

Kate Donald, CESR – remarks on ‘follow-up and review’ panel at DESA/NGLS Stakeholder Forum, 16 January 2015

I’d like to use my few minutes here to ask: “Who’s afraid of accountability?”

It hasn’t escaped everyone’s notice that the title of the negotiation session in May scrupulously avoids mention of the A word. Indeed, it has evolved – or backtracked – from “monitoring and review”, and now just to ‘follow-up and review’. The place of accountability in the OWG outcome document was also weakened over successive drafts.

This suggests a troubling and short-sighted aversion on the part of many States to anything that hints they might be held accountable for their post-2015 commitments. [Ambassador Kamau was upfront about this “anxiety” of some Member States earlier today, although I’ve been very glad to hear some of the distinguished Ambassadors on the panel here today reclaim and embrace the term.] Yes, the SDGs will be voluntary, political pledges. But that doesn’t mean we shouldn’t seek to put in place robust, people-centred accountability mechanisms and processes.

Accountability doesn’t just mean courts, conditionality and punishment. Sometimes the legal system plays a role, yes. But accountability is much broader than this – and more far-reaching and transformative than this narrow view of accountability might suggest.

For example, accountability might encompass and include: reporting; monitoring by authorities, communities and independent bodies; complaints mechanisms; data and data analysis; budget analysis and expenditure tracking; lessons learned; policy reviews; hearings; surveys and report cards...among many other tools and practices which we already see on the ground in many countries.

By allowing for better feedback loops between States, people and communities and other development stakeholders, putting in place effective accountability mechanisms will increase the credibility, ownership and effectiveness of the post-2015 development agenda. It will also make progress towards the goals more inclusive, more empowering and more egalitarian, ensuring that no communities or groups are left behind – as long as the processes put in place actively seek out the voices of people living in poverty and marginalized groups. From the local level to the High Level Political Forum, we should be hearing regularly from these individuals and communities– what is working for them and what isn’t, and identifying who should be doing what to improve their situation. This will also generate important evidence about successful strategies and policies, and ones that are not performing as they should.

As the Secretary-General eloquently surmised in his Synthesis Report, we need a new paradigm of accountability - *“not one of conditionality or North to South, nor South to North, but rather one of all actors — governments, international institutions, private sector actors, and organizations of civil societies, and in all countries, to the people themselves. This is the real test of people-centred, planet-sensitive development.”*

I would like to applaud the Secretary-General for positioning monitoring and accountability mechanisms as a core component of the overall post-2015 agenda – at the national, regional and international levels. However, his proposals should represent a floor, not a ceiling. Yesterday, the Post-2015 Human Rights Caucus – of which my organization CESR is a co-convenor with Amnesty International and AWID – issued a joint statement responding to the Synthesis Report. One of the main things we highlighted is that the S-G’s proposals on “monitoring, evaluation and reporting” can be built upon and improved through a human rights perspective. His proposal positively reflects the need to ensure national-level ownership and accountability for the SDGs; but this must be underpinned by a safe and free environment for civil society, and access to information. Accountability is impossible if these elements are not in place. Meanwhile at the global level, truly people-centered, participatory accountability will require a more than just a ‘global component for knowledge sharing’. At all levels, the post-2015 accountability mechanisms must be robust and comprehensive enough to cover private sector actors, partnerships and IFIs as well as States, premised on full transparency and the right to information, and encompassing extra-territorial obligations. We also urge Member States to recognize and examine the role that existing human rights mechanisms, properly strengthened, can play in this process – and take human rights obligations into account in monitoring progress towards the SDGs, including examining the cross-border impacts of policies. Of course, we can also learn some important lessons from human rights monitoring mechanisms – including the UPR of the Human Rights Council, which I’d be happy to share some thoughts on in Q&A or in person.

So, in conclusion, I’d like to emphasize that, far from being afraid of accountability, Member States should embrace it with open arms, not as an optional add-on or onerous punishment device, but rather an integral part of the agenda itself. Done right, the post-2015 accountability architecture can uplift the whole agenda into the realm of the tangible, empowering and communally-owned. Anything less than full and meaningful accountability risks rendering the SDGs a set of lofty but empty promises, rather than the transformative agenda that civil society, the Secretary-General and many of you States delegates envision.