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Research Report

Post 2015: special event on Post-2015 – stuck in the process?

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Post 2015: Special Event on Post-2015 – Stuck in the process?

Summary

On 25 September 2013, the United Nations General Assembly gathered in New York for a Special Event on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The purpose of the event was: first, to review the progress made so far towards the achievement of the MDGs and, second, to chart the way for a development agenda after 2015, the target year of the current MDGs.

What sounded like a very ambitious and visionary assignment resulted in a very shallow outcome document of merely three pages. This might come as a surprise, particularly against the background of the complex processes that were set in motion in preparation of the event. Yet, it is the very complexity of the processes that explains the shallowness of the document.

The MDGs were developed by an expert group from the OECD, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund and the United Nations Development Programme with the initial objective of monitoring the implementation of the commitments made in the Millennium Declaration – but ultimately captured only a fraction of them. Thus, from the very beginning, the MDGs were criticized as being a mere donor agenda and for not meeting the much broader vision of the Millennium Declaration – and even less so the sustainability paradigm as established in the Rio Declaration of 1992.

In June 2012, Member States gathered at the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro – twenty years after the 1992 Earth Summit in Rio de Janeiro. The conference adopted the resolution “*The Future We Want*” that generated the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It is a

clear response to the failures of the MDGs: initiated by developing countries – in particular Guatemala and Colombia – and with a focus on sustainability as anchored in the principles of the Earth Summit. In the follow-up, an intergovernmental process was set in motion that is to result in a concrete proposal for SDGs in 2014.

At least since then, the parallel nature of the two processes – the consultations on a successor document to the MDGs, and the development of SDGs – has become obvious. The very real risk of two – in the worst case incompatible – agendas for the period post-2015 created a tension that accompanied all preparations for the event on 25 September 2013.

The six work streams that were initiated by Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon and his Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, Amina Mohammed, all worked under the effect of this tension: the *UN Task Team*, the *UN Global Compact*, the *High-Level Panel of eminent persons*, the *Sustainable Development Solutions Network* and the *UN Development Group*. They delivered the input for the report of the Secretary-General that was to provide the platform for the discussions at the Special Event and summarized the recommendations of the work streams.

But the Member States that were to discuss the document faced the dilemma that any concrete proposal for a post-2015 agenda from their side would risk separating the two processes irrevocably. Their response was the production of a kind of “stand-by” document, the only purpose of which was to leave the door open for the linking up of the negotiations of the two processes at some point in the future.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)

The UN Millennium Summit was concluded with the adoption of the Millennium Declaration on September 8, 2000. A global vision for the future, the Declaration is based on a set of *fundamental rights* – freedom, equality, solidarity, tolerance, respect for nature and shared responsibility – and is a summary of the major commitments made during the international gatherings of the 1990s that followed the fall of the Berlin Wall and the end of the Cold War.

In the following years, an expert group from the Development Assistance Committee (DAC), the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) developed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) with the objective of monitoring the implementation of the commitments made in the declaration – though they ultimately captured only a small fraction of them.

This process, however, is one of the main points of criticism facing the goals. The MDGs were perceived as a mere donor agenda: they formulated only a few, vague targets for developed countries and a whole catalogue of clearly specified targets for developing countries, and focused only on development rather than other issues of the Millennium Declaration and ignored almost completely the much broader vision of sustainable development as established in the Rio Declaration in 1992.

Since then, countless consultations have been conducted and endless reports produced emphasizing how legitimate this criticism is. The partially very concrete proposals of non-governmental organisations for a post-2015 agenda highlight the demand for an agenda that is much broader than the current MDGs (see Figure 1) and virtually all of them stress the need for a truly participatory approach.

Rio+20

From 20 to 22 June 2012, the Member States met for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development in Rio de Janeiro,

known under the abbreviation Rio+20. Taking things into their own hands, the Member States adopted a resolution-called “*The Future We Want*” that generated a concept parallel to the MDGs: the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It was a clear response to the failures of the MDGs, initiated by developing countries – in particular Guatemala and Colombia – and with a much broader understanding of development as already anchored in the principles of sustainability at the Earth Summit held in 1992.

In order to operationalize this concept, Member States from the five UN regional groups nominated 30 members for an Open Working Group (OWG). The OWG, established on 22 January 2013, is co-chaired by Mr. Csaba Kőrösi, Permanent Representative of Hungary, and Mr. Macharia Kamau, Permanent Representative of Kenya. Germany shares a joint seat with France and Switzerland. It is the task of the OWG to present a report with a concrete proposal for possible SDGs by September 2014 – one year after the Special Event.

Setting the scene for the Special Event

Against this background, the Special Event on 25 September 2013 – part of the resolution adopted at the 2010 UN Summit on the MDGs – came at a particularly inopportune moment. Nevertheless, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon was obliged to prepare a report with suggestions for a post-2015 agenda in the run-up to the Special Event.

Well aware of the difficulties of preparing such a report before the results of the OWG were available, the Secretary-General responded in his own way: he and his Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, Amina Mohammed, initiated six work streams for the preparation of the Special Event.

Each of the different streams was asked to prepare a report that was in turn to inform the report to be produced by the Secretary-General. The strategy seems to have been to include representatives of every possible camp. The result was a complex fragmentation of the process (see Figure 2) that raises concerns of how the different strands of the process could ever be brought together again.

All of the work streams were well aware of the tension under which they were operating – and the fact that they were representing different camps situated somewhere on the range between the development and the sustainability strand.

The UN Task Team (UNTT)

Proceedings were opened by the UNTT that was launched in January 2012 at the request of the Secretary-General to support the UN system-wide preparations for the post-2015 agenda. The task team is co-chaired by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme and brings together experts from more than 60 UN entities and international organizations. Already presented in June 2012, UNTT’s report “*Realizing the Future We Want for All*” was the key input of the UN system and set the stage for the discussions.

Well aware of the tension between the development and the sustainability strand and located somewhere in the middle, the report proposes an integrated framework that combines the three pillars of sustainability – inclusive economic development, social progress, and environmental sustainability – as well as a fourth pillar, peace and security (see Figure 3). The concept of the four pillars is in a way a

Figure 1: Comparison of selected proposals

Topics	Bellagio Goals	Save the Children	Getting to Zero	Oxfam Doughtnut	People's Goals
Environmental Sustainability	x	x	x	x	x
Food, Water, Sanitation	xx	xxx	x	xx	x
Education	x	x	x	x	
Health	x	x	x	x	
Equality/ Gender	x		x	x	x
Governance	x	x	x		x
Resilience/ Social Protection	x	x		x	x
Income/ Poverty			x	x	x
Civil/ Political/ Human Rights	x			x	x
Employment/ Decent Work		x		x	x
Security/ Peace	x	x			x
Energy		x		x	
Infrastructure	x		x		
Inclusive Growth	x	x			
Partnerships		x	x		
Social Equity				x	
Trade, Financial Architecture					x

Source: Rippin (2013): Progress, Prospects and Lessons from the MDGs, Background Research Paper HLP Report

uniting element that has been taken up in one way or the other by every single one of the other work streams.

UN Global Compact

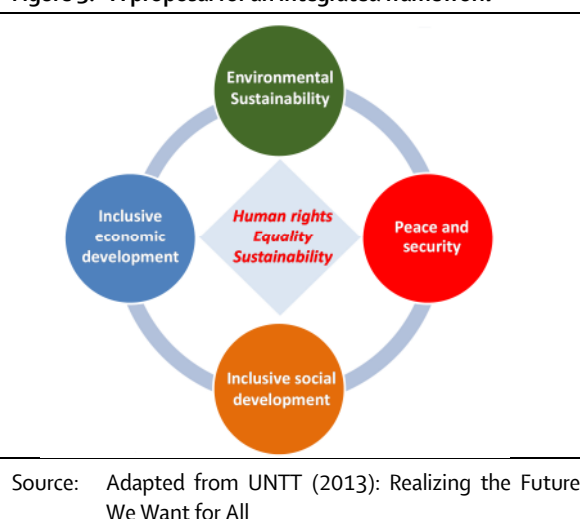
Launched in 2000, the UN Global Compact is a corporate responsibility initiative with over 7,500 business signatories in more than 140 countries and 101 local networks. On 17 June 2013, the Global Compact presented their report "Corporate Sustainability and the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda" that summarizes business and investor perspectives on the post-2015 agenda. The publication of the report went almost unnoticed and it played virtually no role in the process.

National, Regional, Global and Thematic Consultations

In the middle of 2012, a process was initiated that was intended to bring the voices of individuals and civil society into the conversation. In the course of more than a year, the UN Development Group conducted 88 national and 11 thematic consultations as well as a global survey called "My World". More than 1 million people from all backgrounds were reached and their opinions were summarized in the report "A Million Voices: The World We Want" that was presented in September 2013.

The report demonstrates vividly that public opinion is at the centre of the development and sustainability strands. Respondents stressed that the fundamental areas of the MDGs are still critically important topics that need to be strengthened in their ambition and urgency. At the same time, they express their concern that other critically important issues have not been covered by the MDGs. In

Figure 3: A proposal for an integrated framework

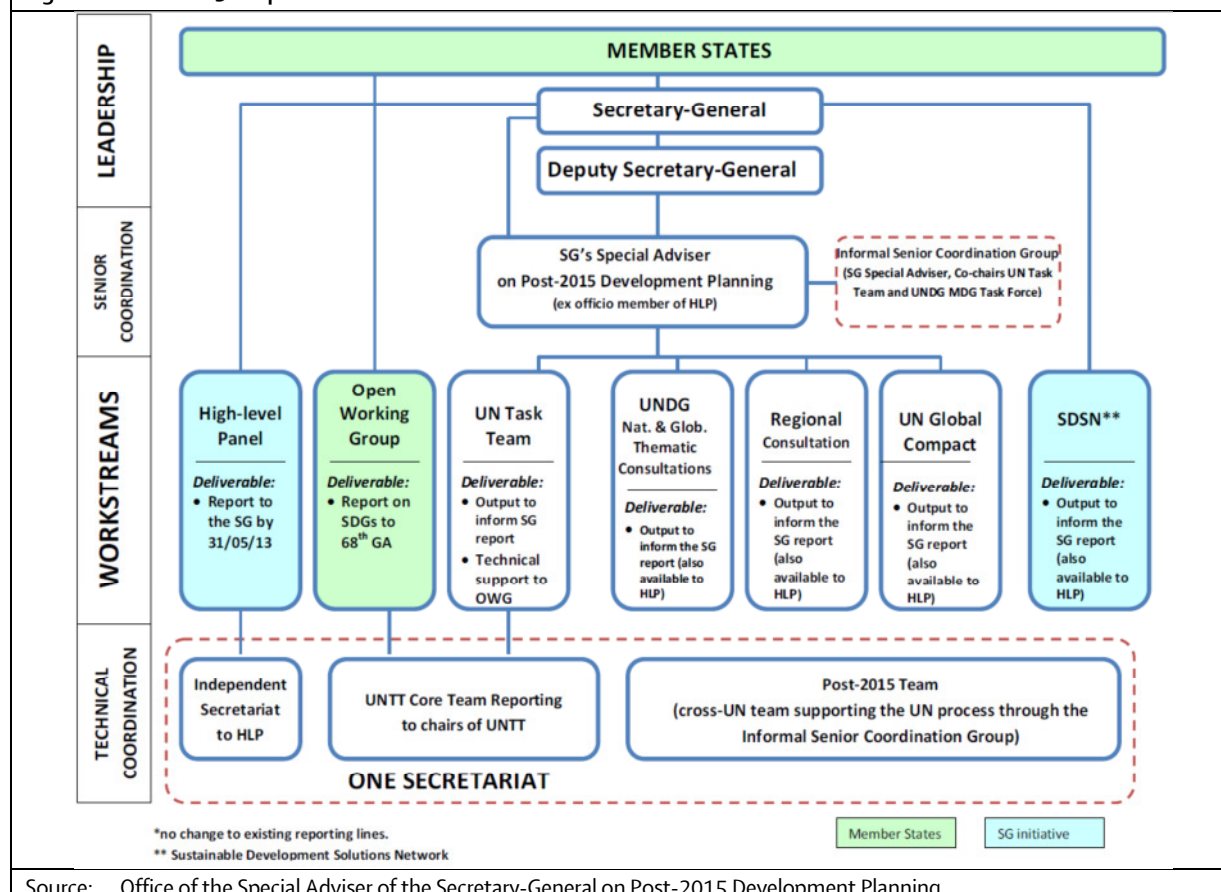


short, "they are pushing for a strong and legitimate successor-framework that combines development and sustainability".

The High-Level Panel of eminent persons (HLP)

In July 2012, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon appointed 27 members for his High-Level Panel of eminent persons (HLP) and tasked them with developing a bold yet practical vision for development beyond 2015. The panel was jointly chaired by President Susilo Bambang Yudhoyono of Indonesia, President Ellen Johnson Sirleaf of Liberia, and Prime Minister David Cameron of the United Kingdom. Among the appointed members was also the former Ger-

Figure 2: Post-2015 UN process: Actors and communication lines



man Federal President Horst Köhler. On 30 May 2013, panel members handed their report *“A new Global Partnership: Eradicate Poverty and Transform Economies through Sustainable Development”* over to the Secretary-General.

The task description of the HLP – to develop a vision for development – already indicates that it has a tendency towards the development strand. Though sustainability is an important issue in the report, it is nevertheless often criticized that the recommendations of the HLP with regard to sustainability lag behind what would be needed in order to achieve sustainable development. Interestingly, the HLP report is the only document of the six work streams that explicitly calls for a single post-2015 agenda.

The Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN)

On 9 August 2012, Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon announced the launch of the UN SDSN. This network was to mobilize scientific and technological knowledge from academia, civil society, and the private sector on the challenges of sustainable development and to make recommendations for the design and implementation of the post-2015 agenda. It was directed by Professor Jeffrey Sachs. The network presented their report *“An Action Agenda for Sustainable Development”* on 6 June 2013.

Again, the task description of the SDSN – to mobilize knowledge on the challenges of sustainable development – already provides a hint that the network was positioned towards the sustainability strand. Critics accordingly attest that the network gives the best account of planetary boundaries – but a too limited account for development issues. Thus, the HLP and the SDSN represented the two opposite poles in the range of positions, a fact that was actually reflected in a noticeable competitiveness between the two work streams.

The report of the Secretary-General

All of the above mentioned reports were to inform the report of the Secretary-General *“A Life of Dignity for All”* that was presented on 26 July 2013 and actually reads as a condensed summary of the main reports of the work streams. It describes a vision of a post-2015 agenda that is universal and leaves no one behind, has sustainable development at its core – including the eradication of extreme poverty in all its forms –, promotes inclusive economic transformations, peace and governance, a new global partnership, and is “fit for purpose”, i.e. it ensures that the institutions and tools for a successful implementation of the post-2015 agenda are in place.

Considering all the different work streams that published their reports with partially considerable media attention as well as

the countless consultations, proposals and suggestions from around the globe, it is not surprising that on 25 September 2013 many eyes turned expectantly towards New York where Member States met for the Special Event.

When the outcome document was finally released, it fell considerably short of what had been produced in the run-up to the event. On a mere three pages, the document limits itself to describing the forthcoming steps on the path to a new global development agenda, as well as commissioning further consultations and reports. While the emptiness of content might well be surprising and even disappointing for many observers, it is in fact the best decision Member States could have taken under the given circumstances.

Stuck in the process?

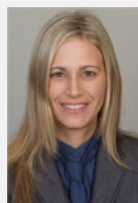
When the Member States met for the Special Event, they were confronted with the dilemma that the Open Working Group (OWG) had not yet released any concrete proposal for possible Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – and will probably not be able to do so before September 2014. In a way, the Member States had become stuck in the process, as any concrete proposal for a successor document to the MDGs would inevitably multiply the risks of separating the two processes irrevocably.

In response, Member States consciously approved a sparse, vacuous document that sent a clear message to the OWG: the Member States would wait for the results of the OWG in order to leave the door open for linking up the negotiations of the two processes at some point in the future. The clear message was additionally underlined in the outcome document’s explicit request for a *“single framework and set of Goals”* – and its description of the way ahead.

The way ahead

The message of the Member States is clear: the matter now lies with the OWG. In their outcome document, they urge the group to complete their work in time. “In time” means by September 2014, when the 69th Session of the UN General Assembly begins. At that time at the latest, intergovernmental negotiations will have to start if a post-2015 agenda is to be adopted in September 2015.

Until then, the outcome document requests the President of the General Assembly to convene General Assembly events under the topic *“The Post-2015 Development Agenda – Setting the Stage”*. This is an effort to give the OWG the time to develop their proposal, while at the same time keeping the process going. In other words, it is playing for time.



Nicole Rippin

After joining the Secretariat of the HLP in New York to support the production of the HLP Report, she returned to her previous position as researcher in Dept. II: “Competitiveness and Social Development” at the German Development Institute / Deutsches Institut für Entwicklungspolitik (DIE). She focuses on human development, poverty, inequality and inclusive growth.