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Poverty Wellbeing

The SDGs, land rights, and poverty

Jane Carter, October 2015

After all the reflections, discussions and high level negotiations, the SDGs are approved (1). National governments and the development community have a clear framework for action, and Switzerland can feel proud in having particularly supported a focus on overall health; gender equality; access to clean water and sanitation; and peaceful societies – each of which are stand-alone goals, respectively 3, 5, 6 and 16. Clearly all four topics have a direct link to reducing global poverty, although the term used more often than poverty these days is inequality. The need to address social and economic inequalities both between countries and within societies is a theme running throughout the SDGs. To put matters in crude terms, the successes amongst the MDGs have been largely in reaching the “low hanging fruit” – people living in poverty who could relatively easily climb out of it. It is those living in extreme or chronic poverty who are the “high hanging fruit”, the women and men, children and youth who live in particularly remote or deprived areas and/or who experience social discrimination. They face the greatest difficulties in changing their lives for the better, and risk being further left behind in development achievements – thus widening the gap between rich and poor (2). Being more focused and strategic in interventions to ensure a clear reduction in inequalities looks set to be one of the challenges for the development community in future.

Rights to land and resources

Although a much smaller event than the UN summit, this week saw an important international gathering in Bern of people working on a topic that is integrally related to poverty and inequality: the ownership and governance of land and resources. The Bern conference, co-hosted by the Rights and Resources Initiative, the International Land Coalition, Oxfam and HELVETAS Swiss Intercooperation, called for action on putting rights to land and natural resources into the hands of local communities and indigenous peoples (3). Launched to coincide with the conference, a new report by RRI shows that indigenous peoples and local communities lack legal rights to almost three quarters of their traditional lands, despite claiming or having customary use of up to 65 percent of the world’s land area (4).

Criminalization of rights defenders

In addition to Western-based members of advocacy and development agencies, a wide variety of indigenous communities were represented at the conference – from South America, Africa and Asia. Discussions were wide-ranging and intense, with a strong emphasis on legitimacy and (re)claiming land rights that are threatened variously by national governments or powerful private interests. The violence often associated with claiming these rights was underlined, with indigenous leaders being criminalised, imprisoned and even murdered. A report last year by Global Witness (5) documents this violence, and came up with the now widely quoted figure of two people being murdered every week in defending land and resources against expansionist development. It was noted repeatedly at the conference was that such rights defenders are also defenders of the planet, in that the forested areas that they are protecting are some of the most important carbon sinks of the world. Not all indigenous people can use this argument, though - linking land rights to the mitigation of climate change is more obvious for forest-dwelling peoples than for those of the Sahel and Andean highlands, who are amongst those experiencing some of the greatest negative impacts of climate change.

Local co-existence

Amidst the discourse on rights and violence, the word “poverty” was less often heard. Of course realities are more complex than the stereotype of poor, unarmed indigenous peoples defending forested land against the might of industrial developers armed with bulldozers and weapons (even if such scenarios do still exist). It is notable how well organised and networked indigenous peoples have become over the past decade or so, ensuring that their voices are heard on the international stage. Nevertheless, “indigenous” identity is often a sensitive matter - both for individuals and with governments. Being indigenous is not synonymous with being poor, or vice versa, and claims for exclusive rights can potentially alienate very poor people. Candido Mezua Salazar, representing the Mesoamerican Alliance of Peoples and Forests (AMPB) tacitly acknowledged underlying use conflicts in stating the importance of co-existence at the local level. He emphasised the need for forest-dependent, agricultural and pastoral communities to unite in claiming local control over land, rather than decisions being in the hands of distant government officials. Meanwhile, UN Special Rapporteur on Indigenous Peoples, Vicky Tauli-Corpuz pointed out the need to be aware of the root causes of poverty, rather than just looking at the symptoms.

The SDGs and land ownership

The SDGs are relatively silent on matters of land ownership. This is hardly surprising, given their authorship. However, as pointed out in a blog by Luca Miggiano (6) on the website calling for action on land rights, there are statements under the goals of Poverty Eradication (1.4), Food Security (2.3) and Gender Equality (5.a) that go in this direction, recognising the link between owning land and climbing out of poverty.

References

- (1) <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/post2015/summit>
- (2) http://www.oecd-ilibrary.org/employment/in-it-together-why-less-inequality-benefits-all_9789264235120-en
- (3) Who owns the world’s land? A global baseline of formally recognized indigenous and community land rights RRI http://www.rightsandresources.org/wp-content/uploads/GlobalBaseline_web.pdf
- (4) <http://communitylandrights.org/conferences/2015-bern-conference/>
- (5) <https://www.globalwitness.org/campaigns/environmental-activists/deadly-environment/>
- (6) [Are the Sustainable Development Goals matching international standards on land rights?](http://landrightsnow.tumblr.com/) Luca Miggiano <http://landrightsnow.tumblr.com/>