

Follow-up and Review of the Post-2015 Agenda. Contributing to effective implementation of the SDGs?

Marianne Beisheim

The United Nations Member States are currently in the process of negotiating the post-2015 agenda for sustainable development. This agenda will consist of four elements: a declaration, the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the means of implementation (MoI), and follow-up and review. The negotiations in May 2015 dealt with follow-up and review, which is the main focus of interest here. The zero draft of the outcome document that was recently issued deploys an ongoing lack of clarity on many issues, some of the proposals are likely to make an effective contribution to SDG implementation. However, the challenges – to which solutions must be found before the post-2015 summit in September 2015 – are also moving into sharper focus.

Following on from the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and in accordance with the outcome document adopted at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), the United Nations members undertook to negotiate, by September 2015, a new set of goals which would identify the priority objectives of sustainable development to 2030, building on the experience gained with the MDGs and taking account of their strengths and weaknesses. Measurable and time-bound targets and indicators will therefore be defined for the new SDGs, as it was done for the MDGs before. Only on this basis will it be possible to assess the progress made by the international community as a whole, but also by individual countries, in reaching these ambitious goals. Unlike the MDGs, however, the goals set for the new universal agenda will apply not only to developing countries

but to *all* UN Member States, and will also cover a broader thematic spectrum, ranging from “classic” development and environmental goals to sustainable consumption and production, peace and good governance. Moreover, this time, there is an explicit aspiration to “leave no one behind”, i.e. to reach the goals for all sectors of society. This, however, makes not only implementation but also monitoring of the agenda a challenging task, for it requires not only reliable but also disaggregated data (by income, age, social status, etc.).

Monitoring: experience and initiatives

Although global monitoring of the MDGs proved difficult at first, it improved steadily over time, which is also reflected in the annual progress reports and progress charts. However, there was a less targeted approach to evaluation of the data and analysis of *why* certain trends and gaps in the implementation of the MDGs were emerging. Furthermore, the UN lacks adequate opportunities to encourage those of its members which failed to make sufficient progress to make changes. It was not until the mandating of the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR) under the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) in 2005 that a mechanism was created for direct discussion of the implementation of development goals with the relevant representatives of the UN Member States. However, very few developing countries signed up to the AMR, and even when they did so, it had little impact. There

were various reasons for this: the AMR was, for the most part, an event which was confined to the UN circles in New York, with participating states making voluntary presentations and showcasing their successes in implementing selected development goals. Moreover, the results of the review were not addressed in a systematic way by the United Nations development system, and this created even less of an incentive to participate in the AMR. In parallel, aid effectiveness has been discussed and evaluated at the Development Cooperation Forum (DCF) since 2005, but sustainability aspects have remained, for the most part, a side-issue. Furthermore, some other mechanisms – notably the OECD Development Assistance Committee (DAC) Peer Reviews and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) – have been established to identify and analyse strengths and weaknesses in the implementation of development goals in some regions, but this is not the case everywhere.

The surprise element: follow-up and review as part of the post-2015 agenda

During the Rio+20 conference, the UN Member States were unable to reach a decision on a monitoring and review system for the SDGs. As a consequence, the outcome document is largely silent on the issue. Over the last three years, however, there have been increasingly vociferous calls for a “robust review”. Still, the negotiation of follow-up and review as an integral element of the post-2015 agenda took even the experts by surprise.

There are two conceivable reasons for this development:

Firstly, the negotiations in the Open Working Group have resulted in the Member States assuming a relatively high degree of *ownership* of the process and the goals themselves. What’s more, the interest and support of many civil society groups and other stakeholders have been secured through broad-based consultation processes, with the result that many of the negotiators and stakeholders are now more willing to press for effective measures to implement the shared goals. And secondly, these universal goals are to be implemented as part of a “new global partnership”. The current texts being negotiated convey the impression that countries are aware of their “shared responsibility” and are willing to act accordingly. It is to be hoped that this is not simply a replay of the euphemisms previously deployed and implemented, rather unconvincingly, in MDG 8. The aim is, after all, to ensure that in future, the industrialised countries not only review their development in terms of its sustainability, but also their aid obligations to developing and support for emerging countries. At the same time, the latter have a responsibility to review their own efforts in the context of both national implementation and in-

ternational cooperation and financing. This type of “mutual review” would certainly create good starting points for a deal that would benefit both sides.

Elements of a follow-up and review mechanism

In other words, a window of opportunity exists, but many issues are still unresolved. During the negotiations at the end of May 2015, it became clear that countries were able to agree on shared principles for follow-up and review, and this is now reflected in the zero draft of the post-2015 agenda. It states that there should be a voluntary, multi-tiered, universal, positive, efficient, transparent and participatory review process, based on facts, data, scientific findings, and evidence-based solutions, and encompassing all dimensions of sustainable development, including the means of implementation. This sounds very positive – but the crux lies in the detail and the divergent interpretations of these principles.

Even on the issue of whether there should be *mandatory* monitoring of implementation against a set of universal indicators defined at the global level, some countries were already signalling their disquiet. They would prefer to make their own decisions on which indicators should be utilised at the national level. In reality, however, chances are quite good that the 100 or so indicators that the UN Statistical Commission will present by March 2016 will be used for this annual monitoring. This is implied, too, by the zero draft, which proposes that an annual SDG progress report based on these indicators should be prepared by the same Inter-agency Expert Group that is currently developing the list of indicators. There is a general consensus that in many countries, data collection and processing capacities will have to be strengthened in order to establish a sound basis for reporting on these indicators and for participation in the review process. Where the resources for this are to come from remains unclear, however.

National reviews

Generally, countries are reluctant to agree to any intervention in their national implementation processes. This applies, firstly, to demands for binding reporting on progress, with reports to be produced in a harmonised format and for subsequent submission to the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). Secondly, some delegates have been criticising those elements of the proposed review that would allow more intensive critical analysis of the national reports and discussion of necessary changes, all this in a process involving parliaments and municipalities,

civil society and other local stakeholders. Although most countries accept the principle of government accountability to citizens in the national context, they nevertheless insist on fleshing out this principle as they see fit and they completely reject the notion that it should have validity at the international level. Furthermore, some countries point out that in a future review, non-state actors in receipt of public funds and responsible for implementing relevant projects should be required to report on these activities.

Regional reviews

According to the zero draft, there will also be scope for regional reviews. However, views on this particular issue vary widely: the Latin American countries, for example, are already setting up a forum for peer reviews under the auspices of their Economic Commission (ECLAC), whereas some countries are more restrained, as they do not necessarily wish to recognise their neighbours as peers. Moreover, while the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UN-ECE) has experience with regional reviews and also has resources at its disposal, the Regional Commissions for Asia lack these capacities. Many African countries are relying on the African Union and the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM) to provide a basis. The wording of the zero draft consequently implies that a flexible approach could be adopted in relation to *how* Member States shape their regional processes; they are encouraged to identify or establish suitable regional forums themselves.

Global reviews

At the global level, many Member States regard the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development as the centrepiece of the United Nations review process. Indeed, this is spelled out in Resolution 67/290 on the format and organizational aspects of the HLPF. However, this is where opinions diverge: those wishing to see the HLPF taking on a stronger institutional role are calling for more negotiating days and better resourcing, e.g. in the form of a dedicated secretariat and bureau. Others regard the HLPF as being more akin to a platform whose purpose is purely to facilitate high-level discussion of the results of reviews, with the reviews themselves being conducted at the regional level or under the auspices of ECOSOC and its various bodies. They therefore reject any broadening of the mandate and/or increase in resources.

There is, however, general agreement that *existing* review processes should be used effectively – but the question of precisely *how* this should be achieved is still unresolved. The United Nations

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) has undertaken a mapping of the existing processes but this document does not address this particular question. One option may be to establish an Inter-Agency Task Force through which representatives of the UN system would feed the results of their review processes into the HLPF and channel its recommendations back to their home institutions. The question of how to realise the review of the UN entities' implementation actions, called for in the HLPF resolution, also needs to be resolved.

Beyond these institutional issues, there is, of course, the issue of the content of the HLPF review. There is a general consensus that successful policies and solutions that might inspire other countries should be shared, and there is surely no disputing that general sustainable development trends and progress on individual SDGs should also be discussed. However, a controversial issue is whether the relevant data broken down to the country level should be presented for critical debate as well. Here, countries are worried about negative finger-pointing. But unless they know where the problems lie, countries cannot make the necessary adjustments, and the UN system cannot provide targeted support.

And finally, there is another highly sensitive issue: as already occurred during the negotiations on the *means of implementation* in April 2015, a heated debate in May focused once again on the form that the follow-up and review process for financing and the other means of implementation should take. The HLPF resolution makes it clear that the means of implementation should also be included in the review process. However, it is still unclear whether this applies only to the MoI specified in the OWG proposal or also to the topics being addressed in the parallel negotiations on Financing for Development (FFD). The G77 countries are calling for a separate follow-up mechanism for the FFD negotiations, whereas the donor countries regard this as unnecessary and are instead proposing a joint and coherent process under the HLPF. However, developing countries fear that this linkage could jeopardise the outcomes of the FFD negotiations, which started a good 10 years earlier and encompass other thematic areas in addition to the MoI listed in the OWG document.

Less controversial but still unclear is the role that *science* is to play in the review process. The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) will be one important resource for the review. It is to provide a scientific assessment of developments, making reference, in this context, to data of relevance to the SDGs. The precise format that this is to take is to be decided "as soon as possible". Member States should utilise the opportunity afforded by the next HLPF, when the second edition of the GSDR will be presented.

What happens next?

In June and July 2015, the next rounds of negotiations and the HLPF will offer an opportunity for Member States to revisit and, one would hope, to clarify unresolved issues. Some of the relevant recommendations have already been mentioned. However, a general question which arises is whether attempting to clarify all the details and resolve critical issues by negotiation is in fact a wise approach. The zero draft proposes that the Secretary-General should be tasked with preparing guidelines for national reports and review processes and for state-led reviews at the HLPF. If this proposal were accepted, it is likely to produce a more innovative format for the reviews than would be achieved through negotiations, when states tend to opt for a more conservative approach in order to safeguard their control.

The zero draft also encourages Member States to develop “ambitious national responses” to the SDGs as soon as possible. Existing sustainability strategies or development plans could be adapted for this purpose. Germany has already embarked on this process within the framework of the forthcoming regular revision of its National Sustainability Strategy. This is very welcome and should now be linked with broad public consultation processes so that the issue is firmly embedded in society. At regional level, the EU’s Sustainable Development Strategy must be revitalised as a matter of urgency, and the Europe 2020 goals and targets must be aligned to the SDGs.

For the voluntary global review at the HLPF, the degree of success achieved in the first rounds of the review process will be crucial. During the negotiations in May, one government representative suggested that it would be better to talk about “review and follow-up” rather than “follow-up and review”. This goes to the heart of the matter: only if the reviews achieve relevant results in the first rounds and lead to improved implementation actions will the voluntary process gain any traction. One option is for the German Government to form a lead coalition with partner countries and present itself for review as early as 2016, a prospect raised during a side event in New York in May. In parallel, countries with an interest in review could be supported in their efforts by means of a suitable platform or partnership. Drawing on the experience gained by this group, a results-oriented review process could then be developed over time, in keeping with the idea of a learning institution, as an effective means to an end: safeguarding sustainable development worldwide.

Author

Dr Marianne Beisheim | Senior Researcher, Global Issues Division at Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik (German Institute for International and Security Affairs - SWP), Berlin

Further information

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