Integration and universality key to the post-2015 sustainable development agenda

AT A GLANCE

An unprecedented series of decisions by governments since the 2012 Rio+20[1] conference has yielded progress towards a universal commitment to achieve sustainable development. The year 2015 will see additional efforts to finalize the global agenda, address its means of implementation, and set up ways to measure and monitor progress.

The dialogue on the post-2015 agenda will need to facilitate convergence among the interests of governments, the private sector and civil society, from both the developing and developed countries. A universal agenda to achieve sustainable development and thereby end extreme poverty and inequality should be commensurate with the level of ambition expressed by world leaders at Rio+20, the Millennium Development Goal Special Event Summit in 2013, and the Climate Change Leaders' Summit of 2014. Saving our planet, lifting people out of poverty, and advancing sustainable and inclusive economic growth are one and the same challenge. Solutions to one problem must be solutions for all.

TAKING STOCK OF THE PROCESS

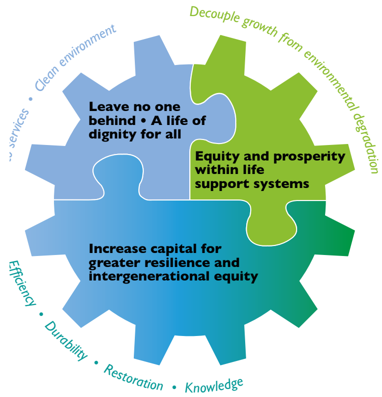
Within the last two years, the institutional framework for sustainable development has seen some remarkable changes, including establishing the **High-Level Political Forum** to succeed the Commission on Sustainable Development; enhancing the mandate of the **Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC)** to also address environmental sustainability; and strengthening and upgrading the United Nations Environment Programme with, among others, the establishment of the **United Nations Environment Assembly (UNEA)**[2].

Moreover, the UN General Assembly's **Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals** (OWG)[3], through a global, far-reaching and engaging multi-stakeholder consultative process, proposed a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) and targets, that drew inspiration from the Rio +20 outcome and the Secretary-General's High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, among others. This has increased attention on many of the driving principles of the sustainable development agenda reaffirmed at Rio+20, such as the notions of universality, integration, and the understanding that economic progress at the expense of social or environmental (or vice a versa) is hardly a recipe for success.

In September 2015, world leaders are expected to agree on an historic and far-reaching agenda for the next 15 years. The **Secretary-General's synthesis report, *The Road to Dignity by 2030***, presents a vision for UN Member States to consider carrying forward in negotiations leading up to the **United Nations Special Summit on Sustainable Development**, which will adopt the post-2015 development agenda. By 2030 we can end poverty and transform lives while protecting the planet. Achieving this agenda will not be without challenges, and its implementation will require that our collective and individual actions are carried out in a more integrated and holistic way.

THE POST-2015 GOALS AND TARGETS

The General Assembly in September 2014 resolved that the SDGs proposed by the OWG be the main basis for integrating sustainable development goals into the post2015 agenda. The OWG produced a comprehensive package of 17 SDGs and their embedded targets, reflecting the three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental. It covers a complex set of urgent or emergent issues; it leaves no agenda behind; and it is universally applicable.



The novelty of the proposal is that it forms a universal covenant around the key transformative elements that define the future theory and practice of sustainable development. Although quite comprehensive, it does not attempt to cover all issues exhaustively.

By incorporating issues such as eradicating extreme poverty, reducing inequality within and among nations, and attaining sustainable consumption and production, the OWG recommended goals build on the unfinished business of the MDGs while addressing key priorities of Rio+20 through people-centred sustainable development.

Convergence between the MDGs and the outcome of Rio+20 can be expressed through three unifying concepts: **leave no one behind and ensure equity and dignity for all; achieve prosperity within the Earth's safe capacities; and invest in restoring natural, social and economic assets**

and services for today and into the future. Poverty eradication can only be irreversibly attained if it is achieved through a universal commitment to sustainable development.

These key aspirations and the opportunities reflect the best science and policy known today. When adopted in their entirety, the 17 goals could transform the "business-as-usual" towards sustainable development, with explicit links between social and economic development and environmental stewardship. Prioritizing or selecting only some of the goals could serve only to deepen the challenges we face today.

There is some scope for further strengthening the proposed targets and for developing appropriate indicators so as to make them actionable. The principles for such improvements include:

1. *Further integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development.* The degree to which all goals complement each other could be strengthened. For example, targets under the "poverty" goal could further emphasize the positive feedback between poverty and environment; the "health" targets could recognize the connection of health with climate and environmental change, and the opportunities arising from genetic and biological resources for disease prevention and cure; and the "oceans" targets could have a stronger links to social and economic issues through livelihoods and trade.

   The food security targets could refer to livelihoods derived from common property management, land use planning, water quality and efficiency. Several targets could better balance urban vs. rural development. Sustainable consumption and production principles are relevant under many goals, and sustainable chemistry principles could enhance achievement of many others.

2. *Eliminating potential contradictions between targets,* especially where these contradictions arise from the scale and/or timing of proposed actions. For example, doubling agricultural productivity (target 2.3) could be at the expense of ensuring sustainable and resilient agriculture (target 2.4) unless the two are achieved together. The climate change goal cannot be achieved unless the energy goal focuses on safe, clean and low-emission technologies. Over-exploitation of planetary resources to fulfil the goal of sustained economic growth will ultimately jeopardize achievement of all goals.

3. *Improving the consistency of the goals' and targets ambition and transformational nature.* Each goal should systematically build on existing conventions and commitments and abide by the principle of non-regression as expressed in Rio+20. Targets should reflect specific outcomes and be quantified better so as to clarify their intended level of ambition. In doing so, care must be taken not to reduce the detail, comprehensiveness, universality, and ambition already achieved through the OWG negotiations.

4. *Reducing duplication among targets.* Some overlap among targets does help to strengthen the coherence and integration of the goals. However, a number of process targets could be amalgamated and placed under Goal 17 (Means of Implementation). This could reduce the number of targets significantly. But a few implementation gaps still remain. For example, the responsibilities of member states to engage multiple stakeholders (including businesses and civil society) are still undefined. More emphasis on new metrics that go beyond GDP can be transformational in how countries plan for the future.

5. *Developing a limited number of appropriate indicators.* A careful application of result-based management principles could lead to a judicious selection of scientifically credible indicators, building on the current measurement tools and developing innovative ones where need be. Targets that are related could be monitored through combined indictors, both qualitative and quantitative ones. Composite or integrated indices could be developed to better link the 17 goals and thus effectively measure society's progress towards sustainable development, without burdening countries with too many indicators.

The voices and opinions of diverse constituencies should continue to be heard. Rich debate among multiple stakeholders on the challenges of implementing an ambitious agenda is an important part of verifying the agenda – is it actionable, is it achievable, does it build on existing achievements and commitments?

TRANSLATING A GLOBAL AGENDA TO MANY NATIONAL ONES

Past experience shows that countries can sign up to a global agenda while tailoring the pace of achievement relative to their starting point, their priorities, capacities and means of implementation, and for some, their ability to leap-frog typical development trajectories. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR) and how it applies to the post-2015 agenda should be discussed both in terms of tailoring targets and specific indicators to countries' circumstances (differentiated capacity) and incorporating different levels of support into targets (differentiated responsibility), through technology transfer, South-South Cooperation and triangular cooperation to complement official development assistance. However, the CBDR concept, if applied too inflexibly, could contradict the universality of the agenda.

The process for setting the global agenda has been remarkable in its engagement of multiple stakeholders. Following the same approach for setting the national and regional agendas will increase the likelihood of arriving at a shared commitment to linking the three dimensions of sustainable development. An inclusive approach – with various stakeholders representing different areas of expertise and interests – would enhance the ownership and hence accountability of the agenda.

MEANS OF IMPLEMENTATION

The SDGs, when combined with appropriate means of delivery and enabling conditions, including key issues such as trade, finance, policy reform, technology transitions, capacity building, monitoring and accountability, would be framed by the universal standards, norms and rights espoused by the United Nations that create a meaningful future for generations to come. Discussions on finance, technology transfer and capacity building, global partnerships, monitoring, reporting and accountability, will need to be accelerated to resolve underlying differences among Member States. As much as is it critical to have political commitment in shaping the agenda, so too is it necessary for its delivery.

Public and private finance, both domestic and international, must complement each other in supporting sustainable development. The Inter-governmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Finance[4] notes that expected returns on investments associated with sustainable development are often less attractive than other opportunities, especially in the near term. It is thus essential to create a policy framework that encourages for-profit investment in areas critical for sustainable development and discourages unsustainable investment. International public finance is important but not sufficient; the solutions for sustainable development require private sector cooperation and investment at all levels – corporate, small and medium enterprises, informal sector, and traditional producers alike.

A vital component of financing for sustainable development in every country is and will remain domestic resources. Often the steps taken to enhance domestic resource mobilization, both private and public, will also simultaneously alter the structure of incentive towards sustainability – for example through taxation of carbon and other environmentally and socially damaging goods, or the elimination of perverse subsidies such as for fossil fuels. Policy incentives for sustainable activities in natural-resource-based economies, can unlock tremendous knowledge and resources. A stable, predictable, and enabling environment and governance are crucial ingredients.

Transforming the financial landscape is critical for long-term sustainable development. The SDGs recognized this through a target aimed at improving the regulation and monitoring of global financial markets and institutions. More could be done to address dysfunctions of the global economy and its financial mechanisms, such as over-discounting of future risks, and structural under-investment in sustainable assets that contribute to environmental degradation and social exclusion[5]. Innovations in accounting practices, such as durable value creation[6], and private sustainability finance[7] (including innovative sustainability bonds[8]) are helping companies and investors assess social and environmental sustainability.

Moreover, achieving a balanced outcome at the third **International Conference on Financing for Development** in July 2015 in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia – through considering the complementarity of all sources of financing for sustainable development – will be critical in creating an enabling framework for the post-2015 agenda, which transcends the limitations of the current financial landscape.

During the four rounds of structured dialogues on **technology transfer** undertaken by the General Assembly in 2013-2014, reforming international property rights, and establishing a global data portal, a technology bank and a global facilitation mechanism for transferring environmentally sound technologies were discussed in depth. Although no action has yet been decided upon, existing transfer mechanisms, such as the Climate Technology Centre and Network and Enlighten, can be used as baselines for further development.

The OWG recognizes the need for developing **measures of sustainability** that complement GDP. Although the *Inclusive Wealth Accounts Initiative*[9], for example, combines measures of natural capital with GDP, baseline data and statistics will be required in the future to measure a broader range of disaggregated indicators, and enable sophisticated analyses of data by all levels of society – from governments through civil society to businesses.

Technical and financial capacity will also need to be strengthened, especially in developing countries, for stronger monitoring and accountability, starting from public access to information and full participation in issues of importance to them. The **data revolution** could offer new opportunities linked to innovation, technical progress and the surge of new public and private data-providers.

UNEP-Live[10] is an excellent opportunity to create efficient and verifiable measurements of environmental data and information for sustainable development from national to global levels. UNEP is also preparing and piloting the **National Reporting Toolkit,** an online tool that speeds up reporting of environmental information to decision-makers. An explicit target or indicator in the SDGs on expanding existing monitoring and reporting mechanisms would help to reduce the reporting burden of countries.

The ambitious and transformational nature of the SDGs and post-2015 agenda should also pay attention to creating a multi-sectoral, multi-layered and multi-stakeholder **accountability framework**. Multi-layered reporting mechanisms, thematic reviews, and peer reviews, can be useful tools to share experiences, and to convince stakeholders and shareholders of the benefits of change. Third party assessments such as through credible and independent bodies, and earth-systems monitoring can complement such reporting mechanisms.

Private sector transparency will be essential for the implementation of the Post-2015 Agenda. With increasing availability of quality information, corporate sustainability reporting represents a potential tool to generate and measure progress in the contribution of companies. Corporate performance would strengthen private sector accountability to achieve this global agenda[11]. To this aim, a growing number of governments have been promoting corporate sustainability reporting through different regulatory instruments[12].

Our **institutional structures at global, regional and national levels** will need to be reviewed for their ability and effectiveness to implement the post-2015 sustainable development agenda. Clarifying the role of the High-Level Political Forum in relation to other entities, such as UNEA, would be crucial in ensuring an actionable post-2015 agenda. Building on the foundations set by the MDGs and the multi-lateral environmental agreements (MEA), incentives should be found for cross-sectoral cooperation at all levels, and clarification of roles and responsibilities. Institutions should be ready to revise workplans and master plans, so as to capture emerging opportunities, for example, through availability of new knowledge, technologies, and tools. Participatory mechanisms, social dialogue, and leveraging the power of the internet should become the business as usual. Transparency and participation in policy-making, budgeting, service delivery and oversight can help building accountability. At the regional level, cooperation is needed on shared challenges and transboundary issues and exchange of best practices.

CONCLUSION

The remarkable depth, openness and comprehensiveness of discussions during the OWG need to be continued during the coming year to create a post-2015 sustainable development agenda that the first session of the UN Environment Assembly said should be "ambitious, universal, implementable and realizable", fully integrating "the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a coherent, holistic, comprehensive and balanced manner, including comprehensive and action-oriented sustainable development goals."[13] Transformations away from the business as usual in critical areas such as financial and technology landscapes, will be needed through innovative options that redress existing dysfunctions, deepen commitments, and broaden the array of solutions available. The agenda should build on and strengthen existing commitments, agreements and conventions. Ways to better measure and value all three dimensions are evolving and such efforts should continue. In addition to better technical tools, learning from good practice elsewhere will assist in achieving the best possible post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

Endnotes

1. United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, 2012. http://www.uncsd2012.org/index.html
2. UNEA website: www.unep.org/unea
3. OWG SDG website http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1300
4. Report of the Inter-governmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Finance, 2014. http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/4588FINAL%20REPORT%20ICESDF.pdf
5. UNEP Finance Inquiry, October 2014. http://www.unep.org/inquiry/Portals/50215/Documents/Inquiry_Summary2_Insights_v3.pdf
6. For example, the Value Creation Index provides a method of quantifying non-tangible and non-financial performance on issues such as : innovation, quality, customer relations, management capabilities, alliances, technology, brand value, employee relations, and environmental and community issues. See : "The value creation index: quantifying intangible value", Strategy & Leadership, Vol. 29 Issue: 5, pp.9 - 15
7. For example, see recent briefs from UN Global Compact and partners https://www.unglobalcompact.org/news/1341-09-17-2014
8. For example, Unilever is the first company to have issued a sustainability bond in the sterling market. See: http://www.unilever.com/mediacentre/pressreleases/2014/Unileverissuesfirstevergreensustainabilitybond.aspx
9. A UNEP and IHDP-UNU joint initiative. The 2012 report launched at Rio+20 for example indicated that over the period assessed, natural resources per capita declined by 33% in South Africa. If measured by GDP, the economy of South Africa grew by 24%. However, when South Africa's performance is measured by the IWI, it decreased by 1%.See: http://www.unep.org/pdf/IWR_2012.pdf
10. Weblink to UNEP-Live: http://uneplive.org/
11. For example, see UNEP's initiative to assess the quality of environmental information disclosed through corporate sustainability reporting: http://www.unep.org/resourceefficiency/Business/SustainableandResponsibleBusiness/CorporateSustainabilityReporting/MERITAS/tabid/794770/Default.aspx
12. For example through the "Group of Friends of Paragraph 47" of the Rio+20 Outcome Document: www.unep.org/GoFParagraph47
13. UNEA resolution 1/1

For more information
www.unep.org/post 2015

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