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THE "A" WORD: MONITORING THE SDGS

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Twenty-two UN independent human rights rapporteurs wrote to the Rio+20 Summit that "real risk exists that commitments made in Rio will remain empty promises without effective monitoring and accountability."[1] This danger also exists for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Could Universal Periodic Reviews (UPRs) of SDG progress be the answer?

The Open Working Group (OWG) created by Rio+20 to "establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals" concluded its work in July 2014 and approved 17 goals.[2] Those SDGs are followed by 169 paragraphs denominated as "targets," some of which spell expected outcomes while others identify means of implementation to make that possible. Seventy countries were part of the OWG and other non-members participated actively in the negotiations in a lengthy process that suggested the political importance of the outcome document, which the September 2014 General Assembly resolution A/68/L.61 decided should be "the basis for integrating sustainable development goals into the post-2015 development agenda."

GOING FOR "THE OTHER HALF"

The first goal of the earlier Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) promised by 2015 to reduce by half the proportion of people living with under $1 a day, with 1990 as the base year. This focus on extreme poverty is the essence of the MDGs and for most of the development cooperation community the post-2015 agenda should "finish the task"[3] by addressing the other half.

The very first target of the first goal of the SDGs aims to eradicate extreme poverty everywhere. Goal 2.2 calls for an end to all forms of malnutrition, and 6.1 aims to ensure affordable drinking water for all. The 13 targets on ending hunger, reducing infant and maternal mortality, and providing access to primary school and safe water "for all" are intended to address the other half.

These targets are universal and seek to establish an absolute minimum that all of humanity should achieve, which developed and middle-income countries have already met. Developing country governments are responsible for delivering those targets, and developed countries are expected to contribute. No new commitment has been made by developed countries that was not already in previous UN resolutions. "Finishing the task" of the MDGs only requires of the UN development system to keep doing what UN organizations have been doing for decades. No new mechanisms for monitoring and accountability are proposed, but an improvement of the existing ones recommended, particularly in terms of data collection and capacity building of statistical offices in developing countries.

UNIVERSAL GOALS

The SDGs are not just about the unfinished agenda of the MDGs but aim higher through several goals and targets that are "universal" and create obligations for all governments. The second target of the first goal, for instance, promises "to reduce at least by half by 2030 the proportion of men, women and children of all ages living in poverty in all its dimensions according to national definitions."

This target challenges also some of the richest countries of the world where poverty is still widely prevalent. UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon proposed in his 2013 report *A Life of Dignity for All* to "eradicate poverty in all its forms" as the first and main goal of the new agenda.[4] The OWG raises the bar further and proposes to "end poverty in all its forms everywhere." Similarly, target 3.8 demands that all countries ensure universal health coverage and target 8.8 seeks to protect labor rights, including those of migrant workers.

Goal 5 of the SDGs, on the empowerment of women and gender equality, explicitly uses the word "everywhere" again and its provisions on equal pay, recognition of the value of unpaid work, more political representation and sexual and reproductive health and rights were supported by women's organizations from all continents and will require efforts in all countries. Even in Scandinavia with top rankings in all gender indexes, the wage disparity between men and women is still around 15 percent.

Future UN Development System supports and helps accelerate change in the UN development system to increase effective responses to global development challenges—especially after 2015, the target date for the Millennium Development Goals. Recognizing the many frustrations that have accompanied UN reform efforts, FUNDS envisages a multi-year process designed to help build consensus around necessary changes. Financial support currently comes from the governments of Denmark, Norway, Sweden, and Switzerland.

In summary, over 70 of the 169 targets request developed, middle-income, and transition countries to take action domestically, in addition to supporting the efforts of poorer countries.

MONITORING AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Under the ambitious title of "data, monitoring and accountability," the last two targets urge building the statistical capacity of developing countries and continue work on alternatives to gross domestic product (GDP) to measure human progress. The absence of specific targets for monitoring and accountability implies that the concept has been agreed but without specific consensus about next steps. Maintaining a heading over a basically empty section reveals that effective monitoring and accountability mechanisms, together with means of implementation, will be among the main issues to be negotiated during 2015 before the General Assembly approves the new development agenda in September 2015. The issue is so sensitive that what is now whispered in UN corridors—the "A word" for "accountability"—has been dropped from all drafts and replaced by a vaguer "review mechanism."

In fact, many of the targets are essentially impossible to assess quantitatively because they refer to concepts for which there are no indicators or no internationally agreed definition. Such is the case of practically all of Goal 16 ("governance"), most of the "environmental goals" (11 to 15), and some key aspects of others, such as target 10.7 on migration and mobility.

Many of those targets list valid aspirations that make sense locally and can certainly be important in national policy debates but would require an international agreement to be properly defined and thus able to be reviewed at UN level. Their inclusion in the list opens an agenda for further international negotiations. Other targets, such as 11.4 on safeguarding cultural and natural heritage, lack quantifiable indicators but can be monitored through an objective assessment of the policies to meet them.

The targets that can be monitored, quantitatively or qualitatively, can be grouped into three categories: for developing countries (in particular, the least developed); for all countries; and for exclusively or mainly developed countries.

The first group was described above as "finish-the-MDGs" targets, aiming at the eradication of extreme poverty and achieving a minimum social standard (in education, health, access to water and sanitation) that developed countries and many middle-income developing countries have already attained. The UN development system has been monitoring such targets for decades, and there is wide consensus on methodology. The main debate is between the primacy of the income measure of extreme poverty, preferred by the World Bank, and the multidimensional approach that is more consistent with the UN's human development approach but lacks consensus about appropriate measurements.

In both cases the challenge is the absence of accurate and updated statistics in the countries where those measures are relevant, which underlines the logic of strengthening the data collection and processing capacity of developing countries (target 17.18).

When it comes to social targets to be met by all countries, such as halving poverty according to domestic standards or ensuring universal access to health services and full employment, data is not the main challenge. Indicators for those issues can certainly be improved, but they are largely available in developed and most middle-income countries. The issue is not monitoring but the "A" word: who is going to report to whom?

The SDGs mandate developed countries with two additional tasks: to contribute to the means of implementation (MoI) to make the 16 other goals possible, and to exercise leadership towards sustainable consumption and production patterns (targets 8.4 and 12.1).

Monitoring Goal 8 of the MDGs (the single goal specifically calling upon developed countries to make the other seven achievable) was never an easy task, but the Department of Economic and Social Affairs has regularly coordinated efforts for publications by the MDG Gap Task Force.[5] The SDGs make the task easier by spelling out more clearly what is required, and target 17.2 explicitly demands developed countries "to implement fully their official development assistance (ODA) commitments, including to provide 0.7% of gross national income in ODA to developing countries, of which 0.15-0.20 to least developed countries." This language is far more concrete than MDG 8.

WHO IS TO MONITOR AND HOW?

The Rio+20 Summit created the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) to replace the Commission on Sustainable Development and mandated it to "follow-up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments." It will meet every four years at the level of heads of state and annually at ministerial level. National reporting to any international body on domestic progress towards the SDGs will, however, be voluntary.

Governments are primarily responsible to their own citizens through oversight bodies such as parliaments, and so it will be up to civil society to demand and promote regular reporting on national progress. This approach is consistent with a wealth of experience in making governments accountable for their human rights obligations through Universal Periodic Reviews, which involve: national and international human rights groups and their networks; women's groups; issue-based organizations such as those organized through Global Health Watch or the International Council on Adult Education, as well as cross-issue monitoring efforts such as those by LDC Watch, focusing on the poorest countries and the specific commitments made towards them, or Social Watch, created in 1995 to follow-up on the Social Summit and the IV International Conference on Women.[6]

Actually, some targets can only be monitored at the national level. For example, target 10.3 commits governments to "ensure equal

opportunity and reduce inequalities of outcome, including through eliminating discriminatory laws, policies, and practices and promoting appropriate legislation, policies, and actions in this regard." Most of the specifics have no agreed international definition or indicators to allow comparison across countries. It makes no sense to compare whether African-Americans face more or less discrimination than Dalits in India. What is "appropriate" is the result of a political debate, but the commitment to social and political improvements in all countries is nonetheless an important step forward. By moving from a request of "equal opportunities" to an endorsement of the concept of "inequalities of outcome," the SDGs are helping the cause of social justice everywhere.

The UN can encourage national level reporting by helping to define standards, building capacities, and providing for adequate peer review. It has been suggested that regional and sub-regional organizations could play a major role in this regard.[7]

In promoting accountability by developed and middle-income countries, the UN development system should draw from the experiences of UPRs in the human rights field. An extended Post-2015 UPR, complementary to the existing one, could be adopted to encompass the SDGs. Its *modus operandi* could follow the IBSA (Indicators, Benchmarks, Scoping and Assessment) mechanism,[8] which comprises four steps to check whether a country is fulfilling its obligation to comply with economic, social and cultural rights. First, the indicators for the assessment of progress are defined. Second, the country defines benchmarks that are to be achieved within the prescribed period. Third, a UN review determines whether reasonable objectives have been set, or whether they have been too high or too low. Finally, the UN judges the overall achievement before the cycle begins anew.

The assessment procedure is based on information provided by governments as well as civil society and other independent sources. A review of this kind offers a "coherence check" covering a country's entire policies independent of its development status and would put to the test its compliance with the universal sustainability principles and human rights. The HLPF could be the appropriate body to implement the Post-2015 UPR and make it a meaningful body.

Further, the cross-border impact of national policies and the performance of international institutions in terms of how they influence sustainable development, both need to be assessed by credible international mechanisms such as the HLPF. Similarly, commitments to change global rules, such as target 10.6 ("ensure enhanced representation and voice of developing countries in decision making in global international economic and financial institutions") also require international monitoring.

MONITORING NON-TRANSPARENT "PARTNERSHIPS"

Finally, in implementing the SDGs, there is growing pressure to refer to "partnerships" of different kinds among governments, the corporate sector, and civil society. Many such partnerships have been created since the Millennium Summit with active support from the UN secretary-general. "Every Women Every Child," "Education for All," and "Sustainable Energy for All" are the most frequently quoted initiatives. Ban Ki-moon's December 2014 "synthesis report" on the post-2015 development agenda includes a graph on "flow of funds to sustainable development" that has "blended institutions" at its center, exemplified by "innovative partnerships, e.g. Global Health Funds, potential public-private infrastructure funds." Public-private partnerships (PPP) and guarantees are identified as the key "instruments" of these "blended institutions."[9]

Such an endorsement of PPPs comes at a moment when World Bank experts[10] are criticizing this model of procurement for its lack of transparency and the implicit tendency to overspend that seems inherent in what ultimately acts as a "buy-now-pay-later" formula. The Advisory Group on Investment and Development of the Development Assistance Committee of the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) states that "if certain modalities are hugely unsuccessful in OECD countries, they are unlikely to succeed in less developed countries where cost recovery is more difficult."[11] Indeed, the UN Partnership Facility proposed by the Secretary General has been stalled for two years in the General Assembly's Fifth Committee.

"Multi-stakeholder partnerships" are the subject of two vague targets under goal 17 regarding the means of implementation and revitalizing "the global partnership for sustainable development finance." The use of the singular in the goal's title implies an intergovernmental partnership. The secretary-general proposes "principled and responsible public-private-people partnerships" (in plural) as "a key feature of implementation at all levels: global, regional, national and local." In that, he adds "mutual accountability is critical."[12]

Mutual accountability is enshrined in the Paris Declaration on Aid Effectiveness and refers to a relationship between donor and "partner" governments. In a more complex partnership, involving corporations and civil society as well, it is unclear how to understand "mutual" because governments should be accountable to their citizens but certainly not to corporations.

Undermining accountable and transparent multilateralism is a risk of such partnerships, argues the Civil Society Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives.[13] In an open letter to UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon of November 2014, the Righting Finance coalition of civil society networks proposes that "private sector financing and public-private partnerships for sustainable development should likewise be accompanied by mandatory transparency and accountability safeguards in compliance with human rights norms and standards putting people's rights before profit. These are minimal safeguards to save the UN from potential reputational shocks if the chief private financiers it engages with were found to be also chief violators of its most cherished principles."[14]

CONCLUSIONS

The preceding analysis of the SDGs and ensuring independent monitoring and accountability lead to the following five suggestions:

Monitoring and review (accountability) mechanisms are part of the "package" of a new sustainable development agenda and should be adequate to the aspirations and specific responsibilities and all actors.

If the corporate sector is to have a substantial role in the implementation, *ex ante* criteria and accountability mechanisms should be agreed to counter the risks associated with such partnerships.

Since national governments have a predominant and non-transferable responsibility in implementation, accountability to their own citizens is key and the role of civil society in this regard is essential.

Since developed countries have specific responsibilities in the SDGs, both in providing means of implementation as well as in leading transformations in global production and consumption patterns, the monitoring and accountability of their policies is key to the success of the new development agenda.

In view of increasing trans-boundary impacts of national policies, particularly of the most powerful countries, and of the need for international action to meet the SDGs, strong international review mechanisms are necessary, which can be modelled on the UPRs for human rights. Since sustainable development is multi-sectoral, such reviews will require the United Nations to convene the highest level of political decision-making of all key global institutions.

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NOTES

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2. OWG, *Proposal for Sustainable Development Goals*, http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/focussdgs.html.
3. An expression frequently used in relation with the MDGs. See, for example, https://www.devex.com/news/mdgs-the-un-s-best-kept-secret-84071 or http://www.nsi-ins.ca/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2013-Post-2015.pdf.
4. Ban Ki-moon, *A Life of Dignity for All* (New York: UN, 2013).
5. MDG Gap Task Force, *The Global Partnership for Development: The Challenge We Face* (New York: UN, 2013), http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/mdg_gap/.
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14. Righting Finance, "Letter on Financing Issues in Secretary General's Upcoming Synthesis Report," http://www.rightingfinance.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/11/Read-full-letter.pdf.