

Outline for New York talk, 19 January 2015.

Integrating sustainable development goals and targets into the post-2015 development agenda

Your Excellencies the Co-facilitators of the intergovernmental negotiations,
Excellencies, Distinguished Guests,

I feel honoured to have been invited to talk to you today. As you may know the Overseas Development Institute and other members of the Independent Research Forum have sought to contribute in various ways to debate about the post-2015 development agenda, over the past two years. So it's a privilege, as you begin the intergovernmental negotiations, to have the opportunity to speak to you this afternoon – and a bit daunting given the breadth of issues we are dealing with, but perhaps not as daunting as the task you have yourselves over the next few months. I can only hope that what I have to say provides some food for thought and helps to make your task a little less onerous.

This is not the place and moment to provide you with lots of additional information to consider, nor detailed analysis of the proposal from the Open Working Group or the Secretary-General's Synthesis Report. There has been plenty of that already, including by ODI and the IRF. So, I would like to confine my remarks to five points: my first two points are about fundamentals; the other three concern the framework and its implementation and use. I put them forward here for your consideration, and perhaps as points to be kept in mind over the next six months.

My first point is to suggest, at this stocktaking stage, and before you get deeply into negotiation and a focus on formulating an agreement, is to take a moment to stand back from the process and questions about what the goals and targets should be – stand back and ask 'what is the real purpose of the SDGs?' I feel that sometimes, in the attention given to the framing of the goals and targets, it has been too easy to lose sight of the why. How are you going to justify them to your head of government? How are you going to explain why they are necessary to your country's citizens? Increasingly during 2015 we're going to be faced with these questions.

There may of course be more than one purpose – but it would still be helpful to reflect on what they are. In particular, I would ask whether the SDGs are intended by the international community to be aspirational and norm-setting, or are they seen more as a plan for action? The fundamental purpose makes a difference to the way the goals and targets are articulated and how the package will be communicated and used across the world to inspire aspiration, ambition and action for sustainable development.

You don't need me to remind you that a key difference between the SDGs and the MDGs is the greater attention given to the challenges of environmental sustainability – a genuine sustainable development agenda. This is my second fundamental point. No-one expects sustainable development to be achieved globally by 2030 – but the SDGs do need to put us all on a pathway towards it. The agreement in September presents a unique opportunity to define more clearly what the international community means by sustainable development, a phrase which has tended to be left unexplained when used in the past. The Open Working Group's proposals provide a much clearer picture of what sustainable development means than we have had in the past – what the long term goal is and what needs to be done over the next two decades to get there – and I believe potentially this has implications for other processes and agreements. That will depend in large part on the final agreement.

We have been talking about sustainable development and its three pillars or dimensions for more than three decades but have made very limited progress, if any, on the environmental front. The science is telling us that we do not have much time to change this – before it is too late and environmental damage, globally and locally, is irreversible and compromises human development and prosperity. An ambitious, internationally agreed, sustainable development agenda in the SDGs will be an important step towards actually realising past commitments to sustainable development.

This requires – and this is my third point – full and proper integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development across the goals. Many of you will have seen a colourful diagram showing how the goals and targets proposed by the Open Working Group reflect human development and environmental sustainability objectives. Indeed, the Open Working Group has gone a long way to integrate

sustainable development into to the framework. More could be done, but I would suggest that integrated agenda we require will not be effective if the integration of the social, economic and environmental dimensions is seen as a technical, a mechanical, exercise. Such an approach does not capture the idea that the social, the economic and the environmental are not separate pillars of sustainable development, but they are completely inseparable systems. All actions towards human development goals depend on the natural environment and in turn have an impact on the environment. The global and the local environment, we all know, are shaped by human activity – we are in the age of the Anthropocene. Achieving sustainable development will require integrated, holistic thinking, and changes in institutions and behaviour to reflect this. The SDG framework needs to promote and encourage this transformation. The language, the wording, of the goals and targets may be important politically – but it will also be important for putting us all onto a pathway towards sustainable development.

Integration within the SDG framework is also essential in another sense. A number of development challenges, such as gender, equality, rights, governance, and resilience, cut across all of the goals. Integration of these issues across goals and targets means there will be a need to ensure coherence across the goals and targets.

The suggested technical proofing of the targets proposed by the Open Working Group would provide an opportunity to check on how well key issues and the three dimensions of sustainable development are integrated in the framework – as well as making the targets as specific and measurable as possible. There are legitimate concerns that such an exercise might change the essence of the targets. That would certainly be a risk. But I would suggest that it is also a risk, if many of the proposed targets are not revised, that important elements of the framework may be regarded as irrelevant or not a priority, because their meaning is vague and open to interpretation, or because of a contradiction with another target. The framework needs targets that reflect what is intended to be achieved and to avoid inclusion of targets that risk being ignored.

A final aspect of integration takes me to my fourth point, the relationship between the global goals and targets and national goals and targets. The dimensions of

sustainable development and the cross-cutting issues need to be integrated across national development agendas if these are to be sustainable development agendas. Perhaps the most significant gap in the post-2015 framework at this stocktaking, beginning of the negotiations, stage is how the global agenda is linked to national goals and targets. Of course, the post-2015 sustainable development agenda will be pursued through nationally determined targets, appropriate to countries' conditions, capabilities and priorities. At one extreme, this could be interpreted as all countries defining a national target for each of the global targets; at the other extreme it could mean countries adopting a few of the global targets, and only those that guarantee achievement or match current national objectives. However, countries have a shared responsibility for the global agenda, and this calls for nationally determined targets to contribute to achievement of the global goals. The SDG agreement needs to reflect this.

My final point concerns the institutional and procedural architecture that will be necessary to ensure the SDGs are effective at bringing about the transformations that are envisaged. The SDG agenda is much broader than the MDGs, and needs to reach and influence a wider group of government and non-government actors. The roles and capacities of international organisations to support national target setting and implementation need to be considered, as do the roles and capacities of national organisations. The process and responsibilities for monitoring, reviewing and sharing learning about good practice, including data collection and harmonisation, all need to be considered. As you know, the Secretary-General has made suggestions in these areas, but up until now they have not received much attention in intergovernmental discussions.

Expectations are high for the international agreements to be concluded this year. There is a huge amount of work for you over the next six months, and I wish you well. I hope my few remarks provide some food for thought. Thank you for listening.