

PROSPECTS FOR IMPLEMENTING THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:  
THE URBAN SDG AND IMPLICATIONS FOR ISTANBUL



Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul hosted *Aromar Revi*, Director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements and Co-Chair of the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) at a roundtable meeting on November 10, 2015. Aromar Revi, a globally recognized expert on urban issues, leads the SDSN's thematic group on sustainable cities. His advocacy efforts were influential in the acceptance of a stand-alone goal focused on cities within the Sustainable Development Goals (SDG 11).

Aromar Revi was in Istanbul to participate in a high-level conference with the SDSN20, examining the relevance of the Sustainable Development Goals for industrialized countries ahead of the G20 meetings in Turkey. This marks Revi's second visit to Istanbul in 2015. In February 2015, his program entailed a meeting with Istanbul Metropolitan Mayor Kadir Topbaş, a visit to the Sarıyer Municipality, a roundtable meeting and a public talk titled, "How can new urban geographies create new histories?"



The roundtable at Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul brought together a diverse group of stakeholders engaged with questions of urban sustainability and the SDGs from UNDP, Kadir Has University, Boğaziçi University, İstanbul Bilgi University, UCLG, Embarq Turkey, the Sustainable Development Association, Foundation for the Support of Women's Work as well as independent researchers, social entrepreneurs and architects.

This meeting note begins with a summary of the opening remarks made by Aromar Revi, followed by a synopsis of the main points raised in the discussion.



AROMAR REVI

Aromar Revi is the Director of the Indian Institute for Human Settlements (IIHS) – India's first prospective National University for Research and Innovation to address challenges of urbanization through an integrated program of education, research, consulting and advisory services.

He has been a senior advisor to various ministries of the Government of India, consulted with a wide range of UN, multilateral, bilateral development and private sector institutions and works on economic, environmental and social change at global, regional and urban scales.

Aromar Revi has led over a hundred major research, consulting and implementation assignments in India and abroad; helped structure, design and review development investments in excess of \$4 billion; worked on three of the world's ten largest cities, with communities across twenty-five of India's twenty-eight states apart from multiple international projects in half a dozen countries.

He is also one of South Asia's leading disaster mitigation and management experts and has led emergency teams to assess, plan and execute recovery and rehabilitation programs for ten major earthquake, cyclone, surge and flood events affecting over five million people.

Aromar is considered a leading expert on Global Environmental Change especially on Climate Change adaptation and mitigation. He is one of the Coordinating Lead Authors for the Urban Areas section of the IPCC 5th Assessment report (2014). He also works on the dynamics of macro-governance and on long-range futures for India and South Asia. He is currently involved in developing India 2050, a dynamic long-range national economy-resource-demographic model for India.

<http://unsdsn.org/about-us/people/aromar-revi/>

## A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE ON THE GLOBAL AGREEMENT ON THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDG) are considered an updated, more comprehensive version of the Millennium Development Goals (MDG). They are, however, more than a mere continuation of the MDGs. SDGs do embrace the same ongoing concerns of the MDGs but surpass them with new priority agendas while also extending its target countries. SDGs, unlike their predecessors, are relevant to all countries and aim make sure that no one is left behind.

Aromar Revi noted that the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs will differ from country to country, depending on a number of factors. In some countries, like Turkey for example, the connection between the two processes may not necessarily exist.

For the urban sector, the *UN Habitat II meeting held in Istanbul in 1996* was a watershed moment in that it brought the urban dimension to the UN system. Istanbul was the first of a series of major conferences that paved the way for engaging with the urban within the global system. It was especially significant for including many different voices, in which civil society in Turkey played a key role in mobilizing. While the creativity and passion of these voices were quite significant then, the momentum catalyzed by Habitat II was not sustained in all countries. For Brazil, it led to a strong movement which in 10-15 years made cities central to the national development agenda, enshrining the right to the city within the national political movement. Much of this was inspired by the encounters in Istanbul in 1996.

*We are now seeing an important new phase in a process which started nearly 100 years ago, with the establishment of the United Nations in 1948.* Its predecessor was the League of Nations. Both structures came about during another period of globalization, when there was a need to set the terms of engagement between different countries for their influence and actions concerning matters of global relevance. At that time, there were also major problems confronting the global system and nation-states, such as poverty and environmental degradation. What emerged in 1948 was a global agreement brokered among certain countries. But not all countries were comfortable with this agreement. Turning to the SDGs, it is important to match action on the ground across several levels: local, regional, national and global.

### THE SIGNIFICANCE OF THE SDGs: GLOBAL COOPERATION TO ADDRESS COMMON PRIORITIES

Understanding the historical perspective offers several insights. First, it is interesting that many of the core concerns are returning, but in new forms. While inequality may have been reduced, it still exists. The factors driving contemporary concerns include the growth in population, rise in consumption, and the



## ABOUT THE SDSN

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) was commissioned by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon in 2012 to mobilize scientific and technical expertise from academia, civil society, and the private sector to support practical problem solving for sustainable development at local, national, and global scales. The SDSN operates national and regional networks of knowledge institutions, solution-focused thematic networks, and is building SDSNedu, an online university for sustainable development.

[www.unsdsn.org](http://www.unsdsn.org)

Along with 12 national level and 10 regional SDSN chapters, there are now up to 350 universities and knowledge partners from around the world who have become members of the SDSN. SDSN Turkey was established in June 2014 through the support and collaboration of Columbia Global Centers | Istanbul and is currently led by Boğaziçi University.

[www.unsdsn.boun.edu.tr](http://www.unsdsn.boun.edu.tr)

## WHAT THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS MEAN FOR THE G20 COUNTRIES

**A high-level workshop ahead of  
G20 – Turkey 2015  
November 11 and 12, 2015  
Boğaziçi University**

UN Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN) and SDSN Turkey convened the first SDSN20 – a meeting of international sustainability academics and experts to discuss: implementing and localizing the SDGs in the G20 countries; how G20 processes can support the SDGs; international financing & role of the private sector; and the role of youth in achieving the SDGs. The meeting included perspectives from SDSN Regional and National Network leadership from the following networks: Amazon, Brazil, Germany, Mediterranean, Spain, and Turkey. The SDSN20 concluded with the signing of a Declaration for Action.

*Leaders from Global Sustainability Network Unite to Call for G20 Action on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Ahead of the G20 Antalya Summit.*

<http://unsdsn.org/blog/news/2015/11/10/sdsn-regional-and-national-networks-call-for-commitments-to-sdgs-ahead-of-g20-turkey/>

dramatic impacts being seen on the environment. Therefore what we are seeing is the recurrence of the core challenges of social and economic development.

There is a growing realization that addressing these challenges will require countries to come together. It is obvious to all that the recovery from the global economic downturn necessitates cooperation. Moreover, the global economy is so large and has enough productivity to make the eradication of poverty possible. Achievements in the MDGs such as that seen in China demonstrate that change of this magnitude is possible. Meanwhile, the situation in the Middle East demonstrates the influence of young people and technology in driving democratization. Member states also know that their citizens will no longer easily accept the BAU (business as usual) scenario.

With the Rio Summit in 1992, it was difficult to arrive at a concrete process that everyone could commit to. The only agreement was on climate change while other agenda items were left behind. The political agreement which failed then took 20 years, with the COP21, to come about.

*Against this backdrop, the SDGs represent a major achievement: a global political agreement on social and economic development priorities. There is a commitment to ensuring that no one gets left behind.*

## RETHINKING GOVERNANCE AND DEVELOPMENT MODELS

The 17 SDGs represent priorities that most citizens would aspire to. In Turkey for example, there may not be public awareness of the SDGs, or there may be questions about their relevance to the local context. However many of the SDGs have a direct impact on very real concerns, such as health care and education. The question still remains though on how to ensure that the SDGs do have meaning and relevance to the local context.

A second important aspect, is that over the last 100 years, it has primarily been the role of the nation-state to deliver services. As a result, our current model of development has been based on a process of centralization at the nation-state level. There is now a reconsideration, a contest even, on how this governance model will be reshaped. This is also a question of how power and technology will be exercised to ensure the delivery of services in support of development. Many national governments were against SDG Goal 11. The Urban SDG represents a new kind of politics, a transition to a subnational way of working. When one looks at the SDGs, it becomes apparent that local governments will be essential to the delivery of the SDGs. Therefore one needs to rethink the balance between national and local governments, which will have far reaching implications.

A third key element of the SDGs is that they have removed the artificial division between urban and rural. Rural areas will always be important, particularly considering how essential they are to supporting

livelihoods. However, there are several important threats facing rural areas. Energy systems are destroying the health of rural areas, while migration from rural to urban areas will continue. There needs to be more imaginative thinking about the connectivities and interdependencies across these different contexts.

At the core of all of this is the question about how governance will be reshaped in ways that structure new relationships between citizens at the grassroots level, local government, civil society and the nation state. This will be critical to the successful implementation of the SDGs.

## PATHWAYS TO SUPPORTING THE SDG IMPLEMENTATION PROCESS

United Nations Secretary General Ban Ki Moon recently acknowledged both in person and in public that the UNSDSN and its global network has an important role in supporting the implementation process.

First, education for sustainability will be very important. Along with awareness raising on a general level sustainable development needs to be made part of the curriculum. In fact, learning systems need to be completely overhauled to support the skills and concepts needed for sustainable development.

Second, many countries are not prepared to implement the SDGs. Know-how on this needs to be developed. There is a need to organize the implementation process and to ensure that more groups are represented in the conversation, such as the private sector. Both vertical and horizontal partnerships will be needed. SDSN has been mandated to host these kinds of conversations and to facilitate convergence and cooperation, as well as to offer opportunity to reflect on SDG progress.

The SDSN will also support the new thinking and bring together the knowledge required to navigate the SDG matrix, which comprises complex connections across geographies and themes.

Monitoring mechanisms will need to be set up on the ground, which will require considerable improvements in data systems. However, this needs to go beyond state driven monitoring mechanisms. Technology gives citizens the opportunity to actively track the SDGs. Crowdsourcing, user generated maps, participatory budgeting processes in cities – these are all the kinds of tools that will be developed in support of the monitoring process.

## DISCUSSION

Several key themes emerged in the discussion:

- Since they are internationally endorsed, the SDGs offer a powerful benchmark to hold governments and politicians to account. If mobilized in the right way, they can evolve into a robust *terms of reference for politicians and governments*. This is especially important considering that financing for the implementation of the SDGs will mainly come through their integration into national planning strategies.
- In the same way that national governments are seeking ways to implement the SDGs, *municipalities are also in need of tools and roadmaps* to support their efforts in applying the SDG framework. Putting the SDGs into context in Turkey will require a more systematic way of thinking across vertical and horizontal layers, particularly given the interdependencies across the SDGs. One also has to think spatially, considering that the implementation of the SDGs requires uptake across multiple geographical levels. One should also keep in mind that governments may be enticed into emphasizing those SDGs that are easier to implement ('cherry-picking'). This is one risk to having 17 SDGs.
- *Partnerships to leverage expertise from international organizations, universities and civil society* could be one way to bolster implementation efforts. However, participants noted that the high level of staff turnover at municipalities undermines the continuity of programs. This factor also explains why the private sector has yet to substantially engage with local governments, even though it is quite keen to do so. Several participants underscored the importance of increasing the engagement of civil society organizations and universities with local government. Establishing platforms of scholars and civil society that can work with a cross section of staff within local government over a solid length of time was cited as one strategy to strengthen relationships and ensure continuity.
- Many noted, however, that there is a great deal of reluctance to do so, arising from the ways that existing mechanisms meant to uphold good governance and environmental standards (such as sustainability plans, environmental impact assessments, legal processes and freedom of information laws) have been diluted and manipulated. The civic momentum that defined Habitat II in 1996 has been lost over time. One indication of this is the absence of dialogue and preparation for Habitat III. Civil society in Turkey should use this opportunity to formulate an agenda for Habitat III, but this isn't happening. This is another indicator of the lack of belief that engaging in global process will lead to a clear benefit.
- *Public awareness and engagement in the SDG implementation and monitoring process* is essential. Making sustainability a more visible issue on the public agenda is a key challenge. One way to overcome this is by describing sustainable development in concrete terms.
- One participant noted that with both agency and good will, much can be accomplished. Existing data on Istanbul is accessible and fairly precise. *Data is an incredibly valuable but underutilized resource that researchers and activists could use in creative ways*, not only in monitoring and spatializing trends with the SDGs but also to improve understanding of overlooked factors. There is a need for analytical tools to enable this. Other ideas would be to use crowdsourcing, and/or to start off by developing a baseline report for a particular region of Istanbul. There can also be creative ways to depict the connection of the SDGs to local issues through using data and communications in more innovative ways. In Johannesburg, an observatory has been established that tracks developments in the city. The observatory is a partnership between the regional government, local government and two universities. In India, some groups used crowdsourcing to develop a consultation with 50,000 citizens on an urban planning issue. Explaining the relevance of SDGs at the microlevel, sharing concrete examples and best practices would be another important contribution.
- Moreover, to support the monitoring process, *more data will be made available over the coming years as statistical reporting systems are strengthened at national and local levels*. Another valuable resource here is the data in the hands of private companies. The international community will need to find a way to engage with these companies so that data is transparent and used for the public good.
- *How contradictions and gaps will be resolved* was also raised in the discussion. For example, a goal to ensure access to finance might also call into question the structure of the international finance regime and its relationship to sustainable development outcomes. In the same vein, World Bank and IMF policies and practices undermine some elements of sustainable development - how will this be reconciled with the new global norms that the SDGs aim to foster? While justice and human rights were included in the SDGs, there is also no mention of LGBT groups.
- *Civil society and NGOs can play a critical role in developing independent reports monitoring the progress made in implementing the SDGs*. While the reporting architecture for the SDGs is still being defined, it is agreed that thematic reporting should be a part of the process.
- Migration surfaced in the discussion in several ways. First in relation to the ongoing trend of *rural to urban migration*, which will lead to the continued growth of existing and the development of new cities. There is a need to ensure that infrastructure, planning, housing, local economies etc. will be constructed within a paradigm of sustainable development. High levels of poverty in peri-urban areas also continue to pose a significant challenge.

Climate or rights issues may be too complex but a good part of the SDG agenda items have very tangible and human benefits.

- The second dimension of migration relates to the increased presence of *refugees in urban settings*. It is expected that migration flows will continue to grow in the face of environmental stress, raising the question of how best to prepare for and absorb larger numbers of migrants and refugees?

The SDGs represent a universal agenda that leaders have agreed to, with quite serious commitments. It is the first time since 1948 and the acceptance of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights that all member states have achieved consensus on a political agreement. This is an important recognition of our interdependence as a global community. With a focus on root causes, the goals push us to reexamine fundamental processes. Pathways will need to be built across local, regional and national levels in ways that enable the systematic thinking needed to tackle implementation. Approaches must be integrated in ways that take up the interconnections and synergies across the goals. We are now in an important period in which conversations will be taking place on how to implement the SDGs. New approaches will be tested out, stakeholders and key actors will be mobilized, institutional capacity will need to be built, educational systems realigned and monitoring and evaluation systems established. Assuring a sustainable future requires imaginative solutions that will redirect existing systems and institutions to align with these priorities.

*Columbia Global Centers promote and facilitate the collaborative and impactful engagement of the University's faculty, students, and alumni with the world to enhance understanding, address global challenges, and advance knowledge and its exchange.*

The eight global centers—located in Amman, Beijing, Istanbul, Mumbai, Nairobi, Paris, Rio de Janeiro, and Santiago—form the core element of Columbia's global strategy, which is to expand the University's ability to contribute positively to the world by advancing research, learning, discussion, and discovery around the most important global issues through a truly global perspective.

Columbia Global Centers | Turkey was launched in November 2011 and is directed by Ipek Cem Taha, a Turkish journalist and businesswoman, and a graduate of Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs and its Graduate School of Business. A hub for students and scholars from Columbia and universities in the region, the Center hosts several educational programs: the Summer Program in Byzantine and Ottoman Studies; the Global Seminar on Byzantine and Modern Greek Encounters; the Summer Program on Democracy and Constitutional Engineering; and the Summer Program in Balkan Transcultural Studies. Initiatives facilitated by the Center in cooperation with Columbia faculty and regional partners include: Studio-X Istanbul, the Istanbul Documentation Project, Women Creating Change, the United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network and the Regional Network for Historical Dialogue and Reconciliation. Freedom of expression, film, entrepreneurship and public health are other ongoing areas of programming, while the Global Center in Amman is a close partner on issues of regional concern.



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