



WOMEN, PEACE AND SECURITY: BUSINESS AS USUAL?

This article is part of the WPP Publication bundle “Women, Peace & Security: Business as Usual?”, providing a critical exploration of the link between the private sector and the implementation of the Women, Peace & Security agenda.

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The Post-2015 Agenda and Corporate Sector Involvement: The Need for Transparency and Transformation

By Thalia Malmberg

After two years of consultation and input from a wide range of stakeholders, this past summer saw conclusion of the Post-2015 Development Agenda process. It was led by the United Nations Secretary-General at the behest of the General Assembly, who in 2010 mandated Ban Ki-moon to advance the UN’s development agenda beyond 2015. The Post-2015 Development Agenda would build on the previous Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The MDGs comprise eight international objectives: eradicating extreme poverty and hunger; promoting gender equality; achieving universal primary education; reducing child mortality; improving maternal health; combatting HIV, malaria and other diseases; ensuring environmental sustainability; and developing a global partnership for development. These goals emerged from a closed-door UN Secretariat process that lacked wide consultation with developing countries, civil society, and other stakeholders. What’s more, they were not informed by the first-hand experiences of those most directly affected by poverty and the denial of human rights. As a result, the MDGs have not always had as strong a sense of ownership from civil society and national governments as they could have had.

The Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) on the Post-2015 Development Agenda began in January 2015 and ended later that year in August. By the following month at the UN Sustainable Development Summit in New York, the document “*Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*” had been adopted. A concrete output was the formulation of 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Similarly to the MDGs, they span a spectrum of issues, such as ending poverty and hunger; achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls; promoting peaceful and inclusive societies; improving health and education.¹

When it came to drafting these 17 goals, civil society at large had emphasized the need for inclusive global consultations with an emphasis on accountability. Compared with the drafting of the MDGs, the SDGs took a more integrated approach, including the aforementioned two-year consultation process facilitated by the General Assembly Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals. During debates, member states accepted the principle that any review process should include participation and inclusion of civil society and the most disadvantaged, marginalized populations.

The private sector was also an important stakeholder in the process. This is reflected in the consolidated report of the consultations, entitled “Engaging with the Private Sector in the Post-2015 Agenda” and jointly published by the United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Global Compact, which largely informed the stance of the UN on public-private partnerships. The report states:

Government, which plays a leading role in the Post-2015, SDG process, can put policy measures in place to incentivize greater implementation of voluntary sustainability regimes. These include tax breaks, access to export credits, promotion of best practices in the realm of sustainability, and integration and prioritization of sustainability criteria within transparent procurement tender contracts, etc.²

However, this report - the essence of which is echoed in the Post-2015 Development Agenda outcome document itself - fails to take a hard look at the role companies play in the current state of the world. That is particularly the case when it comes to huge transnational organizations and their impact on environmental degradation, exploitation of poor populations, conflict, and war.

The report, moreover, draws greatly on pragmatic arguments. For example:

With a global trajectory of slower growth, and official development assistance (ODA) gradually becoming more constrained, a growing consensus is emerging on the role of the private sector as the main provider of innovative sustainable development financing.

It was suggested that more dialogue and a deeper collaboration between public and private actors will be needed. Institutional investors, companies and foundations, as the largest sources of capital available for investment, should be an integral part in the design and implementation of the strategy to finance the SDGs.

Private financial flows represent volumes significantly larger than the future SDG investment needs. Therefore mobilizing private investment for sustainable development should not be seen merely as an exercise of raising more capital but of reallocation. With the right incentives, private resource flows could be redirected towards sustainability issues and regions in need, and away from areas with negative externalities.³

To many in civil society, this language is deeply concerning. It raises red flags for a number of reasons, such as the lack of critical analysis of how the private sector and the economic system actually play part in conflict. Firstly, the Post-2015 Agenda's position is an indiscriminate acceptance of the assumed benefits of private financing for sustainable development and the function of business in implementing the SDGs. While emphasizing ways to entice the private sector to invest in sustainable development, it fails to demand any type of transformative structural changes in the current economic system or the private sector's ways of doing business. Responding to the outcome document, the Post-2015 Women's Coalition wrote:

Due to its main focus on the current exploitative market-based development model, it fails to reformulate economic policy-making and indicators to reflect the value of people and planet in order to uphold the principle of universality and also to address the needs and rights of at-risk and marginalized populations.⁴

Secondly, as also stated by the Women's Coalition:

The agenda has increased the role and power of the corporate sector and international financial institutions at both the local and global policy making levels, coupled with lack of transparency and public accountability for these actors. Their role was further emphasized in the focus on a 'New Global Partnership' (para 39). The prioritization of profit over people, and conflating economic development with economic growth, is a barrier to fulfilling human rights, particularly as the agenda has failed to guarantee regulatory frameworks and accountability mechanisms to ensure that people and the planet come before progress and economic growth.⁵

The argument here is not to shut out the private sector from the issue of sustainable development altogether. The private sector is a powerful actor in society and thus has a crucial role to play. However, as Kate Donald, Director of the Human Rights in Development Program at the Center for Economic and Social Rights (CESR) argues, there must be safeguards in place and we must find ways to ensure accountability, especially with regard to powerful corporations.⁶ Here Donald draws attention to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights as an important normative source to cite vis-à-vis the Post-2015 outcome documents.

Economic growth should not be the Post-2015 Agenda's be-all and end-all. Nor should it be a goal in and of itself. Instead, we need to take a critical look at *who* is benefiting from the economic growth. With this, furthermore, we need a commitment that any implemented measure stands up to the adherence of human rights.

In the first of 17 new SDGs, the UN commits itself “to build the resilience of the poor and those in vulnerable situations, and reduce their exposure and vulnerability to climate-related extreme events and other economic, social and environmental shocks and disasters.” This goal can only be reached by holding accountable those in positions of power. And that, in turn, will help change the current economic model that treats the most vulnerable as fodder for the consumerist machinery and profits from their continued oppression.

Notes

¹ The 17 SDGs listed here:<http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/sustainable-development-goals> and The UN's Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform: <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org>

² United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Global Compact (2015: 19), “Engaging the Private Sector in the Post-2015 Agenda,” https://www.unido.org/fileadmin/user_media_upgrade/Resources/Publications/Final_Consultation_Report_Engaging_with_the_Private_Sector.pdf.

³ United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO) and the United Nations Global Compact (2015: 13), “Engaging the Private Sector in the Post-2015 Agenda,” https://www.unido.org/fileadmin/user_media_upgrade/Resources/Publications/Final_Consultation_Report_Engaging_with_the_Private_Sector.pdf

⁴ The Post-2015 Women's Coalition, of which the Women Peacemakers Program is a part, is an international network of feminist, women's rights, women's development, grassroots, and social justice organizations working to challenge and reframe the global development agenda through advocacy and movement building.

⁵ Post-2015 Women's Coalition, “Response to the Outcome Document ‘Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development’ of the UN Sustainable Development Summit (2030 Agenda),” <http://www.post2015women.com/response-to-outcome-document>

⁶ Kate Donald, “Breaking the Accountability Taboo in the Post-2015 Negotiations,” Center for Economic and Social Rights, June 4, 2015, <http://www.cesr.org/article.php?id=1732>