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GENDER EQUALITY AND WOMEN'S LEADERSHIP FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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Abstract

On 1 January 2016, the world officially began the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (the SDGAgenda): the transformative plan of action based on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) to address urgent global challenges over the next 15 years. The SDG Agenda includes a comprehensive single-standing goal devoted to "achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls" (SDG 5). According to its targets, this goal requires ending discrimination, violence and harmful practices and enhancing equitable policy, opportunities and access to health, economic and technological resources by 2030.The author underlines that women and girls face these and others tremendous structural barriers that impact all aspects of their lives. Hence, eliminating these barriers is not only critical to achieve the SDG 5 – an important goal in itself– but also as an incentive for attaining a sustainable future for all. The aim of this paper is to illustrate the cross-dependence of the SDGs, based on the consideration that advances in gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are indispensable for progress in achieving them. The research is based on a review of the existing academic literature on the interactions between SDGs and their goals, a body of literature that is quite recent and small in comparison with other material areas of research.

1. Introduction

The year 2015 will go down in history for having given unprecedented attention to the issue of gender and development. On 9 March, the 59th session of the Commission on the Status of Women, known as Beijing + 20, began in New York. It was specifically dedicated to evaluating the commitments made at the *Fourth World Conference on Women* and, in particular, in the *Beijing Platform for Action*. The Secretary-General's report acknowledged significant progress in the elimination of discriminatory practices and the adoption of legislation to promote gender equality and to combat violence against women and girls in national legal systems. The report also noted an increase in girls' enrolment in primary and secondary education, in women's participation in the labour market and in their access to contraception. However, many of the critical issues identified by the signatories of the Platform persisted, including discriminatory social standards and gender stereotypes, low levels of women's participation and leadership in decision-making at all levels and the limited progress made in promoting women's economic rights and independence (United Nations ECOSOC, 2015).

Beijing + 20 coincided with the culmination of the process to establish a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), initiated at the *High Level Meeting on the Millennium Development Goals* (MDGs) and the *United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development* (also called Rio + 20), held in September 2010 and June 2012 respectively. In fact, the above-mentioned report of the Secretary-General states that "gender equality, the empowerment of women and the human rights of women and girls must be a central priority in the post-2015 development agenda" (United Nations ECOSOC, 2015, para. 389).

The outcome of this process would be the document entitled Transforming our world: the *2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development* (hereinafter referred to as the 2030 Agenda), adopted at the World Summit on Sustainable Development in New York in September 2015. As stated in its preamble, the 2030 Agendais "a plan of action for people, planet and prosperity". This plan comprises 17 SDGs and 169 targets that are "integrated and indivisible", linking the three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 1, 3).

The 2030 Agenda came into force on 1 January 2016 and, although it is based especially on the MDGs, it moves away from the North-South gap that presided over these objectives. The questioning of this gap works in favour of a holistic consideration of development, where the "global South" is a key, though not exclusive, element. Consequently, the universal reference framework of the 2030 Agenda makes it relevant for all countries, questioning one of the central ideas of development research and policies: 'that development is something for, and occurs in, the "developing world"' (Death & Gabay, 2015, p. 598). A central element of the 2030 Agenda is its clear and unequivocal commitment to the fulfilment of its objectives and goals in "all nations and peoples" and in "all segments of society" or, in other words, without anyone being left behind (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, Declaration, para. 4).

2. Problem Statement

The commitment of The 2030 Agenda to leave no one behind is closely aligned with some of the SDGs and in particular with SDG 5, which focuses on "achieving gender equality and empowering all women and girls". Six ambitious goals make up this objective. First, "to end all forms of discrimination against all women and girls everywhere" (5.1). Second, "to eliminate all forms of violence against women and girls…, including trafficking and sexual and other types of exploitation" (5.2). Third, "to eliminate all harmful practices, such as child, early, and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" (5.3). Fourth, "to recognise and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure, and social protection policies and the promotion of shared responsibility within the household and the family…" (5.4). Fifth, "to ensure women's full and effective participation and equal opportunities for leadership at all levels of decision making in political, economic, and public life" (5.5). Finally, "to ensure universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights…" (5.6).The SDG includes three Means of Implementation (hereinafter - MoI): undertaking reforms to give women equal rights to economic resources and assets (5.A); enhancing the use of technology to promote the empowerment of women (5.B) and adopting and strengthening sound policies and enforceable legislation for the promotion of gender equality and empowerment of women and girls (5.C).

However, gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are not limited to this goal. While both issues are incorporated into the goals of other SDGs, their positive impact on some of them is obvious. As stated in the Declaration that precedes the 2030 Agenda "realizing gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls will make a crucial contribution to progress across all the Goals and targets". It also notes that "the systematic mainstreaming of a gender perspective in the implementation of the Agenda" is also "crucial" (United Nations General Assembly, 2015, para. 20).

Ten years from the end of the period established for the expiry of the 2030 Agenda, it is essential to intensify the effectiveness and efficiency of the measures to be adopted and, in particular, to broaden the understanding of the interactions between the SDGs. In this context, the knowledge of the synergies between SDG 5 and its goals and the rest of the SDGs and its goals and between the latter is vital to inform the decisions aimed at achieving them.

3. Research Questions

The intersection of gender inequality with other forms of inequality such as those linked to race, class, ethnicity or social orientation, power imbalance and discriminatory norms and/or practices are central factors in addressing the reasons that prevent the sustainable development of the world. Based on this premise, this paper seeks to answer the following questions:

- How does the 2030 Agenda treat gender equality and women's empowerment?

- With the exception of the goals of SDG 5, which goals explicitly incorporate a gender perspective?

- ▪ Does gender mainstreaming in the 2030 Agenda require consideration of the interactions between the SDGs and their goals?

4. Purpose of the Study

The aim of this paper is to illustrate the cross-dependence of the SDGs, based on the consideration that advances in gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are indispensable for progress in achieving them. The objective is to provide an integrative or holistic approach which, in line with the philosophy behind the 2030 Agenda, overcomes the frequent treatment of the SDGs as vertical silos, isolated from each other, and guides the implementation process.

5. Research Methods

This paper is based on a review of the existing academic literature on the interactions between SDGs and their goals, a body of literature that is quite recent and small in comparison with other material areas of research.

Various studies recognize the need for a paradigm shift that rejects the consideration of the SDGs and their goals as a mere sum of elements (International Council for Science, 2017; International Council for Science & International Social Science Council, 2015; Le Blanc, 2015; Lusseau & Mancini, 2019; Nilsson et al., 2018; Pradhan, 2019; Scharlemann et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2018; Tremblay et al., 2020). Based on these studies, this paper argues that the anticipated benefits of each objective and their goals can only be achieved through an integrative or holistic approach that addresses the SDGs and their goals as a whole, with multiple effects between them.

Other studies analyse the links between one or more objectives and other SDGs. Le Blanc et al. (2017), Ntona and Morgera (2018) and Singh et al. (2018) focus on SDG 14; Vladimirova and Le Blanc (2016) on SDG 4; Fuso Nerini et al. (2019) and Santika et al. (2019) in SDG 7, while Barbier and Burgess (2017) examine the connection between SDG 1 and SDGs 2 and 6. Also taking SDG 1 as a reference, Pradhan et al. (2017) analyse their relationship with SDG 3 and SDG 12. Few papers, however, have investigated the interactions between SDG 5 and the rest of the objectives and their targets, as well as among the latter (Stephens et al., 2018).

6. Findings

The following is a summary of the main results drawn from the work.

1. The SDGs involve a thorough review of the MDGs' treatment of gender equality and women's empowerment. The focus of the MDGs had been on equity in the education system (MDG 2 and MDG 3), improving maternal health (MDG 5), universal access to reproductive health services (MDG 5) and redressing inequalities in the labour and political spheres (MDG 3). In contrast, the SDGs, in which the achievement of gender equality and empowerment extends significantly to girls, incorporate issues that were not addressed at the time. Therefore, the need is identified to "end all forms of discrimination

against all women and girls everywhere" (Target 5.1) and "eliminate all forms of violence" against them, including "all harmful practices, such as child, early and forced marriage and female genital mutilation" (Target 5.2). More ambitiously, SDG5 proposes to "recognize and value unpaid care and domestic work through the provision of public services, infrastructure and social protection policies" (Target 5.4).

Furthermore, the 2030 Agenda views gender as a cross-cutting issue that affects all three dimensions of sustainable development and therefore the implementation of all the SDGs. This means that any initiative aimed at this implementation must consider its impact on women, men, girls and boys.

2. The incorporation of a gender perspective in the 2030 Agenda explains why, beyond SDG 5, the aims of other SDGs are specifically aimed at the interests of women and girls. As indicated below, these goals provide a wide range of measures for the achievement of gender equality and empowerment.

- SDG 1.End poverty in all its forms everywhere

Target 1.2. Reduce poverty of women and children

Target 1.4.Gender equal access to resources

- SDG 2. End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

Target 2.2.Nutritional needs for adolescent girls, pregnant women and mothers with babies

Target 2.3.Agricultural productivity and incomes of small scale women farmers

- SDG 3. Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

Target 3.1. Reducing maternal mortality

Target 3.7. Universal access to sexual and reproductive health-care services

- SDG 4. Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Target 4.1. Primary and secondary education for all girls and boys

Target 4.2.Access to quality early childhood development, care and pre-primary education for girls and boys

Target 4.3. Technical, vocation and tertiary education for all women

Target 4.5. Gender equality in education and vocational training

Target 4.6.Literacy and numeracy of women

- SDG 6. Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

Target 6.2.Special attention to the needs of women and girls with respect to sanitation and hygiene

- SDG 8. Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

Target 8.5.Decent work for all women and equal pay for work of equal value

Target 8.8. Protection for women migrants

- SDG 10. Reduce inequality within and among countries

Target 10.2. Empowerment and promotion of the social, economic and political inclusion

Target 10.3. Equal opportunities

Target 10.4. Fiscal policies and domestic resource mobilization

- SDG 11. Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

Target 11.2.Women's access to public transit

Target 11.7. Green and public space for women and children

SDG 13 (Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts) also includes MoI 13B, which calls for the commitment and participation of women in addressing climate change, particularly in the least developed countries and small developing island states. MoI 1.b also proposes the creation of "sound policy frameworks" based on gender-sensitive development strategies. Ultimately, it should be stressed that the mobilization of resources, as envisaged in SDG 17, will be crucial to fulfilling the commitments to gender equality and women's empowerment in the 2030 Agenda.

3. The incorporation of a gender perspective in the 2030 Agenda implies the consideration of the interactions between the SDGs and their goals.

Thus, achieving decent employment for all women and equal pay for work of equal value for women and men (Target 8.5.) will not only contribute to reducing poverty (SDG 1), improving women's nutrition (SDG 2) and achieving better results in education (SDG 4), but also to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being" (SDG 3). The latter objective will also contribute to the elimination of all forms of violence against women and girls (Target 5.2).

Similarly, to "ensure healthy lives and promote well-being" (SDG 3) requires both meeting the goals of this objective and ending poverty (SDG 1), providing access to education (SDG 4), reducing inequality between and within countries (SDG 10), promoting peace (SDG 16) and achieving gender equality (SDG 5). The correct implementation of Target 8.8, relating - as noted - to "protection for women migrants" will also have a positive impact on the latter objective, as well as on SDG 3. This target is closely linked to target 10.7, intended to "facilitate orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration and mobility of people", as well as the challenges of 8.5 (ensuring decent work for all women and equal pay for work of equal value) and 8.7 ("eradicate forced labour, end modern slavery and human trafficking").

7. Conclusion

The 17 SDGs and their goals were conceived as integrated and individual, also combining the three pillars of sustainable development: economic, social and environmental. These objectives and goals are intertwined in a unified framework and, in this sense, form an indivisible whole.

This integral and indivisible character of the SDGs implies that progress in one of them is essential for the achievement of any other. In the same way that the achievement of SDG 5 requires consideration of the other SDGs, these will not be achieved by ignoring the relevance of gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls.

By considering the needs, interests and aspirations of half the world's population, The 2030 Agenda addresses gender as a cross-cutting issue across the three dimensions of sustainable development. In this sense, it is committed to the systematic incorporation of a gender perspective in all its objectives and goals. This incorporation justifies the fact that gender equality and the empowerment of women and girls are present in a significant part of the SDGs and their goals, and demands the recognition of the interactions between the latter - in a strategic and effective manner - in any action aimed at achieving them.

Despite the above-mentioned comprehensive and indivisible nature of the SDGs, in practice it has been found that decision-makers tend to address specific challenges and opportunities, often centred on subsets of objectives and/or targets. However, this character and the progress towards them requires an integrative or holistic approach that goes beyond sectoral approaches, and addresses the interactions between all of the objectives and their targets. The need to address these interactions is not only based on the fact that decisions and actions to promote any one of the SDGs are likely to affect the achievement of the others, but also on the growing evidence that significant economic, social and environmental benefits can be obtained from well-coordinated actions that exploit the synergies between the SDGs.

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