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Making the Sustainable Development Goals Really Sustainable: Human Rights Strategies to Improve Land Tenure Rights and Wages for the Poor

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Research Panel: Inequalities, Rights, and Sustainable Development

Presenter: Paul J. Nelson, University of Pittsburgh

Title: Making the Sustainable Development Goals Really Sustainable: Human Rights Strategies to Improve Land Tenure Rights and Wages for the Poor

Abstract:

The Millennium Development Goals created incentives for donors and governments to favor quick impact over addressing complex social systems. As a result, the MDG period saw little sustained effort to open up access to those productive assets, and that presents a challenge for the SDGs.

This paper argues (1) that this failing of the MDGs weakened their impact; (2) that the SDGs significantly improve on this record by including goals and targets that focus on these productive assets, in both land and labor; (3) that human rights approaches have driven important efforts in some societies to improve land and labor rights; and (4) that human rights organizations and human rights methods are shaping the SDGs and their monitoring and implementation.

Examining national experiences with land reform, women's property and inheritance rights, and improved labor rights and opportunities, the paper shows that these measures have important, long-term impacts on poverty and that they are driven by effective advocacy and long-term government commitments to human rights principles. Sustainable success will also require that poor people have access to the productive assets — land, credit, work at living wages and training, and energy — that give them opportunities to prosper. Human rights approaches tend to call for attention to the causes and multiple dimensions of poverty and to the linkages between poverty and civil and political freedoms, both in principle and in practice. The paper's final section examines human rights advocates' expanded involvement in shaping and monitoring the SDGs.

About the presenter:

Paul Nelson is an associate professor of international development and associate dean of the Graduate School of Public and International Affairs at the University of Pittsburgh. Before joining the university in 1998, he was a policy analyst for several non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in international development. He is the author of *The World Bank and Non-Governmental Organizations: The Limits of Apolitical Development* (St. Martin's, 1995) and coauthor, with Ellen Dorsey, of *New Rights Advocacy: Changing Strategies of Development and Human Rights NGOs* (Georgetown University Press, 2008). His other publications include articles, chapters, and reports on NGOs, transparency in international organizations, the World Bank, the Millennium Development Goals, and human rights and development. He is author of a forthcoming book on human rights and the Sustainable Development Goals (University of Toronto Press). He holds a PhD in development studies from the University of Wisconsin-Madison; a master's in history from Princeton University, and bachelor's in history from Wheaton College (Illinois).