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Research Report

Post 2015: enter the UN General Assembly: harnessing Sustainable Development Goals for an ambitious global development agenda

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Post 2015: Enter the UN General Assembly – Harnessing Sustainable Development Goals for an Ambitious Global Development Agenda

Summary

With the wrapping up of the United Nations' Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at the end of July 2014, the international process towards the adoption of universal sustainable development goals has entered its decisive phase. Established in the wake of the 2012 "Rio+20" summit on sustainable development, the OWG has arguably fulfilled its task by tabling a substantive proposal that represents "an integrated indivisible set of global priorities for sustainable development" with "aspirational global targets." Crucially, the OWG's proposal reflects the global level of ambition as well as attention to national circumstances.

It is now up to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon and, ultimately, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to follow up on the OWG proposal and to foster consensus at the global level. Concomitantly, the SDGs also need to be anchored within an institutional system that facilitates progressive implementation and ensures accountability. The OWG has come a long way in paving the ground, but deliberations will continue before the UN General Assembly eventually adopts a consolidated set of SDGs in 2015. This defines the political space to promote improvements as the international community strives for a set of goals that is pragmatic enough to ensure broad ownership across the North-South divide and ambitious enough to actually make a difference vis-à-vis business as usual. Four issues deserve particular attention from policymakers and negotiators:

1. Negotiators should not let themselves be diverted by the quest for a smaller number of goals. The total number of SDGs is of little concern for each SDG to

deliver on its promises. The substance and the feasibility of individual targets matters, not the memorability of the set of goals as such.

2. A consolidated set of SDGs should further emphasise the potential of integrated approaches wherever this is reasonable, for example with regard to targets relating to water, food security and energy provision. The goals tabled by the OWG could do better to overcome the silo approach that has characterised the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs).
3. The goals need to be ambitious both in terms of substantive targets and in terms of sharing the burdens of implementation in the envisaged 'global partnership'. Now is the time to specify who is expected to be doing what, by when, and with which means.
4. The goals are supposed to be universal and hence need to be relevant and fair for developed countries and developing countries, as well as within all countries. The notion of 'leaving no one behind' should be reflected more consistently across the eventual set of goals.

This briefing paper elaborates on these priorities as it critically appraises the outcome of the OWG with a view to forthcoming sessions of the UN General Assembly. It also identifies challenges for implementation, notably regarding the responsibilities of Germany and the European Union. It concludes that all countries will be well advised to devise national road maps that facilitate the incorporation of the SDGs into domestic policy. These should be fashioned in a manner that is in itself aspiring and flexible enough to allow for progressive adjustment as the global partnership for sustainable development evolves beyond 2015.

Background and outcome of the OWG

In June 2012, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development ("Rio+20") called for the establishment of an Open Working Group (OWG) under the UN General Assembly that was mandated to develop a set of sustainable development goals. On 19 July 2014, the OWG concluded after thirteen sessions of largely technical deliberations by proposing a set of seventeen goals (Table 1) that are now tabled for intergovernmental negotiations at the UN General Assembly. They are to be adopted by the autumn of 2015 and supposed to provide a central point of reference for the wider 'post 2015' development agenda.

The OWG is widely seen as having fulfilled its intricate mandate, that is, to balance the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a way that is supposed to be at the same time coherent with the United Nations' emergent new global agenda, commensurate to completing the work of the MDGs, as well as manageable, aspiring and comprehensible for a broad public.

This was achieved by an intense process that was carefully guided by two highly committed co-chairs, Machari Kamau of Kenya and Csaba Körösi of Hungary, that emphasised deliberation and mutual learning over hair-splitting negotiations and political brinkmanship. On the downside, the co-chairs circumnavigated a number of critical issues and rendered others vague by avoiding specification and, indeed, quantification and timelines. The proposed set of SDGs is thus unlikely to enjoy smooth sailing once the General Assembly takes over.

To make the most of the OWG proposal it seems advisable for negotiators and their respective principals to get their heads around four specific issues that could work to either strengthen or weaken the eventual package of SDGs: the number of goals; the interlinkages between goals; the balancing of responsibilities; and the practical implications of universality, not least with regard to implementation.

Four aspects warrant negotiators' special attention

First, the absolute number of SDGs has become a prominent issue, although it should not be. The OWG was under considerable pressure to deliver a small set of 'crisp' goals that would be susceptible to easy illustration and communication. Expectations persist, that the proposed 17 goals should be boiled down to a dozen or even less in the course of further negotiations.

Yet, calling for fewer goals is as cheap as it is misguided. While there are reasonable arguments why a smaller number of goals would be preferable in terms of strategic communication, there are profound reasons why the OWG was unable to distil a smaller list than it now has. Indeed, the OWG has demonstrated resolve in incorporating many facets of sustainable development to reflect different interests as well as to address persisting gaps in international action (e.g. Goals 11 & 14).

Negotiators would thus be ill-advised to immerse in haggling over the absolute number of SDGs. A smaller number is

Table 1: 17 SDGs as proposed by the OWG

1	End poverty in all its forms everywhere
2	End hunger , achieve food security and improved nutrition, and promote sustainable agriculture
3	Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
4	Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote life-long learning opportunities for all
5	Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
6	Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
7	Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable, and modern energy for all
8	Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth , full and productive employment and decent work for all
9	Build resilient infrastructure , promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation
10	Reduce inequality within and among countries
11	Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
12	Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
13	Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts
14	Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
15	Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems , sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
16	Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels
17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development
Source: OWG 2014 (highlighted by the authors)	

not an end in itself. Making this a priority for negotiations would inevitably divert political attention and capacities from the substantive issues that need to be addressed within individual goals and targets. Besides, there are merely eight MDGs, yet there are few who can name them all by heart even among development professionals. In practice, policymakers or implementers will rarely be occupied with more than one goal at a time but rather with the pursuit of specific targets.

Second, the bulk of proposed SDGs could do better in overcoming the silo approach to sustainable development that effectively sustains 'business as usual'. Regrettably, the OWG proposal subscribes to a siloed understanding of the three dimensions of sustainable development. It thus risks carrying over a flaw of the MDGs that it was supposed to

supersede. By and large, the proposed Goals 1–6 represent an update of the social dimension as prioritised by the original MDGs; Goals 8 and 9 explicitly cater to the economic dimension; while Goals 12–15 address the environmental dimension.

To be fair, the OWG has sought to forward goals that are deliberately more integrated than the MDGs. Some of them at least reflect an awareness for substantive interlinkages beyond their narrow definition, notably the goals on energy (7), inequality (10) and cities (11). Still, its proposal falls short of realising the potential of integrated approaches.

To really make a difference for the post-2015 development agenda, it will be essential for the SDGs to help protect the physical basis that is required to meet the fundamental needs of future generations. Therefore, the goals on food security (2), water (6) and energy (7) should explicitly reflect the interdependencies between water and land resources, their respective resilience and their fundamental relevance for carbon sinks and other ecosystem services as well as considering these parameters in corresponding targets under the goals on infrastructure and industrialisation (9), climate change (13) or terrestrial ecosystems (15). For the time being, however, the goals on food and energy fail to address water efficiency: the goal on water remains silent on energy efficiency and so on (see also Brandi et al. 2013).

Third, to really make a difference for future development, the goals need to be aspiring both in terms of substantive and verifiable targets and in terms of sharing the responsibilities and burden of implementing the goals. The OWG's proposal leaves a lot of room for specification on both counts. Member states will need to use the remaining time to specify how they will contribute to achieving the SDGs through domestic action as well as through international cooperation.

Implementation is ultimately a domestic task and should be framed by country-specific road maps. These would also guide a division of labour regarding the implementation of domestic responsibilities, specific engagement in bi- or multilateral development cooperation and commitment to overarching challenges of global governance. In effect, such road maps will invariably reflect national interests and priorities even as they are guided by the timelines and quantified targets spelled out in the prospective SDGs. This in turn calls for the establishment of an adequate monitoring and reporting system that is yet to be negotiated.

With regard to quantitative targets it should be self-evident that these must not fall back behind pre-existing international accords. To signal added value, for instance, the goals on energy (7) or on marine resources and terrestrial ecosystems (14 & 15) need to be spelled out *at least* as ambitiously as the Sustainable Energy 4 All initiative of the UN Secretary-General or the Aichi Targets under the Convention on Biological Diversity respectively. Ideally, they should expand on them by either upping the corresponding targets or tightening the deadlines to achieve them. Pre-existing frameworks would thus qualify as contributing to an overarching and more ambitious SDG. Con-

versely, SDGs that are merely equivalent in substance would not only appear superfluous and redundant, but might thereby undermine the SDGs political clout from the outset.

The same applies to sharing responsibilities in the context of the envisaged 'global partnership'. Without tangible specifications on how the international community is to capitalise on the respective comparative advantages of established North-South cooperation, emergent South-South cooperation as well as innovative 'triangular' approaches to international cooperation, Goal 17 runs a real risk of reliving the disappointments of MDG 8 (i.e. 'Develop a global partnership for development'). For instance, current efforts to establish a transatlantic trade and investment partnership (TTIP) can be seen as contrasting with the "universal, rule-based, open, non-discriminatory and equitable multilateral trading system" proposed by the OWG.

Fourth, the SDGs are supposed to be universal. This marks an essential departure from the MDG approach in which developed countries (if in the guise of 'the UN') were effectively telling developing countries to get their act together. Universality is thus arguably the single-most important selling point of the prospective SDGs. To bear fruit, these goals need to be perceived as relevant and fair by all parties concerned. This in turn calls for differentiation regarding individual countries' responsibility to honour stipulated common goals.

The notion of 'leaving no one behind' as postulated by the High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda should prove a useful guiding principle to this end, at least with regard to targets that are geared towards socio-economic indicators. The crux will be the dual application of that principle, that is, between countries within the international system and within national societies irrespective of their being rich, middle-income or poor. Developed countries especially will need to translate the global goals into domestic policies that are in themselves ambitious and equitable without externalising their costs to global public goods and without giving up on their international commitments to support developing countries in meeting their national targets.

Indeed, reaching a consensus regarding the responsibilities of rich countries to assist others in achieving their targets while avoiding, or at least reducing, negative transnational spillover effects of their own policies will be paramount to eventually setting the SDGs on track. This is another case in point for national road maps. These would best be conceived by a two-tier approach that allows countries to honour universality by adequately combining the pursuit of national and global objectives (see also Janus / Keijzer 2013).

Conclusions: the proof of the pudding is in the eating!

In the remaining time until the new post-2015 agenda is adopted by the UN General Assembly, it is of utmost importance for all parties concerned to understand and to appreciate what universality means in practice. In developed countries, in particular, it will be paramount to secure political

buy-in from constituencies 'beyond aid' as well as to curb vested interests. A credible commitment to universal SDGs actually provides a unique opportunity to further policy coherence at domestic and international levels as well as to overcome engrained stalemates between socio-economic and environmental constituencies. Poor developing countries may perceive this mainly as a pretext to reducing aid budgets. Yet, it would also help to raise awareness for international linkages in policy areas that are still dominated by purely domestic perceptions.

In any case, Germany and Europe should not be seen as punching below their weight. The task at hand is to devise specific sets of goals and targets which guide the elaboration of national road maps for implementation and which help to actually translate them into effective practice. Such road maps should be guided by the questions of

- how the objectives of the host of SDGs (and the corresponding multitude of targets) will be best pursued domestically;
- how international cooperation will best contribute to the effective implementation of the SDG agenda in partner countries;
- how domestic implementation efforts will best avoid or minimise negative spillover effects for other countries and with a view to global public goods.

In Germany, the national strategy for sustainable development is already an established instrument that could be

geared toward this end. With its revision scheduled for 2016 it should provide an ideal vehicle for linking pertinent domestic policies with the emergent post-2015 agenda and, indeed, the SDGs. Doing so would demonstrate responsibility for and, indeed, leadership in an international process that will be critical to shaping the global development agenda for years to come. Being seen to do their homework in such a way would not least help Germany and Europe to regain some of the credibility that they appear to have lost in recent years. It would thus be in their own best interests to demonstrate resolve in the implementation of the SDGs. After all, credible ownership is in itself a vital resource in the context of international negotiations.

Lest it be forgotten, the prospective set of Sustainable Development Goals is but one building block of what is to be a much broader global development agenda. The relative significance of this particular building block remains to be seen. Yet, if the UN General Assembly manages to adopt a set of SDGs that can be considered ambitious as well as fair, this will provide the international community with a powerful instrument that can be harnessed to boost sustainable global development. To that end, the SDGs will generate the more traction the more substantive they are spelled out, the better they capitalise on interlinkages across the engrained silos of economic, social and environmental policy, and the more specific they will be in balancing responsibilities for implementation between and within countries. Ultimately, the proof of the global pudding will be in the eating of national dishes.

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