Sustainable Development Goals Primer

Mary Gilbert, January 2014

I  The 1992 Rio “Earth Summit” established the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), which had annual 2-week sessions in NYC for 19 years. At that point it was decided that it was just a failure, and at the “Rio + 20” summit in 2012 it was decided to replace it with a different structure.

   The structure that emerged has 2 parts. There is a High Level Panel on Sustainable Development (HLPSD) composed of presidents, etc. which will meet under the General Assembly once in 4 years. It had a half-day meeting in Sept. 2013 to get going. There is also a ministerial level of HLPSD meetings that will be annual, I think in July. I hope to attend these if they are “open.”

II  The Millennial Development Goals (MDGs) were set up by the CSD to operate from 2000 to 2015, when they fizzle out. They addressed the worst aspects of poverty in the poorest countries, by having 8 goals, targets and indicators, or measurement tools. Here is a chart of the goals and the indicators for each: http://mdgs.un.org/unsd/mdg/host.aspx?Content=indicators/officiallist.htm

   The MDGs have had some success. Some countries have met or almost met the targets. Others, basically countries where there is violent conflict going on, have had no success whatever. Most countries’ success falls between these extremes.

III  At Rio + 20 it was determined to create a new set of goals, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to take effect in 2015. These goals are to apply to ALL countries, not just the poorest, the idea being to share the responsibility for working toward a sustainable planet. I should point out that there is no agreement on the term “sustainable.” The Open Working Group (OWG) on the SDGs was to consist of 30 seats, and begin meeting in Sept., 2012. The difficulty of establishing which 30 countries would be in on it was such that the meetings did not begin until March of 2013, and the 30 seats are shared – mostly by “troikas” of 3 countries each. From http://www.iisd.ca/vol32/enb3201e.html :

   Rio+20 did not elaborate specific goals but stated that the SDGs should be limited in number, aspirational and easy to communicate. The goals should address in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and be coherent with and integrated into the UN development agenda beyond 2015. A 30-member Open Working Group (OWG) of the General Assembly is tasked with preparing a proposal on the SDGs. The Open Working Group was established on 22nd of January 2013 by decision 67/555 (see A/67/L.48/rev.1) of the General Assembly. The Member States have decided to use an innovative, constituency-based system of representation that is new to limited membership bodies of the General Assembly. This means that most of the seats in the OWG are shared by several countries.

   The United States shares a seat with Canada and Israel. (I think nobody else in the world would share a seat with Israel.)

   In Feb. 2014 the OWG will end a year of taking stock of 37 incredibly complex and interrelated issues and begin in March the work of putting together something that can be submitted to the General Assembly (GA) in Sept. Then there will be an additional year of real negotiation before the SDGs are adopted by the GA in Sept. 2015.

IV  There are other Post-2015 processes taking place at the same time.

   - High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda: http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml  These are individuals who participated in the panel as such, not formally as representatives of their countries. They turned in their report on May 30, 2013, and many people thought this was IT.
   - A UN-run on-the-ground survey called My World that took care to include a wide range of
people down to the age of 10. http://www.worldwewant2015.org/ looked at the survey and found that it limited the kinds of input that could be made…it would have to in order to have comparable results from many areas of many countries. I don’t know if any attention will be paid to it at the international level. This survey can also be taken on-line using the above link.

- **Beyond 2015** is a global **civil society** campaign, pushing for a strong and legitimate successor framework to the Millennium Development Goals composed of more than 900 Civil Society Organisations in over 100 countries around the world. http://www.beyond2015.org/ QEW has not looked into joining this because we have an understanding with the QUNOs that we will not join or initiate any statements to UN bodies that might undermine the perception of QUNO neutrality on specific issues.