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Stress exercise at HAF women's empowerment workshop in Kik village; September 2024. Photo Credit: HAF

Sustainable Development Goals: Where The UN Pact For The Future May Fall Short – OpEd

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By Sushant Sareen The United Nations Security Council (UNSC) designated terrori

This past September, world leaders gathered in New York at the [UN Summit of the Future](#). The purpose of the summit was to create new and strengthen existing consensus on how to deliver some of the world’s most pressing present and future goals. These priorities are intended to be achieved through the [Pact for the Future](#), an intergovernmental negotiated and action-oriented agreement focused on issues of sustainable development and financing, international peace, innovation, youth and future generations, and transforming global governance.

The 66-page document outlines a number of action items within these key areas to achieve the ambitious goals agreed upon by the parties of the conference. While the document offers a comprehensive framework for the end goals that the world needs to see, equal focus needs to be placed on the specific steps and processes required to achieve these end goals.

In general, the action items detailed in the document, from poverty alleviation to ending hunger to addressing climate change, use broad, overarching language that leaves unanswered the question of how to achieve true lasting progress. The widely recognized Sustainable Development Goals, adopted by UN members in 2015, similarly offer pillars of development achievement without any steps to achieve them or indicators to measure their success.

Of course, given the incredible diversity of situations and needs across the globe, specific action plans will be similarly diverse for individual countries, regions, and even communities. But, a common factor that unites all contexts is the need for participatory and decentralized approaches to development that enable people on all levels to take control of their own futures in a sustainable manner.

It has been shown over time that communities know their own interests best and therefore have the best ability to make decisions on their development pathways. Further, when people feel they have a say in decisions made in their communities, it encourages greater engagement in collective action and

st Masood Azhar and his organisation Jaish-e-Mohammed (JeM) are once again emerging



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increased interaction among people, building critical social capital and networks that can then help communities in the future.

Social networks have proven to be particularly important in the aftermath of shocks such as natural disasters or economic instability. Individuals with stronger social ties, senses of belonging, and senses of purpose are more likely to be able to rebuild after disasters and overcome other barriers in shorter amounts of time. With larger social networks, individuals also have more people to turn to share resources and lean on.

This idea is becoming more critical everyday in the context of increasing climate impacts that are making vulnerable people around the world even more susceptible to shocks. For example, a devastating earthquake struck the Atlas Mountain regions of Morocco in September 2023 and has since inflicted physical, mental, and emotional damage on a number of people across the country, particularly those already living without basic needs like clean water. An important first step in the recovery journeys of these communities is first building community empowerment and bonds, especially among women, to feel like they have the capacity and support to undertake physical and emotional rebuilding efforts.

“In a way, there is a little bit of detachment between what the SDGs are saying and how the nations are going to get there. One of the definitions or aspects of what utopia is is a vision detached from today, the space between this idea of what society ought to look like and the situation society finds itself in at this moment. That separation is a utopian vision. Sometimes when I look at the SDGs and the statements that come out of the UN being nonprescriptive, it feels a little of that quality of utopian.” – Yossef Ben-Meir

Often, nondescript international agreements related to climate and development focus on achieving this utopian ideal while all of the questions in the space between go unanswered. Instead, the Pact for the Future, SDGs, and other widely agreed upon goals need to take into consideration the importance of local people



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driving change and include prescriptive steps on how to achieve it.

The High Atlas Foundation (HAF) is one organization that is a proponent of participatory community development across varying projects in the realm of sustainable agriculture, water infrastructure, women's empowerment, and more important areas of development. **Asset-based community development** approaches, like those that HAF has employed after the 2023 earthquake, have been shown to have widespread benefits for long-term community growth. These approaches importantly move away from top-down enforcement of targets that are delineated without consideration for the contexts in which they will be implemented.

Sustaining a sense of ownership within a community over their priority projects is incredibly important in maintaining a sustainable development process. Ownership can most effectively be derived from utilizing existing local assets, including people and resources, so that communities are empowered within their own capacities, skills, and knowledge to create lasting, sustainable change. HAF builds this idea into the foundation of their development model by ensuring all projects begin with an invitation from communities, empowerment workshops to facilitate individuals in understanding their truest goals, and locally designed and led action plan creation. This method creates both clearly defined goals, similar to the Pact for the Future report, but also goes further to develop the specific methods of achieving these goals that communities want to see.

With these findings surrounding effective community development from research and experience, it is crucial that world leaders take opportunities like the UN Summit of the Future to agree upon more detailed action plans that make explicit considerations for community-based development, rather than listing out the high-level end goals of all sustainable development as a whole that are already found in the SDGs. As important as these gatherings of leaders and stakeholders are,

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they can be even more powerful by encouraging actionable, community-driven plans.

Kaitlyn Waring

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