WN *Feedback*

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Climate. Nutrition. World health

The world wakes up



Access March 2014 IPCC report on food systems impacts here
Access March 2014 IPCC report on health impacts here
Access April 2014 Editorial on climate and food systems here
Access May 2014 Editorial on climate and food systems here
Access May 2014 Tony McMichael, Helen Berry, Colin Butler on climate here
Access June 2014 Colin Butler on climate here
Access this issue Naomi Klein, Tony McMichael and Colin Butler on climate here

Maria Alvim writes:

I have just become a new member of the *WN* family. This began by my writing in saying that I am beginning my career in public health nutrition, and would like to help *WN* in any way I can. My concern as a young professional and a citizen, is that the issues confronting international public health and nutrition are huge, but despite

what is being said by important organisations, with United Nations commitments continually being signed by national governments, I have been feeling that not much is really happening. In my own country the shops are filling with all sorts of junk food and salty snacks and sugary drinks, and children are getting fat. So for people like me *World Nutrition* is a beacon of light. I was asked to write a letter for publication in *WN*, and below is what I wrote. Or rather, some is what I first wrote, because as if by magic, public events transformed towards the end of September.

The climate

Whether by human or natural causes, global temperature is rising on land and in the oceans, and the area covered with glaciers on the planet is declining (1). The consequences of these changes are immeasurable and extremely troubling (2). Natural climatic events like the El Niño oscillation need proper concerted action. But it is the climate crisis that has been created by humans that needs the most radical action. I have found a paper that impresses me because of its coherent approach (3). Here are some of its proposals, and I think the first and last ones should be stressed.

- Change the current model of development to a more humane and fairer model that really is sustainable.
- Make the fight against global warming part of the commitment to defend life and health as a fundamental human right.
- Involve everyone in actions to protect health and life, at international, regional, national, local and personal levels.
- Link knowledge, decision and action. Always use knowledge as a basis for policy development.
- Strategise to adapt to climate change. Exercise geopolitical pressure to fulfil agreements already made by UN member states.
- Recognise age-old relationships between humans and nature as a model for more harmonious relationships with the environment.

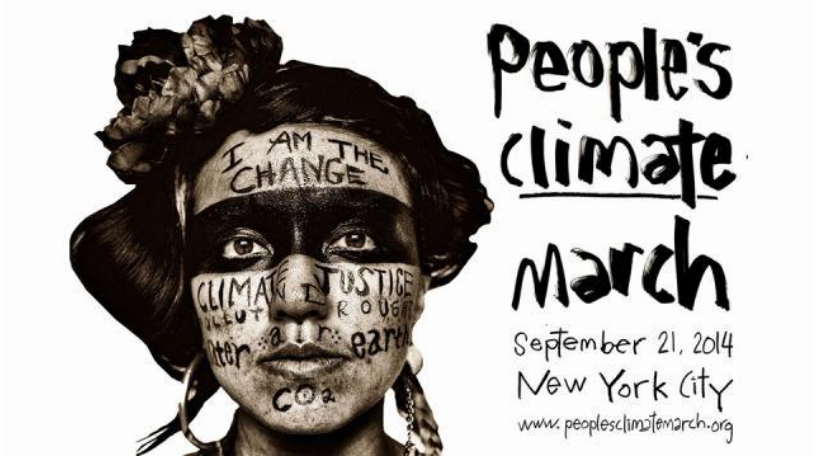
Why no action?

Here is what I continued to write in early September. It is surely strange that there is so far so little public response, for food and water supplies are already threatened in large parts of the world. Maybe I am mistaken, but it seems to me that few people really care about this. I am not suggesting that mass panic is needed. But it seems very strange to me that there is no major mobilisation.

Yes, we read about protocols and conferences addressing climate. Yes, there are people like us who care about the future of water and food supply in the world, and also are concerned about the emergence of new diseases borne by air and insects, and other worrying changes. But little that is really effective seems to be happening. Sometimes it seems there is only silence.

On 23 September at the United Nations climate summit in New York, secretary-general Ban Ki-moon will be inviting leaders from governments, finance, business, and civil society, to make bold commitments to reduce emissions, strengthen climate resilience, and mobilise political will (4). My hope is that more and more people get the message. Health professionals and citizens can't change everything, but we can make a concerted start.

The people move!



And here is what I write in late September. What I hoped for has begun, as shown by the picture at the beginning of this letter. The people all over the world have not merely waited to hear what UN officials, politicians and industry executives have to say. A huge manifestation has taken place in an estimated 165 countries. This is not me in the picture above, but I feel proud to be able to express solidarity with the brave bold citizens in the streets. They are angry and also hopeful and themselves demonstrate in solidarity with people whose lands are being flooded and wrecked now. We in public health nutrition are a part of this beginning.

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Human rights
The right to cook

Access April 2013 Extract from Cooked by Michael Pollan here
Access May 2013 Appraisals of Michael Pollan here
Access June 2013 Michael Pollan on gut microbiota here
Access 2014 IISC report What's Food Got To Do With It.
Access September 2014 Michael Pollan in Brazil and on Cooked here
Access September 2014 Urban Jonsson on human rights here



Chips plus ketchup with practically everything may be what so many people in Britain and Ireland now consume, but asylum seekers from countries that eat meals have a right to cook their own food

John McKenna writes:

Human rights are not what they used to be, it seems. When Denis O'Brien, the billionaire chairman of the mobile phone corporation Digicel, was quoted recently in *The Irish Times* declaring that access to broadband was a 'basic human right,' his declaration was accompanied by a call for 'the international community to facilitate private sector roll-out of high-tech infrastructure.'

So, basic human rights in the modern age come courtesy of profit-focused companies, allowing you to chat on Facebook with an Android system on your HTC smartphone via the Digicel network. As with so many unexpected outcomes, I somehow doubt that this was how the original drafters of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights saw things panning out, when in 1948 they finally completed their work after two years of deliberations.

But let's try to be positive about this development, because I rather like the idea that we can declare a new human right. And so I want to suggest the creation of a new one. That human right is the right to cook.

The dismal fate of asylum seekers



The conditions in which refugees are kept in many countries are appalling. Denial of any right to cook their own meals is just one example. Economies of wealthy countries depend on foreign labour

If this seems somewhat obvious, the sad fact is that the right to cook is not a right recognised by the Irish Government, at least not for the thousands of asylum seekers housed in dozens of locations around Ireland, awaiting a decision of their application for refugee status.

Direct Provision is the system used by the government in the many former hotels, hostels and other units where asylum seekers are housed, and it is applied by private companies who administer the system. Many people over recent years have commented on the unfairness and unsuitability of the system. There have been many complaints about the quality of food served to the residents.

> A steady stream of chicken nuggets, white rice, ketchup, vegetables and chips daily, and a distinct lack of toddler appropriate foods

was how Ronit Lentin of Trinity College, Dublin, described the fare back in 2012. But there is a bigger issue here than simply what is served three times a day to the residents as they wait for years to hear if they will be granted refugee status.

When the Irish Immigrant Support Centre, examined the food experiences of asylum seekers in Cork in their 2014 report *What's Food Got To Do With It*, their first finding was that 'food provided in Direct Provision is not satisfactory.' That's what one would have expected, but it is the following conclusions that show the true depth of the problem:

> The food does not represent the cultural and multi-faith religious needs of asylum seekers living in Direct Provision centres in Cork. [It] has a negative impact on families and children who are residents of direct provision centres. The food system in Direct Provision centres is negative for the health of asylum seekers.

Which is to say, the food is one part of a broken system. Residents are served food three times daily, but they are not allowed to cook their own food. No chapattis for the family from Pakistan. No pounded yam for the Nigerians. No breakfast of tea

and *canjeero* for the Somalis. Instead of these staple foods that people love and crave, the system gives them chicken nuggets, ketchup and lots of chips.

Why should they be granted the right to cook? Well, to put it quite simply, humans are cooking animals. No other species in our world cooks food. Cooking is what separates us from every other form of life. Cooking defines *homo sapiens*.

We cook, therefore we are

Transforming the raw into the cooked lies at the centre of our development as a species. We are who we are, because we cook.

What's more, cooking is one of the key ways in which we define ourselves, and recognise and celebrate the culture we were born into. The bread we eat is not just the staff of life, it is the staff of our personality and psyche, and it matters enormously if that bread is naan, or soda bread, or corn bread, or rye bread, or brioche.

Cooking the food we love to eat also comforts us and reassures us. We have all had that moment in our lives when we are down and distressed, and then someone hands us a bowl of something we love to eat. In an instant, we are made whole: the fabric of our being is stitched together once more. Even better, if we have suffered distress, having access to a kitchen, and to the ingredients that we know and love, is how we re-make our lives after they have been torn apart: the home begins again at the hearth.

Perhaps more importantly, it is cooking that shapes our health. The effects of the 'Western diet' on people who are used to traditional diets has been studied for the past century and, as Michael Pollan has written

> Wherever in the world people gave up their traditional way of eating and adopted the Western diet, there soon followed a predictable series of Western diseases, including obesity, diabetes, cardiovascular diseases and cancer.

Impact on gut health

A baby's health depends on what the mother eats when the child is in the womb, and a family's microbiomes are shaped by what they are fed every day. If mothers and parents cannot choose what to eat for themselves and what to feed to their children, and if that food is made up from ultra-processed products, refined and packed with hidden salts, sugars and fats, then the microbiome of the person who has been reared on living grains, pulses, legumes and grass-fed meat will suffer at an astonishingly rapid rate. Research carried out at the *American Gut Project* has shown that the impact of even a single course of antibiotics can transform the health of the microbiome in not much longer than a week.

In this regard, we are all different and yet all the same. I live in Ireland, and the Irish love of the potato and our cooking of it as a daily staple, is equal to the Japanese reverence for rice, or the Mexican reverence for corn. Any Irish restaurateur will tell you that if a dish of potatoes doesn't arrive with the main courses, then Irish diners will look around anxiously. Where are the spuds?

I think we need to take the system of Direct Provision, and what it does to people and their families who are waiting in the asylum process, very personally. Just think of how you would react, if every morning you were offered rice, miso and *umeboshi* pickles, instead of your favourite cereal, or that beloved boiled egg and a hot cup of tea. Imagine if every meal, instead of an opportunity for creative cooking and then communal sharing and sensory enjoyment, becomes yet another miserable trudge through poor quality food that you may never have eaten?

Treating people in this way doesn't just harm their physical health. It has terrible consequences for their mental health as well. How would you feel after a month, a year, and then several years, of unrecognisable, unhealthy food, three times a day? It would do your head in. It would also do your health in. 'Frankly, I feel like I am eating in Guantanamo,' is how one asylum seeker described eating under the Direct Provision process. When people are obliged to consume alien food, much of it obvious rubbish, this increases their alienation and anger.

Degrading treatment

The Universal Declaration of Human Rights, in Article 5, states that 'No one shall be subjected to… cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.' Forbidding people to cook their own food for themselves and their families, and then serving them ultra-processed products, much of which is wasted and thrown away in disgust, seems to me to be a veritable definition of 'cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment.' One asylum seeker summarised the situation perfectly:

> They should put the money into food that people will eat rather than having all this waste. The waste is sinful… instead of wasting, just provide us with a kitchen we can use.

In mid-2014, there are more than 50 million displaced refugees throughout the world, the greatest number since the Second World War. Ireland in the past has had a proud history of supporting the oppressed. With the Direct Provision system, however, Ireland stands indicted of denying the most helpless people the most fundamental right: the right to cook.

The irony is that the system could be changed in an instant. The NASC report, whilst recommending a total overhaul of the Direct Provision system, makes two simple recommendations: expand self-catering options for asylum seekers as a matter of urgency, and create communal cooking areas at all Direct Provision centres.

The fact that it is this simple to put right the wrong done to helpless people, makes the cruelty of the system even more galling

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McKenna J. Human rights. The right to cook [Feedback]. World Nutrition October 2014, 5, 10, 900-903

Editor's note

Patrick Holden, founder of the Sustainable Food Trust, explains:

Our current industrialised food system is destroying biodiversity and our environment. At the Sustainable Food Trust, we are committed to facing challenges and exploring solutions for a food production system that causes the least possible harm to both humans and the environment. The key principles for sustainable food systems are that they should:

Optimise the production of high quality safe food. Minimise the use of non-renewable external inputs. Maintain and build soil fertility. Enhance food security and a high degree of resilience against external shock. Support plant and animal diversity and animal welfare. Minimise environmental pollution. Promote public health

As a planet, we have never faced the scale of crisis that we do now. Time is not on our side. If we are to transform our food systems so that the maximum amount of people can eat nutritious food produced in the right ways, we need to work together, share ideas, pool resources and connect as part of a global food movement. Every voice counts.



Farming

Quantifying quality

Access June 2014 Enrique Jacoby et al on farming in the Americas here

Tim Lang writes:

Can the relative quality of farming, in terms of its effect on human health, be quantified? One indicator is efficiently at delivering dietary energy, which is to say, how many people are fed per hectare. This can be calculated (1). The ideal indicator would be the number and range of a selected number of nutrients per hectare.

Big farms tend to have fewer people working on them. They have access to more capital, have larger turnovers, and make more profits than smaller farms. But from a public health point of view we want people to be fed healthily. Defining the relative healthiness of a farm's production is complicated policy territory. A dairy farmer selling milk, may be paid by the quantity of milk fat, but it cannot be said that just because he doesn't produce fruit or vegetables or some other more nutrient-dense foods, that his farm is unhealthy.

A hundred and more years ago, when addressing the Malthusian question of how to produce more food to feed more people, agronomists debated two routes. One was intensification and increasing the scale of production, applying new technologies. The other was smaller scale. The advantage of the former is that it got rid of labour, which was replaced by machines and fossil fuels. The advantage of the latter is that it can produce more nutrients but it does rely on free or cheap labour.

The model which triumphed was that which favours mechanisation and intensification. But as we all know now, this comes at a cost to the environment, which includes biodiversity loss, water stress, and greenhouse gas emissions. That's one of the reasons why the deeper green agriculturalists now favour the smaller scale alternative, now in the name of agro-ecology (2-6).

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*World Nutrition October 2014, **5,** 10, 904-905*




The Food System /NOVA

Theory and reality in the Arab world

Access December 2012 Carlos Monteiro et al on The Food System here
Access March 2014 Jean-Claude Moubarac on Brazil's food guide here
Access Sept 2014 Jean-Claude Moubarac on Brazil's food guide and UNICEF here



The Food Dome shown here is part of the 2012 food-based dietary guidelines for Arab countries, which take into account the climate and the environment and traditional food culture and cuisine

Sara Garduño-Diaz writes:

It is good to know that the meal-based dietary guidelines for Brazil (see links above) are gaining momentum and are now adapted for UNICEF in a draft of its forthcoming *Facts for Life* report (1). Writing from Kuwait, here I look at the rules and guidelines for global health as now being proposed for UNICEF, and see how these could apply to Kuwait, where I am based (2).

Rules followed and ignored

Making food and freshly prepared dishes and meals the basis of the diet is the one rule out of the three listed in the draft UNICEF *Facts for Life* report that people in Kuwait stick to the most. Fast-food restaurants are abundant and widely popular at all times of day and night, but the main midday meal remains socially significant and is often consumed at home, with the presence of all family members being required.

From there things become sketchy. Rules number two and three, moderate consumption of oils, fats, sugar and salt, and limiting the intake of ready-to-consume products, are unlikely to happen. Traditional Arabic food is high in oil (olive), and with the influence of western eating cultures, fats, sugar and salt are becoming more present in daily food consumption, with.ultra-processed products now a favourite.

Other recommendations for Brazil that are now part of the draft *Facts for Life* report are not being applied in Kuwait. Food is not consumed at set times but in a semi-continuous manner throughout the day (and yes, also the night!). Snacking is constantly being pushed by intensive marketing campaigns, everywhere at all times. Food products are marketed by the road on giant billboards facing drivers as well as on the sides of passing delivery vans – and in Kuwait we spend a lot of time sitting in cars, as public transportation is extremely underdeveloped and climatic conditions limit walking. They are also marketed on social media (photo sharing is big here, and most restaurants are on Instagram, Facebook and Twitter), on the radio and television, through fliers slipped under doors, and even on texts directly to your mobile phone. Food product advertising is incessant, and fast food products are available for delivery 24 hours a day, 7 days a week.

It is possible to pull up in your car to almost any restaurant or local shop and, without getting out of the car, you honk and a waiter will dash to the car to take and then deliver an order. Walking is optional and unnecessary. And of course there is the added bonus of multi-tasking while eating, in complete opposition to what is recommended in the *Facts for Life* draft. Texting and talking on the phone are so common that while observing diners at a major shopping centre, I see that most of them do not even look at the people sharing their table, much less pay attention to what they are eating.

The Food Dome

Kuwait does not have its own dietary guidelines. The closest recommendations that could apply to Kuwaitis are those set out in the *Food Dome Guidelines for Arab Countries* (2). These are food-based, and mimic what has been done with schemes such as the US *Food Guide Pyramid* and the Harvard Healthy Eating Plate (3) taking into account Arab culture and commonly consumed foods, as shown in the figure at the beginning of this letter.

What Kuwait is still getting right, is maintaining the social aspect of main meals, with full extended families present, and proper time and space dedicated to eating. In Kuwait it is also common to consume freshly prepared dishes. But food preparation and cooking is mostly done by domestic workers usually from other countries, with these skills becoming ever more non-existent among the general population.

As to the ingredients, giving preference to locally grown and seasonal produce would leave the people of Kuwait with a very limited diet. Due to the local climate conditions, local food production is tremendously energy-intensive and most food consumed is imported. For those from another country the food culture is baffling. There isn't much criticism of commercial advertisement of food products. Over-consumption and waste of a vast amount of food is seen as glamorous and desired.

The original dietary culture

Originally, the peoples of the Arabian Peninsula relied on a diet of dates, wheat, barley, rice and meat, and yoghurt products, such as *leben*. Traditional Arabian cuisine today is rich and diverse, spanning the Arab world from Iraq to Morocco and incorporating Lebanese, Egyptian, and others. It has also been influenced to a degree by the cuisines of India, Turkey, Berber, and others. But food consumption patterns and dietary habits in Arab countries have greatly changed in the past four decades, with a swift shift from traditional to industrialised diets

In many aspects Kuwait is a country in development. It is not too late to establish healthier food supplies and rescue what is left of the original food culture. Unlike in many other countries, money is not a limiting factor here. I believe that we health professionals can develop policies and programmes that will improve the health of the population while also respecting and valuing the environment.

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Human rights
Equitable sustainable development

Access September 2014 Urban Jonsson on human rights here

Ignacio Saiz and Radhika Radakrishnan write:

The UN General Assembly has begun negotiations over the content of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). These succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) next year. The outcomes of these inter-governmental debates will determine the generally accepted model of development until 2030. They will also shape national government priorities, policies and financing decisions in areas from education to ecology, housing to health, climate change to care work.

As worldwide debate on what should replace the MDGs intensifies, many activists are calling for a new sustainable development paradigm which, in the Millennium Declaration's original vision, 'strive(s) for the full protection and promotion in all countries of civil, political, economic, social and cultural rights for all'. So far, progress to make human rights central to sustainable development has been mixed.

Better than the MDGs

From a human rights perspective, the draft SDGs, as agreed in an inter-governmental Open Working Group in July, are a vast improvement on the MDGs. The MDGs were essentially a pact between donor and developing countries. The new goals are intended to be universally applicable, tackling poverty and deprivation everywhere, and holding all countries responsible for taking action, individually and collectively.

Many of the draft goals and targets are likewise more aligned with human rights obligations. Those on education and health, for example, commit states to ensuring that basic education is free, non-discriminatory and of good quality, and that health coverage is universal. The draft SDGs also include a goal on access to justice notably lacking in the MDGs, and are more equality-sensitive, with more cross-cutting commitments to gender equality, and a stand-alone goal on reducing income inequality within and between countries.

But while there is much to celebrate, the current proposals contain a fundamental shortcoming. They fail to boost accountability. The goals are meant to incentivise collective action by holding all development actors – public and private – answerable to quantifiable commitments. But the potential effectiveness of the SDGs as an instrument of accountability has been severely undermined by the highly selective, partial and ambivalent stance on human rights taken by governments of both the global North and South in the process to date.

Many wealthy countries have resisted more stringent and measurable commitments under the SDGs for the negative impacts of their laws and policies abroad, for example those regarding agricultural subsidies, access to essential medicines, illicit financial flows, debt restructuring, and financial regulation, which too often erode the ability of other countries to achieve sustainable development. Efforts by the G77 states to invoke the right to development, as a holistic framework for addressing the extraterritorial responsibilities of rich countries, have met with resistance. The proposed SDGs do little to hold powerful economies and companies to account for their role in contributing to the structural inequities in the global economic and financial system that have continued to fuel poverty, inequality and environmental degradation since the MDGs were adopted.

In turn, many developing country governments object to the inclusion of governance and gender-related human rights commitments. They fear a repeat of the skewed accountability of the MDGs, where compliance with human rights (particularly civil and political freedoms) became a tool of aid conditionality in the hands of donor governments and international financial institutions.

Need to protect rights

The selective stance of donor countries on human rights has served as a diplomatic escape-hatch for some authoritarian governments to question altogether the relevance of human rights and democratic freedoms to the core agenda of socio-economic development. As a result, the language in earlier drafts of the SDGs on freedom of expression, association and information, which are essential prerequisites for ordinary people to hold their governments answerable to their development commitments. was diluted, following fierce debate.

Human rights have thus become a lightning rod in the geo-political wrangling around the next global development goals. The draft SDGs contain few explicit references to human rights, and are conspicuously silent on their role as a universal normative framework for sustainable development. Indeed the Open Working Group co-chairs have admitted that they deliberately avoided explicit human rights language in the SDG draft for fear that this would be considered to be too 'controversial'.

How should human rights advocates navigate these contentious issues this and next year? Some erstwhile allies have argued that the controversies around human rights in the post-2015 agenda are a reason to avoid the issue altogether. We draw the opposite conclusion. Given the consensus that has existed for decades at the UN on the relationship of human rights to development, it is shameful that existing human rights commitments can still be so readily politicised, traded off and written out in UN development forums. Three key shifts in strategy will be needed if we are to turn the tables on the stale geo-political dynamics that threaten to undermine the SDGs as an endeavour that is truly transformative and human rights-centred.

First, human rights advocates need to underscore the extraterritorial obligations of wealthier states to respect and protect human rights beyond their borders, and to cooperate internationally in their fulfilment. This can help advance a more politically astute verson of the 'common but differentiated responsibilities' of all countries in relation to each SDG commitment. The political stalemate that surrounds this concept could be avoided by anchoring these concurrent responsibilities in the detailed normative framework of human rights instruments such as the Declaration on the Right to Development and the Maastricht Principles on Extra-Territorial Obligations of States in the area of Economic, Social and Cultural Rights.

There are already some important best practices and methodologies to put these norms into practice. Norway for example, cancelled the sovereign debt it held itself responsible for in four developing countries. Ireland and the Netherlands have recently committed to conduct assessments of the 'spill-over' development impact of their corporate income tax policies. Unless the SDGs spur wealthier states to get their own houses in order, less powerful governments will have every reason to mistrust their human rights discourse.

Second, advocates must counter the corporate influence on the post-2015 process with a much stronger push for corporate accountability. The current SDGs posit an increasingly central role for the corporate sector as the driver of development, emphasising partnerships with the private sector in the delivery of development outcomes. Yet there is no acknowledgment of the harms businesses so often cause to sustainable development, whether through environmental contamination, mass-scale tax evasion, denial of labour rights, or complicity in repression by security forces.

Attempts to include more stringent commitments in the SDGs regarding corporate regulation, human rights impact assessments, mandatory due diligence reporting, and fiscal transparency and accountability, have been vehemently resisted, with reference to the UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights sidelined from the SDGs. The emerging campaign for a new binding treaty on corporate human rights abuses could give renewed momentum to these efforts.

Third, the human rights community must build more effective platforms and alliances with development, social justice and environmental movements to amplify the human rights voice in these debates, avoiding the fragmentation and issue-specific silos that have characterised advocacy to date.

All those championing human rights on the post-2015 agenda, whether focusing on access to information or the rights to water and sanitation, must maintain an integral and comprehensive approach which recognises the interdependence of all human rights in their civil, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental dimensions. And we must resist the seduction of tactical compromises that would accept leaving out explicit references to human rights.

Need to be transformative

As the last two years of debate and civil society consultation have made clear, those facing poverty, deprivation and environmental injustice across the globe demand that the next development agenda be transformative, founded on the full dignity of all human beings and the accountability of all those in positions of power. As the process moves from consultation to negotiation, we must guard against attempts to restrict or tokenise civil society participation from here on, and to privilege powerful corporate interests over the expectations of ordinary citizens as the goals are finalized. Philanthropic organisations now debating their role in the post-2015 process will need to be sensitised to these risks.

The UN Secretary General has called for a new set of goals that reflect 'a far-reaching vision of the future, anchored in human rights'. The existing framework of human rights commitments should inform the vision of the SDGs, and also the goals, targets and indicators of progress, their financing and implementation, and the accountability mechanisms to ensure they are met. As the process enters the critical home stretch, our global community of practice must settle for nothing less.

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How to respond

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