As part of the United Nations 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development adopted in 2015, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) replaced the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). Both sets of global priorities enhance and complement development organizations’ long-term strategic direction setting. However, crafting short-term outputs that meet such lofty outcomes proves more difficult and requires great attention to time, scale, culture and social responsibility.

I conducted an interview with an international development official in Serbia several years back. We spoke about support for agriculture. This person believed that the area for the most dramatic improvement regarding poverty was on very small farms that are commonplace throughout the country. Helping poor individual farmers could have had a noticeable impact on poverty in the country. However, the terms of his contract and his mandate to improve agricultural output, pushed him to work with larger producers. He, like so many well-meaning efficiency-oriented others, sought scale.

He told me, “It is much easier to have an impact with an association to reach a larger amount of farmers, and we can help market what they all produce. In addition, associations themselves are good vehicles for members to argue for changes.” Such ‘scaling up’ is seen as an effective way for limited aid dollars to reach the most beneficiaries. But that logic also meant that they, “didn’t want to work at the farm level, individual farms are so small, they don’t have a big impact, so we prefer sector approaches.”

His next comment really struck me. “We don’t work with the poorest of the poor, we work with big commercial farms.”

One immediately sees a pragmatic conundrum between, for example, SDG goal #1 to “end poverty” and goal #2, “achieve food security.” The dilemma might be phrased another way; Work with one organization that employees 100 farmers, or work with 1000 individual farmers. Assistance agencies are tempted into working with those that need the least help, but where marginal improvements might have bigger collective impact.

The scaled approach might indeed help food security by helping larger corporate farms produce more food to be sold at lower prices that are more affordable to those suffering from poverty. The approach that we might desire aid organization to select (working with the 1000 much poorer farmers) would take more time, be less obviously scalable, require much more cultural understanding, and embrace a social responsibility with which we may be less familiar. The question they would be forced to answer to their principals is simple; did the program have the most impact given the dollars spent?

This anecdote captures the dominant issues on our panel of time, scale, culture and social responsibility. In seeking short-term (quarterly or annual) high impact output changes, scale (huge volume in terms of output) is critical. Moreover, those larger farms embraced a culture (efficiency and profit driven) and sense of corporate responsibility (providing jobs and food security) more easily understood to many agricultural advisors from the US and Europe.

In contrast, the time (years) it would take to transform the massive number of small scale farmers (80% of farms are 3-5 hectares), the culture (minimal desire to change, small town life) and history (‘it has always been done this way’) present obstacles that are seemingly insurmountable to some external
advisors. To take this path requires substantial investment in changing laws, political systems, huge bureaucratic agencies, and seemingly inflexible cultural identities.

Changes in development assistance can and have been made. Assistance anchored to competitive strategy, (think Porter’s Five Forces), has given way to cluster development, shared value and collective impact. But such moves require time, scale, cultural and social responsibility adjustments in both donor organizations and host communities. It requires multiple iterations of progress and adaptation with donor and host stakeholders working intimately as partners.

Measurement proves critical in such discussions, as does the crucial difference between programmatic output and beneficiary outcomes. Aligning donor and host ambitions is one benefit of the Sustainable Development Goals. But realigning both the giving and receiving of assistance to outcome orientations and measures rather than more simplistic output perspectives also requires great attention to time, scale, culture and responsibility. The SDGs serve the very positive step of aligning goals. How practitioners embed such concepts into organizational strategies and measure and report both outputs and outcomes proves equally complex. This requires integration and understanding between donors, implementing organizations and the communities they assist. That integration will force time, scale, culture and responsibility to the center of assistance strategy, structure and process.