAID/Haiti staff, and an absence of local technical capacity caused delays in other health infrastructure projects.

Implementing shelter infrastructure is a clear illustration of the extent to which original expectations can be drastically pared down to fit operational reality. A New Settlements Program was initially budgeted to spend \$55.4 million to prepare 15,000 plots of land for housing construction and to build houses on up to 4,000 of those plots. By September 2014, the number of plots of land was reduced to 2,013, down 87 percent from the initial target, and the number of houses that USAID would build was down to 906, a reduction of 77 percent. Program costs were revised upwards to \$75.7 million as the cost of a plot increased from \$1,800 to \$13,740 and of a house from \$8,000 to \$24,283. The scope of other projects such as All Children Reading, an education project, was also reduced. By late 2014 the execution time frame for activities under the US Government’s Post-Earthquake Haiti Strategy was extended from September 2015 to September 2018. In short, it will take longer and cost far more to do less.

The GAO identifies sustainability risks: the government’s limited technical ability, budgetary capacity, and political will. Donors provide 80 percent of the government’s budget making it difficult to find recurrent funding for infrastructure operations and maintenance (O&M). New infrastructure is more expensive; estimated O&M costs of the rehabilitated State Hospital are

significantly higher than the current budget, and as yet no additional revenue sources have been identified. The health budget is not an option as 90 percent of its resources are for salaries. Above all, future commitments to O&M face an uncertain political context in which “corruption within the Haitian government could undermine gains made through USAID/Haiti activities.”¹⁶

In May 2015 the US Department of Justice indicted nine FIFA officials and five corporate executives for racketeering, conspiracy, and corruption.¹⁷ FIFA’s corruption woes led UK Prime Minister David Cameron, HLP co-chair, to raise corruption at the June 2015 G-7 meeting.¹⁸ While the G-7 communiqué mentions illicit financial flows, corruption was not linked directly to the post-2015 Development Agenda and the FfD conference. Yet the corruption issue has not gone away as new analysis makes clear the links between corruption and civil violence,¹⁹ public disgust about graft threatens to bring Latin American governments to the brink of collapse,²⁰ and practical ideas are tabled to fight corruption.²¹

Haiti is not immune from such scrutiny. It ranks joint 161 in Transparency International’s public corruption index that measures perceptions of public sector corruption. Tellingly, there is no improvement in Haiti’s score over the period 2012-2014, despite, or perhaps because of, significant flows of post-earthquake financial resources.

CONCLUSION, PLUS ÇA CHANGE

The UN and Haiti have been locked in a development embrace for nearly 70 years. It is unnecessary to discount the damage of poor leadership—some have classified Haiti a “kleptocracy”²²—to characterize the results of almost seven decades of UN development cooperation as meager and disappointing.

If the SDGs are truly to represent a new beginning, it is imperative to apply some lessons learned. Identifying the priority interventions in the light of the operational experiences of other actors is a critical first step—in short, to admit the folly of seeking to implement all SDGs concurrently from day one. A second essential step is a fundamental capacity assessment. In 1941 James Leyburn wrote about Haiti’s problem of overpopulation and its solutions (including education, soil and agricultural improvements, and public works projects) in the following way: “Each of these ‘solutions’ is a major problem in itself, considering the limitations of the country.”²³

Domestic financial and capacity limitations remain; a keen focus and modesty about what can be achieved would herald a welcome change of approach for both Haiti and the UN development system. The same thinking undoubtedly applies to many other countries that have also been the target of efforts by the UN development system. In summary, the key lesson learned for SDG implementation is that better-coordinated responses matched to local capacity can prosper but only if such efforts are not undermined by corruption.

Peter Sollis is a writer and consultant on Latin America and a former official at the Inter-American Development Bank and Oxfam-GB.

NOTES

1. Mark Tran, “Mark Malloch-Brown: Developing the MDGs was a bit like nuclear fusion,” *The Guardian*, 16 November 2012.
2. United Nations, “Open Working Group proposal for Sustainable Development Goals,” (New York: 2015), <http://undocs.org/A/68/970>.
3. United Nations, “Third International Conference on Financing for Development,” Revised draft of the outcome document, 7 May 2015, www.un.org/pga/wp-content/uploads/sites/3/2015/05/070515_financing_for-development-info-consultations.pdf.
4. Marian Neal, “United Nations Technical Assistance Programs in Haiti,” *International Conciliation* 81, (1951): 81-118.
5. United Nations, *Mission to Haiti: Report of the Mission of Technical Assistance to the Republic of Haiti* (Lake Success: New York, 1949).
6. Neal, “United Nations,” 97.
7. Walter R. Sharp, *International Technical Assistance: Program and Organization* (Chicago: Public Administration Service, 1952), 101, note 2.
8. O. Ernest Moore, *Haiti: Its Stagnant Society and Shackled Economy* (Jericho, NY: Exposition Press, 1972), 71-83.
9. Marian Neal, “United Nations,” 101.
10. John R. P. Friedmann, “Development Planning in Haiti: A critique of the U.N. Report,” *Economic Development and Cultural Change* 4, no. 1 (1955): 39-54, quote at 54.
11. See *Haiti Sun*, 22 April 1956, 16 and 20 May 1956, 1 and 17.
12. World Bank and Observatoire National de la Pauvrete et de la Exclusion Sociale, *Investing in People to Fight Poverty in Haiti: Reflections for evidence-based policy-making* (Washington, DC: World Bank, 2014).

13. Programme des Nations Unies pour le développement, République d’Haïti, *Rapport OMD 2013, Haïti: Un Nouveau Regard* (Port-au-Prince: UN, 2014).
14. Justin Elliott, ProPublica and Laura Sullivan, NPR, 3 June 2015, “How the Red Cross raised half a billion dollars for Haiti and built six homes,” accessed at <http://www.propublica.org/article/how-the-red-cross-raised-half-a-billion-dollars-for-haiti-and-built-6-homes>.
15. United States Government GAO, “Haiti Reconstruction. USAID has achieved mixed results and should enhance sustainability planning,” document GAO-15-517, 3 June 2015.
16. *Ibid.*, 40.
17. Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, 27 May 2015, “Nine FIFA Officials and five corporate executives indicted for racketeering conspiracy and corruption,” <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/nine-fifa-officials-and-five-corporate-executives-indicted-racketeering-conspiracy-and-corruption>.
18. Patrick Wintour and Owen Gibson, “Cameron Puts Corruption on G-7 Agenda after Fifa Bribery Scandal,” *The Guardian*, 6 June 2015.
19. Sarah Chayes, *Thieves of State: Why Corruption Threatens Global Security* (New York: Norton, 2015).
20. “Sending off Fifa’s Latin American ‘Soccer Lords,’” *Financial Times*, 6 June 2015.
21. Andres Oppenheimer, “A Recipe to Fight Corruption in Latin America,” *Miami Herald*, 6 June 2015.
22. Kleptocracy derives from the Greek for *thief* and *rule*. Where democracy is the rule by citizens, kleptocracy is the rule by thieves. In a kleptocracy weak standards separate public duties from private interests. The Magloire government (1950-56) was notoriously corrupt, but it was the dynastic Duvalier rule (1957-86) that systematized corruption so that Haiti received the title of “kleptocracy” from Canada in the early 1980s.
23. James Leyburn, *The Haitian People* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1941), 271.

