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Recommended Citation

Dhillon, Harjot (2017) "Lofty Goals in Dire Times: South Sudan's Obstacles to Achieving the New SDGs," *Sustainable Development Law & Policy*: Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 6.

Available at: <http://digitalcommons.wcl.american.edu/sdlp/vol16/iss2/6>

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LOFTY GOALS IN DIRE TIMES: SOUTH SUDAN'S OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING THE NEW SDGs

By Harjot Dhillon*

INTRODUCTION

The seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), comprised of a total of 169 target goals to be achieved by 2030, span a wide variety of problems that run the risk of working against one another.¹ Further, the target goals' lofty requirements could be challenging for countries to comply with, especially new or least developed countries.² It is true that the global partnership goal would ideally provide least developed countries (LDCs) with financial help from developed countries to achieve sustainable development goals.³ However, there is no guarantee that LDCs will obtain all of the resources they require in time to achieve all SDG target goals. This is because the gap between current sustainability practices and lofty SDGs will require increased finances, institutional infrastructure, and other capacity-building requirements that developed countries have no binding commitment to provide.⁴

This Article will demonstrate the need for LDCs to have flexibility in achieving SDG target goals to increase participation in the realm of the SDG framework. This flexibility would allow LDCs to prioritize basic survival needs for citizens ahead of other SDG target goals. By allowing LDCs to prioritize target goals in this way, the framework would be optimized to ensure legitimacy and compliance.

FOOD SECURITY SDG

The food security SDG is an example of a lofty goal that is too inflexible for LDCs to accomplish. Target goal 2.1 to "end hunger" in poor and vulnerable situations specifically targets places in which financial aid and capacity to aid may be too diminished to reach this goal by 2030.⁵ It also aspires to end all malnutrition, improving growth stunting in all children under age five, and prescribes that all countries address health concerns of adolescent girls, pregnant women, and elderly women.⁶ Target goal 2.1 does not mention the existing societal context, however. This will most likely alienate least developed countries (LDCs) from the SDG framework, despite the framework's intentions to apply to "all countries and all stakeholders."⁷

SOUTH SUDAN'S OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING SDGs

South Sudan in particular will have difficulty applying all of the target 2 goals prescribed by this framework. In July 2014, the UN Security Council declared the country's current food crisis the worst in the world, with at least 50,000 children at risk of starvation and approximately 4,000,000 affected.⁸ To meet this goal, South Sudan must address the internal conflict that caused the food crisis, political and economic strife, and the 1.6 million

internally displaced persons whom lack basic safety and shelter.⁹ This makes for a daunting list of goals for South Sudan to accomplish by the 2030 target date.

South Sudan has dealt with internal political issues since its inception in 2011. Indeed, the political conflict between President Salva Kiir and Vice President Riek Machar ultimately led to the country's current food crisis.¹⁰ Both political officials lead different ethnic groups that target civilians based on ethnic ties.¹¹ Numerous peace agreements have been entered and broken, each time resulting in more violence that often targets and impacts civilians. Despite having signed a peace agreement in 2015, both factions have reneged on their relative political duties, accusing each other for violating the terms of the peace agreement.¹² As a result, many civilians who were farmers that produced the majority of South Sudan's food were forced to flee their homes and abandon their livelihood.¹³ This internal displacement leaves many South Sudanese families vulnerable to starvation.¹⁴

International humanitarian efforts alone have been unsuccessful in resolving the food crisis, and will likely continue to be unsuccessful in the future. The UN Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs (OCHA) South Sudan supports humanitarian organizations in providing aid to South Sudan.¹⁵ In 2014, OCHA South Sudan completed 71%¹⁶ of its funding goals; however, that percentage dropped in 2015 to 42%.¹⁷ Further, South Sudan will likely face increased food insecurity this year. Hunger levels are likely to increase as South Sudan exits the typically plentiful post-harvest season and enters the lean season, when food is far less plentiful.¹⁸

Lack of domestic and international resources to combat South Sudan's food insecurity is a significant obstacle to accomplishing all other SDG targets. This is because successful sustainability initiatives also ensure that local communities have access to livable conditions.¹⁹ For example, the World Wildlife Fund found that creating long-term sustainability practices requires addressing major health concerns of local populations.²⁰ South Sudan's food crisis is an extreme version of this reality, and the country requires significant resources to address its food crisis before addressing target goals, such as developing clean energy and promoting sustainable ecosystem management.²¹

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A SOLUTION FOR SOUTH SUDANESE-LIKE COUNTRIES: PRIORITIZATION OF SDGs

As previously indicated, one fundamental issue with the SDG framework is a lack of suggested prioritization. The problematic issues of achieving food security are not exclusive to South Sudan. Violence and economic strife are current afflictions for other countries that are deeply connected to food insecurity and other issues the SDGs aim to prevent.²² South Sudan and other like countries would benefit from prioritizing goals because newly sovereign countries often have little capacity and resources to address all SDG targets. Prioritizing goals that are the most imperative allows these countries to meet their citizens' needs staying within the SDG framework.

The new SDG regime dooms countries like South Sudan from meeting its lofty target goals at the onset. Thus, there is a need for a longer-term institution, the implementation of which could make these goals actually 'sustainable' for new and developing countries. This institution could create structured steps for

each country to take toward achieving sustainable development goals, paying attention to the fundamentals and internal steps new and developing countries so desperately need to address. The first step would include achieving basic survivability in the country. Thus, South Sudan would need to first focus on ending its food crisis and economic strife before moving on to achieving other sustainability goals with a more global impact.²³

Without a long-term institution for sustainable development as described, subsequent global goals geared toward creating sustainable development standards may diminish in legitimacy and work against global sustainability efforts altogether. Where basic survival is at stake, many of the other sustainable goals cannot be achieved. With sustainability goals running the gamut from reducing inequality to sustainably managing forests, a prioritization of the current framework is necessary to ensure a successful implementation for all countries—new, developing, and developed.



ENDNOTES: LOFTY GOALS IN DIRE TIMES: SOUTH SUDAN'S OBSTACLES TO ACHIEVING THE NEW SDGs

¹ See generally *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, UNITED NATIONS, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/21252030%20Agenda%20for%20Sustainable%20Development%20web.pdf>.

² See James MacCormack and Sarah Stroup, *Will SDGs lofty ambition undermine advocacy to achieve them?*, OPEN DEMOCRACY (Sept. 25, 2015), <https://www.opendemocracy.net/openglobalrights/charles-f-maccormack-sarah-stroup/will-sdgs-lofty-ambition-undermine-advocacy-to-ac>.

³ See *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 1 (discussing Goal 17.2 specifically).

⁴ See *id.* (discussing means of Implementation).

⁵ See *id.* (covering goal 2.1).

⁶ See *id.* (covering goal 2.2).

⁷ See *id.* (Preamble).

⁸ See generally *South Sudan's Food Crisis Worst in the World*, BBC NEWS (July 26, 2014), <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-africa-28502260>.

⁹ See *Civil War in South Sudan*, COUNCIL ON FOREIGN RELATIONS (Mar. 31, 2016), <http://www.cfr.org/global/global-conflict-tracker/p32137#!/conflict/civil-war-in-south-sudan>.

¹⁰ *Id.*

¹¹ *Id.*

¹² *Id.*

¹³ *Id.*

¹⁴ See *2015 UNHCR Country Operations Profile – South Sudan*, U.N. HIGH COMMISSIONER FOR REFUGEES, <http://www.unhcr.org/pages/4e43cb466.html>.

¹⁵ See generally *About OCHA South Sudan*, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS, <http://www.unocha.org/south-sudan/about-ocha-south-sudan/about-ocha-south-sudan> (last visited Mar. 18, 2016).

¹⁶ See *Funding for OCHA South Sudan*, UNITED NATIONS OFFICE FOR THE COORDINATION OF HUMANITARIAN AFFAIRS, <http://www.unocha.org/south-sudan/oct-funding?year=2014>, (last visited Mar. 18, 2016).

¹⁷ See *id.*

¹⁸ See *UN agencies warn of escalating food crisis in South Sudan*, FOOD AND AGRIC. ORG. OF THE UNITED NATIONS (Feb. 8, 2016), <http://www.fao.org/emergencies/fao-in-action/stories/stories-detail/en/c/382544/>.

¹⁹ See Julie Oglethorp et al., *Healthy People, Healthy Ecosystems: A Manual on Integrating Health and Family Planning into Conservation Projects*, WORLD WILDLIFE FUND, 1 (2008), http://assets.worldwildlife.org/publications/370/files/original/Healthy_People_Healthy_Ecosystems_A_Manual_on_Integrating_Health_and_Family_Planning_into_Conservation_Projects.pdf?1345737357.

²⁰ *Id.*

²¹ See *The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development*, *supra* note 1.

²² See Clemens Breisinger et al., *Conflict and Food Insecurity: How do we break the links?*, INT'L FOOD POLICY RESEARCH INST., (2014-2015) 51, 52, <http://cdm15738.contentdm.oclc.org/utis/getfile/collection/p15738coll2/id/129073/filename/129284.pdf>.

²³ Further steps may include ending hunger and malnutrition, and afterwards doubling incomes for underrepresented and targeted demographics.