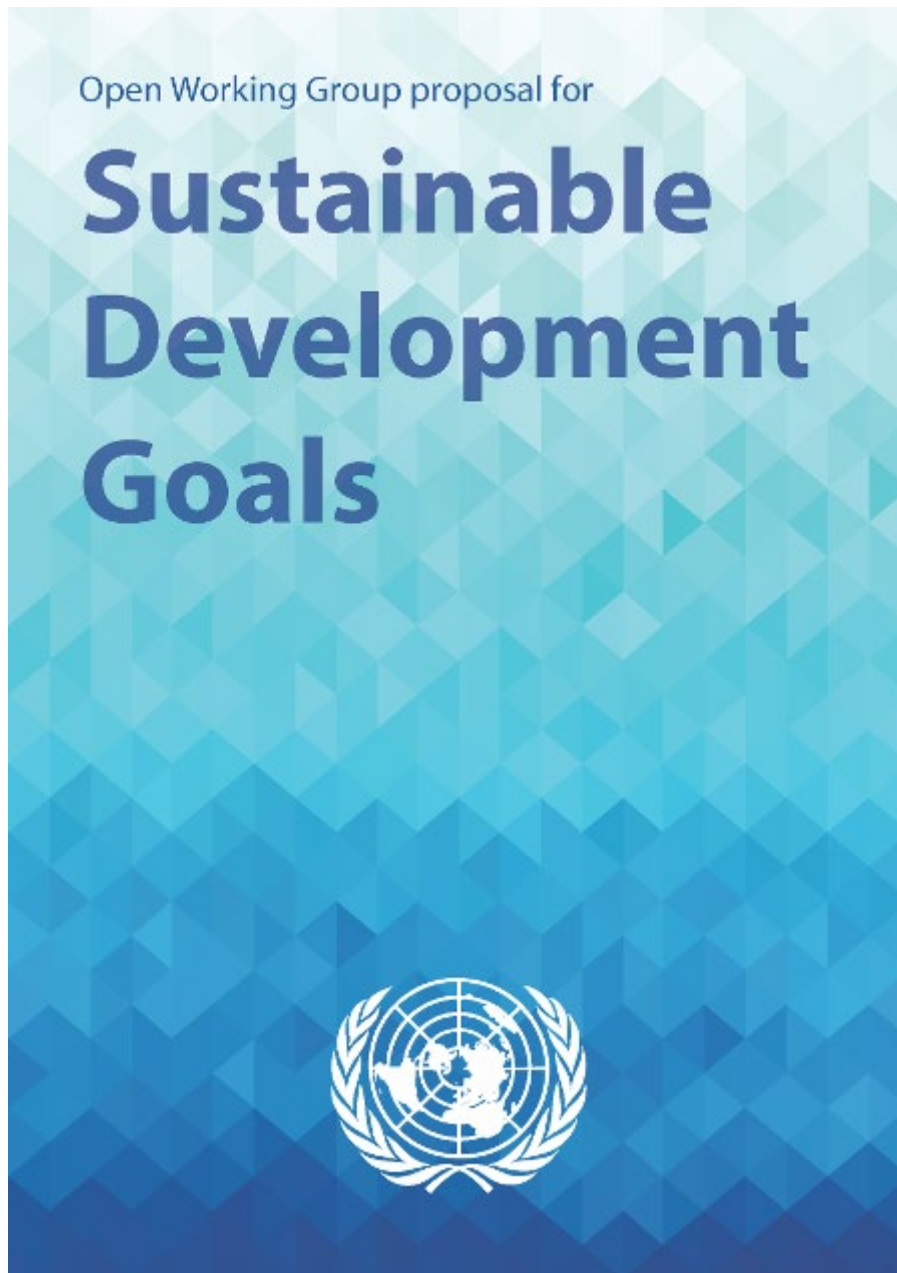


## Emancipation and the failure of the Sustainable Development Goals

By Ismael Peña-López ([@ictlogist](#)), 05 August 2015



Tim Unwin has written a terrific critical article on the [Sustainable Development Goals](#) (PDF) entitled *[ICTs and the failure of the Sustainable Development Goals](#)*. As can be inferred from its title, the main criticism — which I fully share — is about the almost total oblivion in what relates to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), and some other issues concerning the design itself of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), how poverty is defined (and how development and the Economy are defined too), how the United Nations System works.

I want to borrow Tim Unwin's title to go a little bit further on his analysis. In my opinion, the problem is not (only) a total disdain for ICTs and all their potential in enabling, articulating, fostering or multiplying any other initiative against poverty or for sustainable development. The problem, I believe, is that this disdain for ICTs is just a symptom of the real, direst problem: a **total disdain for emancipation**.

There is only one goal out of 17 that deals, in general, about peace, freedom, rights and the government:

Goal 16. Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels.

When one drills down to the 12 targets and sub-goals, some of them are clearly what one would expect to see under the general goal. Some of them are mixed. And some others make one rethink about the previous ones. Indeed, an accurate reading of Goal 16 and its 12 targets and sub-goals raises a shadow of suspicion: is it about people that Goal 16 is talking about, or is it talking about maintaining things in order so that everything (the economy, trade) runs smoothly?

Paranoid?

- Sub-goal 16.a reads Strengthen relevant national institutions [...] to prevent violence and combat terrorism and crime. That is, strengthening institutions is not a matter of peace, equality, progress... but to combat terrorism, which is what richest countries care about: their own safety.
- Sub-goal 16.b reads Promote and enforce non-discriminatory laws and policies for sustainable development. That is, the problem with discrimination is... development. Sustainable development. It is true: it is known that inequality damages economic growth. But one would expect that the direct goal would be inequality itself, and that the indirect one would be growth. Not the other way round.

After that, as it was said before, one becomes suspicious about some well phrased goals that, under a new paranoid light, can be read with different meanings. Such as target 16.3, which speaks of the rule of law: is it really to achieve justice for all, or is the rule of law good in itself at the national and international levels (which is where trade happens)?

Now, on a more serious note, I think there are at least three big omissions in the way the Sustainable Development Goals are stated that are compatible with a vision that

1. The Sustainable Development Goals are especially about economic development, and not about individual and social development.

2. The Sustainable Development Goals are especially about institutional development, and not about personal emancipation.

And these three issues that are omitted in the SDGs are, again in my opinion, closely related with the potential that ICTs can deploy if thoroughly applied. I'd dare say even more: if ICTs have any role in development, I believe that it is in the three following issues. It is not surprising, thus, that ICTs and our three issues are all missing in the 16 Sustainable Development Goals. Issues are:

- **Freedom**, civil rights, citizen rights, political freedoms, freedom rights... many names for the very same concept. Freedom — or free — is mostly missing in the SDGs. It is only explicitly referred in target 16.10, and mixed up with public access to information... in accordance with national legislation. Well, according to Freedom House's [Freedom in the World 2015](#), 54% of the countries surveyed were partly free or not free... in accordance with their respective national legislations. Freedom is simply not a seriously taken issue in the SDGs.
- **Empowerment** is a step beyond freedom. If freedom is about the lack of constraints to think or do one's own will, empowerment is about strengthening the capability to think or do that will of one's own. Not only can you do whatever you want within the system, but you will be helped to. Again, empowerment, or capabilities, are widely mentioned in the formalities of the declaration, but are limited to gender and inequalities. This is quite a bit, for sure, but it is not enough. There is no way that development can be sustainable if it is not endogenous, and there is no way for endogenous development without empowerment. In my opinion, empowerment is paramount to development. Only one step below governance.
- **Governance**, democracy, political participation, deliberation, co-decision. If freedom is do one's own will, and empowerment is doing it with multiplied strength, governance is way above that: it is not thought and action within the system, but *over* the system. Governance is shaping the system to one's needs (or the collective needs, more appropriately), instead of shaping one-self to the system. This is why it is so important... and so surprisingly missing from the SDGs. Yes, decision-making is in there, but always as a way to have a certain influence on institutions. But no words on changing institutions, on transforming them, substituting them by other ones, or even getting rid of them.

And, as I see it, **increased freedom, empowerment and governance are the biggest potential outcomes of ICTs for development**. When Tim Unwin says he misses ICTs in the Sustainable Development Goals, not only I agree, but wonder whether the SDGs are also missing what I believe are the main reasons to apply ICTs for sustainable development, for instance: ICTs applied to Health increase one's own degree of

freedom; ICTs applied to Education improve one's capabilities and empowerment to achieve higher goals; ICTs applied to Politics can lead to better governance.

I, for one, believe that people behind the writing and wording of the Sustainable Development Goals are neither stupid, nor ignorant. A thorough reading of the SDGs is inspiring and every statement is perfectly grounded on evidence.

But.

It's the approach. It's industrial. It belongs, in my opinion, to the Industrial Age. It does not, I think, take into account the digital revolution and, more important, the many social revolutions that we have witnessed in recent years. And no, I am not (only) talking about the Arab Spring, or the 15M Spanish *Indignados* Movement. It's about the revisiting of the commons and the digital commons; about free software and open educational resources and free hardware and open science and free knowledge; about e-government and open data and open government; about liquid democracy and hybrid democracy and e-participation; about personal learning environments and cMOOCs and communities of learning and communities of practice; about innovation hubs and co-working spaces and open innovation and social innovation and [open social innovation](#); and peer-to-peer whatever and dis-intermediation wherever. Almost nothing about this is in the Sustainable Development Goals, which are to last current until 2030. We are not only ignoring the last 15 years of development, but making them last 15 years more. All in all, the Sustainable Development Goals do not seem to belong to the Information Age.