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Official Development Assistance and Priority Fads

How international development partners, aka donors, whether bilateral or multilateral, determine their priorities has always been an issue of much interest and concern. When deciding on their priority allocations, accusations of donors succumbing to the latest fads in the development industry have always been rife. With the recent near consensus on the Sustainable Development Agenda 2015-2030 and the commitment towards the achievement of the seventeen Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the assumption was that there would be greater objectivity and commitment in the allocation of Official Development Assistance (ODA) resources. The belief is that these resources are the main potential driving force behind the ability to achieve the SDGs, but is that really the case?

Based on my previous work experience in coordinating donors assistance directed to the field of the environment in Egypt, more than a couple of decades ago, there was always a fascination with the interplay of politics with development, the bias of donors against some programs and projects and their keenness on supporting specific priorities. Many times this keenness is not based on any objective criteria, save the latest fad in development and the desire to do something different and non-traditional. Technical support, including capacity building programs, institutional development and writing a lot of feasibility studies, appraisal and pre-appraisal reports were always perceived as favorable by donors. Conditional cash transfers, training of trainers (TOTs) and utilization of experts from the donor country were always on the top of the priority list for allocation of official development assistance (ODA). On the contrary, constructing sewage systems, schools or hospitals was never perceived, in the donors' own words, as sufficiently, "Sexy," and therefore it was always more difficult for this latter group of development projects to attract donors' interest and support.

Accusations still preside that amongst the seventeen development goals (SDGs), there are still goals that can be described as, "Darlings," denoting favoritism, and those that are "Orphans," signifying impartiality or lack of interest. Up until 2019, data from the OECD showed that the rise in ODA directed to social protection, education, water, sanitation and agriculture is much lower than the rise in that directed to productive sectors such as banking, mining and industry. A very informative chart available on the United Nations Statistics website summarizes progress achieved up until 2019, and paints the SDGs in an alarming picture. On the global level, the green color denoting that the target was, "Met or likely to be met by 2030," was used only once, and guess what, for sustained per capita economic growth under SDG 8; economic growth being perceived as a, "Darling," priority. Red color, denoting, "Moving away from target," was used under SDG 2 to show that governments have not increased investment in agriculture, under SDG 12 to show that there is a problem with the plans to reduce domestic material consumption per unit of GDP, for Goal 13 to show that there is a problem with the reduction of global greenhouse gas emissions, for Goal 14 to show the problem with restoring the proportion of fish stocks, and also with SDG 15 to show a problem with the protection of species under threat of extinction.

The orange color standing for, "Limited or no progress," was used 15 times out of the total 41 indicators cited and included some critical indicators like: ending hunger, ending the malaria epidemic and reducing the proportion of urban populations living in slums. SDG 16 focuses on good governance. Justice and equity is one of the most difficult goals and we find that many times donors shun from overemphasizing its importance to recipient nations for fear of jeopardizing political relations. The orange color denoting, "Limited or no progress," was used parallel to the SDG 16 indicator related to reducing violence and homicides, and for the indicator related to reducing the proportion of unsentenced detainees. Fair progress was noted for the SDG 16 indicator related to the increase in the proportion of countries with independent national human rights councils. The latter

indicator is the easiest to achieve since you are mostly focusing on the number of Human Rights Councils, and not looking into their effectiveness or integrity! The red and orange indicators were seemingly perceived as, “Orphan,” priorities by the donors.

To achieve the 17 SDGs by 2030 there is a need for a significant increase in ODA, an issue which is not happening as planned. The United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) estimates an annual gap in financing the SDGs amounting to \$2.5 trillion! In 2018 the average percentage of ODA to Gross National Income of DAC countries remained at 0.31% instead of the 0.7% committed to since 1975! Projections so far point to the inability of realizing the SDGs motto of, “Leaving no one behind,” unless drastic changes occur.

To cut a long story short, the commitment and the objectivity of, “Development partners,” in deciding on resource allocations are skewed. We are only ten years away from 2030. Are things going to change for the better, or should we accept that ODA is always going to be politicized and reflecting the latest fads in the development industry!