

Summary of the First Meeting of the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals

14-15 March 2013

The first session of the Open Working Group (OWG) of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) was convened at United Nations Headquarters in New York on 14 and 15 March 2013. The President of the 67th session of the General Assembly, H.E. Mr. Vuk Jeremić, welcomed the Group's members and thanked co-facilitators H.E. Mr. Csaba Körösi of Hungary and H.E. Mr. Macharia Kamau of Kenya, as well as H.E. Ms. Maria Luiza Ribeiro Viotti of Brazil for their engagement and leadership in preparing for the Group's first meeting. Recalling the Rio outcome, he highlighted the agreed criteria for SDGs, and said that the OWG should aim to establish new forms of engagement to ensure that a balanced and coherent proposal could be submitted to the 68th session of the General Assembly. He highlighted the intergovernmental process to propose options for an effective sustainable development financing strategy, the ongoing consultations on the High-level Political Forum, the Secretary-General's High-level Panel, and the Special Event on MDGs in September 2013 as complementary strands in the post-Rio follow-up and conceptualization of the post-2015 development agenda that should inform and guide the Group's work on the SDGs.

The Secretary-General H.E. Mr. Ban Ki-Moon stressed the urgency of the challenges that the planet faces, noting that the 1000-day deadline to achieve the MDGs demands acceleration of progress, and suggesting that the SDGs could extend the effort to eradicate poverty while furthering the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. He stated that the future development agenda will carry increased focus on rule of law and human rights; empowerment of women and gender equality; and the special needs of Least Developed Countries (LDCs) and post-conflict states. He highlighted the consultations being carried out by the United Nations Development Group (UNDG) in 83 countries including thematic consultations on 11 issues, asked member States to recall the promises made in Rio, and called for the post-2015 development agenda to be rooted within one set of SDGs.

The Group elected the Ambassadors from Kenya and Hungary as its Co-Chairs by acclamation. Co-Chair Kamau noted this opportunity to present initial views on the SDGs, emphasizing that deliberations should be open to all stakeholders and supported by scientific evidence. He presented the provisional agenda and programme of work of the meeting, and one member State expressed its reservation on the interpretation of the issue of consensus within the group.

Nikhil Seth, Director of the Division for Sustainable Development (DESA), introduced the Secretary-General's Initial Input to the OWG (A/67/634). He presented highlights from member States' responses to questions on priority areas and underpinning principles; balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development; applying global, universally applicable goals at the country level; and incorporating existing goals and targets into the SDGs while ensuring coherence with the post-2015 development agenda. He underscored agreement on the need for inclusion of all stakeholders, and said that a new cooperation framework should be effectively linked with the evolving institutional arrangements and outcomes of processes agreed at Rio+20, including a financing strategy for sustainable

development, technology facilitation, a strengthened UNEP, and an effective monitoring and review process under the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development.

General Discussion

During the general discussion, statements were made by 50 Member States, seven political groups, three major groups, and three intergovernmental organizations. Members of the OWG and others highlighted many concepts that began to set the foundation and tone for future discussions on how to develop the SDGs. Many agreed that discussions must be open, transparent and inclusive, and that civil society, the private sector, and other groups have much to contribute. A number of speakers stressed that research-based evidence and a multi-disciplinary approach must inform the discussions on SDGs, highlighting reports such as GEO5 that find a lack of progress in important areas – especially on the environmental dimension of sustainable development.

Some speakers acknowledged that current models for development are unsustainable and that the SDGs must represent a new development agenda that respects the physical constraints of the planet and can also lift the poorest people out of poverty. Poverty is multi-dimensional, must remain at the heart of the development agenda, and must be tackled in a holistic manner. Many also emphasized the importance of changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. Removing inequalities and achieving social justice seen by many as inextricably linked with reducing environmental degradation. Noting that LDCs are proportionally under-represented within the group, it will be important to ensure their full engagement in the group's work and reflect their priorities in the outcome. Speakers representing vulnerable groups stated that proposals would be forthcoming on possible SDGs that could address their specific needs.

Many statements reaffirmed the criteria for SDGs mandated by the Rio+20 outcome: that the SDGs should be coherent with and integrated into the UN post-2015 development agenda and harmonize with efforts to achieve the MDGs without diverting attention or resources for their achievement. Many emphasized that the SDGs must be based on the priorities identified and goals agreed in Agenda 21, the JPOI, and the Rio+20 outcome; and coherent with other international agreements such as the Istanbul Programme of Action, the Barbados Programme of Action and the Mauritius Strategy. It was suggested that compiling and mapping all relevant existing goals would be helpful to deliberations on the SDGs. The OWG should also build on the work of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel, and the UNDG consultation process. One speaker cautioned not to preempt the OWG's final outcome in envisioning one set of goals. Another cautioned against including areas diverging from the topic of development (China) and another expressed its reservation on incorporating a fourth dimension of peace and security. Some delegations also highlighted the importance of effective follow-up and monitoring to the SDGs; one country mentioned that this task should be carried out by the High-Level Political Forum.

Achieving and building on the MDGs

While the MDGs have demonstrated the effectiveness of international goals to galvanize action and political will toward a core set of development priorities, some noted that they are not inclusive or universal (applying largely to developing countries), do not address underlying structural factors contributing to poverty, and lack emphasis on sustainable development –

weaknesses that the SDGs could seek to rectify. Some suggested that the SDGs should be elaborated from the foundation of the MDGs, to ensure that unfinished work of the MDGs is completed and that countries working to achieve the MDGs are not left at a disadvantage. The SDGs should allow for the global partnership for sustainable development to be enhanced, founded on strong political will and shared responsibility.

Balancing the three dimensions, linking priority areas

More discussion is needed within the OWG on how to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development—whether to set goals and targets within each of the three dimensions and then assess their interlinkages, or to try and build the three dimensions into the main architecture of the goals themselves, such as with the SG’s Sustainable Energy for All Initiative. Some members envisioned linkages among priority areas such as energy, food and water; this approach invites further discussions.

National application of global goals

The question of how to translate global, universal goals into national contexts is another area for further discussion. Most speakers highlighted national priorities for progress, including in areas such as universal access to water and sanitation, youth employment, gender equality and empowerment, education, enhancing resilience, and mitigating climate change. Some highlighted the need to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation, including through phase out of harmful subsidies. Some stressed that the rights of indigenous peoples including prior informed consent, and the rights of women and girls including prevention of domestic violence, should also be addressed in the SDGs. Several suggested that a dashboard of targets and indicators tailored to and agreed at national levels through a consultative process could ensure results at regional and global levels. Countries could then select appropriate target levels from the dashboard based on national circumstances.

Guiding principles

The Rio principles were reiterated by many as underpinning the SDGs, including the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Several referred to the principles contained in the Millennium Declaration, notably internationally recognized human rights and fundamental freedoms, including the right to development, the rule of law and good governance. Some referred to equity and sustainability as two fundamental principles that should inform the SDGs. Many referred to need to tackle inequalities within and between countries.

Means of implementation

Financing the SDGs is a key concern for many countries; indeed, adequate means of implementation (MOI) is considered critically important for the success of the SDGs, and the OWG will require future discussions on this issue. Speakers highlighted the need to build on MOI outlined in existing agreements, including the Monterrey Consensus; called for debt relief and special support to poor highly indebted countries; and emphasized the need for increased technology transfer and South-South cooperation. Several speakers observed the need for diverse financing approaches, since financing sources for ending poverty and for fostering sustainable development (e.g. to address global challenges like climate change, biodiversity) can differ significantly and funds should not be diverted away from attainment of the MDGs. Some mentioned that developing countries should receive adequate and effective international

assistance, including through the facilitation of their transition to green economies. The role of middle-income countries is also vital to reducing inequalities and building new partnerships beyond traditional donor-recipient relationships.

Interactive Discussion on the SDGs

Co-Chair Körösi moderated an interactive discussion on the afternoon of 14 March, as a component of the OWG's first meeting. He welcomed four expert panel speakers representing the Secretary-General's High-level Panel, civil society and the scientific community. Following brief presentations, an open session of questions and answers focused on themes of coherence, integration of the three sustainable development dimensions, creating universal goals, and priority areas to be addressed by the SDGs. A concept note including discussion questions was circulated to the group.

Amina Mohammed, Secretary-General's Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, underscored the need to base the deliberations of the OWG on the results of the existing processes and to remain committed to the unfinished business of the MDGs. She highlighted priorities that would require coherent action by the international community, including promoting inclusive growth, balance between people and planet, good governance and human rights, and peace and freedom from violence. She reaffirmed the United Nation's commitment to an inclusive process in developing a successor framework to the MDGs that will galvanize action at the country level. Ms. Mohammed stressed that discussions on a new framework presented an opportunity for a paradigm shift that would embrace the different sets of challenges and integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development while keeping the original emphasis on poverty reduction.

Martin Khor, Executive Director, South Centre, said that the post-2015 process presents an invaluable opportunity for the United Nations to face multiple global crises and emphasized the importance of international cooperation to support the efforts of developing countries, in particular by removing barriers to development and reforming the international economic and financial system; and by ensuring finance, technology and other means of implementation. Mr. Khor proposed reflecting these elements in the structure of the SDG framework, which could include a section on principles and modalities in line with the Rio+20 outcome document, a section containing international goals in areas like trade, technology and investment, targets and actions, and one containing national level economic, social and environmental goals, with goals specified for developing and developed countries. Highlighting that it would be challenging to merge the SDGs and post-MDGs because of their different mandates and histories, he suggested that a decision should be taken at later stage in the process.

Manish Bapna, Executive Vice President and Managing Director, World Resources Institute, proposed that the SDGs should build on the successes of the MDGs while addressing their shortcomings by giving increased attention to interlinkages and by responding to the call for universality, with goals that ask more of high-income countries than the MDGs did. He said that the SDGs should be forward-looking and flexible, anticipating future challenges, should respect environmental thresholds and tackle essential questions of inequalities. Equity and sustainability are "must haves, not nice to haves". He suggested that the SDGs should strive to be multidimensional and integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development into each goal

and by going beyond traditional economic indicators. He stated the need to have explicit global goals on sustainability to tackle collective action problems, such as forests or sustainable consumption and production. Lastly, Mr. Bapna said that goals should be the basis for a new global partnership, with differentiation, and that they must animate the public imagination.

David Steven, Associate Director, Center on International Cooperation, New York University, highlighted the SDGs as an historic opportunity to end poverty and build inclusive, prosperous societies, cautioning that SDGs are not just about the environment. He suggested that the focus of SDGs should be on areas where there is a clear case for international action and where there are not already agreed goals somewhere in the international system. He argued that a political consensus needs to be built first, that SDGs will not themselves build that consensus. Core poverty issues could be addressed first, building consensus and momentum to tackle more contentious areas. Mr. Steven stressed the importance of designing simple and memorable goals, which provide a focus for debate, advocacy and policy development, attract and direct resources, and focus on the next generation of young people. Finally, he argued that no goal should be set without a plan for implementation, including financing, and data to monitor progress.

The presentations were followed by a highly interactive discussion among panelists and member States. The discussion highlighted the need for people-focused goals, with all goals including environmental ones seen to contribute to people-centred development. The focus on the near-term attainment of the MDGs should be retained, with SDGs requiring longer-term structural changes – as one noted, a paradigm shift. Some suggested that goals be clustered according to the three pillars, and then the linkages could be considered later. Others felt that developing separate goals for the economic, social and environmental pillars risks diminishing the prominence of both equity and sustainability. The three dimensions are seen as intertwined and interdependent. Several speakers expressed concern about the tendency to think and work in silos by continuing to refer to distinct “pillars”.

One country raised the issue of how to balance incentives both for economic growth and for sustainable development, for example with regard to energy and fossil fuel subsidies, and several speakers highlighted the need for social protection programmes to replace subsidies.

A number of speakers stressed the need to build flexibility into the SDGs, to allow for a dynamic response to changes in different time frames. The challenges of achieving development goals could be significantly greater, for example, if we find ourselves in a 4°C world rather than a 2°C world.

On the theme of framing the SDGs, one panelist suggested a longer declaration or plan of action to capture the complexity of the SDGs, which would themselves be expressed more simply. Issues of accountability and transparency were emphasized; and natural capital accounting at the country level was highlighted by several, as was the important role of the private sector in changing unsustainable patterns of consumption and production. One speaker observed that absolute or “zero goals”, would demand a strong rights-based agenda, including gender rights as women often have more limited access to assets, goods and services so would benefit most from universal access.

Next steps

In closing the meeting, Co-Chair Körösi indicated that he would convene brief consultations the following week on short workprogramme for the group. It was noted that the meetings should be of at least three days. They should be announced in advance so as to secure representation from the capitals.