Lexicon and Syntax of Development Cooperation: Sustainable Development Goals – An Access Perspective

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Real inclusive development that leaves no one behind cannot afford to ignore the status of an individual or a household in terms of their inclusion in the desired access regime.

Development, or lack of it, is intimately linked to access to resources or otherwise. This is true in case of an individual, a household, a community or even a nation. A typical analysis of poverty using head count ratio, identifies a certain income level and considers anyone earning below that threshold limit to be poor – having failed to achieve a minimum level of development. Extension of the idea to multi-dimensional poverty has added access to resources beyond income as determinants of the status of development. They include access to proper health care services and education besides that to factors like access to hygienic toilets, cooking fuel, safe drinking water, electricity, flooring materials other than dirt, sand or dung and assets like radio, television sets, telephone, bike, etc. as important determinants of the quality of living of an individual or a household. Deprivation in terms of lack of access to these resources is an indicator of failure in terms of development. A nation, on the other hand, is considered least developed, if it does not have access to resources to ensure quality livelihood to a large section of its population. Such incapacity may result from lack of access to investible funds that can help increase the level of production of goods and services. Lack of access to relevant technology may make them vulnerable to external competition and lack of access to developed country market may not help them realise the potential benefits from global trade.

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Inability to access skill-enhancing facilities meaningfully contributes to the state of incapacity. All these features contribute to such countries remaining short of achieving the status of developed nations.

Assistance for development as operationalised domestically looks towards the "State" providing necessary support to its citizens and facilitating increased access to the required resources. Free or subsidised access to health care services and/ or education to the citizens formed a fundamental basis of "developmental paradigm" initiated by a state to ensure development of those who were lagging behind. Access to employment opportunity is also an important policy measure adopted by the countries to facilitate development. Later the role of civil society organisations, philanthropic efforts and even the corporate sectors – in terms of their Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR) initiatives – also came to be recognised as simultaneous ways of ensuring access to those found wanting. Recent experimentations with social enterprises add further to the concerns with access.

The same arguments hold squarely good in case of development assistance provided by a country to another. The arguments favouring aid based assistance by the developed ones were ostensibly centred around the idea of providing access to such resources to their developing counterparts as were not accessible so far. However, one must appreciate that most of the developed countries could achieve such status through unhindered access to the resources of their colonies, often expressed as drain on the resources of the colonies. These colonies of yesterday constitute the club of least developed and developing countries today.

The efforts by the developed world to help their Southern counterparts gain access to resources for development were, however, not a bag of unmixed blessings. The conditions, as they emerged to be put forward within a decade of the beginning of the process, turned more stringent over the years. The Bandung Conference in 1955, that was primarily designed as a forum against "colonialism," called for solidarity among the Southern nations and more say for them in the international institutional structure. A solidarity based model of development cooperation was also pushed through as an alternative to the conditionality centred model of developmental support designed by the club of developed nations.

The differential experiences – both domestic and global – clearly underline the role of institutions in defining the access regime. Institutions are often defined as a set of rules that define the constraints on human behaviour. Thus religion is an institution, marriage is another, so are a family and the state. International organisations like the UN, the World Bank or the International Monetary Fund are also institutions. One should appreciate that the access regime to resources are determined by the institutions – the set of rules – assigned to take care of the specific one. Thereby, a given set of rule followed by a family determines if there would be gender disparity in access to resources available to a family. Such rules would determine whether a male child in the family would be given preference to attend a school, while his female sibling would stay back home to assist in household chores. Similarly, such rules formulated at the level of traditional donors would determine the conditions to be fulfilled by a recipient country to get some developmental support, "Washington Consensus" being one such set of rules that became quite popular during the last decade of the previous millennium.

Domestic set of rules formulated by the respective governments determines the extent of access to cooking fuel or electricity given to the members of a particular household, in case they cannot afford to procure them out of their purchasing power. While their purchasing power is itself contingent upon their access to resources – labour power, land, skill, credit, technology among others – the state often plays a proactive role in providing access to resources like cooking fuel and/or electricity at a subsidised rate that those marginalised find affordable. It can also set the rules to provide gainful employment to those who volunteer for such opportunities at the going wage rate.

Needless to say, the rules set under an institutional rubric determine the nature of access provided to an individual, a household or a nation. The rules may, by design, in some cases restrict access to resources and thereby contribute to lower level of living or facilitate access and consequent development. For example, non-trade barriers often restrict access of food items from a developing nation to a developed one, in the name of hygiene and health concerns in tune with the rule set devised by the World Trade Organization. President Trump increased tariff on aluminum and steel to provide larger market access to the US producers in the domestic market. Increased restrictions immigration opportunities in the US are aimed at creating access opportunities to American citizens to the local job market.

Whether institutions turn restrictive or facilitate access is dependent on who get the opportunity to set the rules. If those with lesser access to resources are prevented from making the rules related to getting access, development cannot be assured for them. International institutions that determine the access regime are often controlled by those with larger access to resources. Those falling behind are obliged to follow the rules set by those who are already privileged. A clear example is the debate that has been going on regarding the framing of the rules to prevent illicit financial flow from out of the developing countries. Illicit financial flows cost African countries at least $50 billion every year, more than the total sum of development aid the continent receives, according to a new report by the OECD. A project under the auspices of OECD/G20 named Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) has recently been introduced. The aim of the project is to mitigate tax code loopholes and country-to-country inconsistencies to prevent shifting of profits by corporations from a country with a high corporate tax rate to countries with a lower one.

A 15-point Action Plan was announced in October 2015 by the OECD and G20 to address BEPS to ensure an inclusive and effective international tax framework. It was deemed necessary that developing countries must be involved. As of May 2018, 116 countries had joined the project. However, to gain membership, non-OECD/G20 countries must commit to the BEPS package, a plan to "equip government with domestic and international instruments to address tax avoidance, ensuring that profits are taxed where economic activities generating the profits are performed and where value is created." Such a requirement is indicative of the fact that the developing countries, even though they are a part of this endeavour, are not entitled to frame the rules. They are to commit to the rules made by the big brothers. The recent experiences of the establishment of New Development Bank (NDB) is also an indicator of the frustration of the developing countries not having a commensurate role in framing of the rules that dictate development assistance architecture. The ever growing faith of the Southern nations on the UN system in deference to that on other Breton Woods Institutions also indicates their intent to participate in the process of rule formation.

A detailed list of 8 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) made headlines in 2000. A very critical argument against the process involved in identifying the MDGs was the realisation that the goals were identified without involving the participation of the countries who were to achieve them. The half-baked success of the MDG process is often attributed to the lack of access of the developing nations in generating the operational plan, indicating their clear absence from the rule making process. The lessons learnt thereof helped articulate the process of generating the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in a participatory manner that engaged all stakeholders – state and non-state – from both the developed and developing world. The resultant goals, targets and indicators that evolved out of the process clearly call for enhanced access to all types of resources – economic, ecological, political, social and institutional – for all, so that no one is left behind. Such an emphasis on inclusive growth underpins the realisation of the role of "access to resources" in defining development. It also underscores the belief that such a developmental roadmap would be "sustainable".

A look at the SDGs reveals that all of them are linked to provision of access to some resources, ranging from food, health services, education, peace and justice to natural resources and livelihood options. The targets and indicators also explicitly capture the perspective of access. However, a challenge remains. The SDGs and the targets and indicators identified thereof are hardly linked to the individuals or households suffering from lack of access to resources. Most of the exercises in developing the database of indicators are concentrated at national or at the most at some sub-national levels. Real inclusive development that leaves no <u>one</u> behind cannot afford to ignore the status of an individual or a household in terms of their inclusion in the desired access regime. Sustainable development requires that the last individual in the queue is empowered with the necessary wherewithal that enable him or her in accessing resources as per his/her informed choice. Efforts at localisation of SDGs and their indicators can effectively help achieve the enshrined goals. Participation of each and everyone in identifying/fixing the local level targets and indicators is a sine qua non for the successful achievement of SDGs. An institutional framework that can help such localisation is an urgent need of the day.