



Post-2015: Measuring the (real) scope of ambition

By Barbara Adams, Gretchen Luchsinger

The post-2015 development agenda aspires to global transformation. Its content so far, including the set of 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) agreed in last year's Open Working Group, affirms that aim through an unprecedented commitment to inclusion, sustainability and universality. This suggests that the world might finally move beyond current imbalanced patterns of consumption and production that have left wide swathes of human deprivation and pushed the limits of planetary boundaries.

Yet the main question, after the most recent inter-governmental negotiations on the agenda in March in New York, is: will the political process live up to the agenda's promise? It is still early days in forging global consensus, but given the stakes at hand, momentum is critical. Will governments and all other actors exercise the kind of visionary leadership and risk-taking that transformation demands? Or will they fall back on protecting familiar vested interests and avoid risk by seeking easier, quicker agreement? Does the calculation of political risk overwhelm the very urgent imperative to take serious action on urgent issues—namely, the long-term survival of people and the planet?

Eyes on the issues, via process and politics

Many issues are essential to the sustainable development agenda. There are clear rationales for singling out actions on gender equality, labour rights, quality health and education services, the conservation of oceans, clean and accessible energy and so on. There are technical aspects related to advancing and measuring progress on each. But what do all have in common beyond being integral—and integrated—elements of a sustainable development agenda? All depend on deep-seated political commitment to transformative change, as should be reflected in the post-2015 negotiations.

This commitment needs to be rooted in genuine fairness and cooperation, because transformation, in a real sense, will require people to work together,

to move beyond just their own interests, and to share limited resources in a far more equitable manner. Without these shifts, and the significant re-directions in global political and economic dynamics they imply, progress on any issue, from reducing poverty to saving forests, will automatically be constrained, and probably not sustainable.

The most recent round of negotiations suggested this understanding was not quite in play among all delegates. Some sought to switch the narrative mainly to national or narrow issue interests, and away from global ones. They know that from here on, containing the agenda means controlling the scope of the outcome.

Thwarted ambition?

The March session was dedicated to the post-2015 goals, targets and indicators. Much of the week was spent on intensive talks around whether or not to reopen negotiations on the targets affirmed by the Open Working Group for the 17 SDGs. Rich countries mostly pushed for reopening; developing countries opposed this as threatening the “delicate political balance” crafted last year. Among 169 previously agreed targets, the rich country argument centred on 19 for which the UN Secretariat had suggested technical “improvements.” These covered filling some remaining gaps marked by placeholder “x’s” and adjusting language inconsistent with or weaker than existing international agreements. A few rich countries went beyond the 19 and suggested that many other targets should also be improved, contending that the post-2015 agenda needs to be as ambitious as possible, and therefore should be guided by the most ambitious targets.

But was this really about ambition? The Open Working Group agreement took many months of hard negotiations to conclude. Only a few months remain before the September Summit, where heads of state and government will descend on New York to endorse the final post-2015 agenda.

Is it possible that some rich countries pushed as far as they did on opening the agenda so that develop-

ing countries would dig in and resist all attempts to do so? This approach to making global agreements protects the “delicate political balance,” but reduces prospects for collaboration to fine-tune the targets and possibly to reach agreement at the Third Conference on Financing for Development.

A dose of essential medicine

The calls for being ambitious in some instances attempted to hide the reality of a lack of ambition—perhaps from a concern late in the game that the post-2015 agenda goes too far, at least from the perspective of some vested interests. Rich countries urged alignment with existing international standards—fair enough. Who wants to backtrack? Except... behind the scenes some were insisting on maintaining a reference to access to “essential” medicines and obstructing a broader reference to medicines in general that would have brought target language in line with the 2001 Doha Declaration.

Worth keeping in mind is that revenues for global pharmaceutical companies, mostly based in rich countries, have soared from \$390 billion in 2001 to nearly \$1 trillion in 2013, approximately the period of the MDGs. These companies currently spend much more on selling products than researching new drugs, focus little attention on diseases afflicting poorer people and countries, and, if patterns across transnational corporations hold, pay a scant amount towards the taxes developing countries need to provide essential services. Can we talk about transformation and ambition if the idea is just a kind of MDG+, where developing countries are expected to improve their health systems, somehow, without sufficient resources and affordable access to all medicines? What might transformation look like if it began with those who have a highly disproportionate share of resources, rather than with those without enough for the basics of development?

An indicator of what's ahead

Delegates agreed that the process of defining indicators under each of the 169 targets should be taken up by the UN Statistics Commission, with completion of the work expected in the first part of 2016. As many pointed out, designing correct indicators is a technical process that requires statistical expertise, amply provided by the national statisticians who sit on the commission.

Yet indicators are also political, including through their selection, which explains the multiple calls to ensure political oversight of the commission's work. Postponing indicator selection to 2016 means that they will be decided outside the global spotlight

currently shining on the post-2015 agenda. Countries intent on reducing their commitments and responsibilities could use the process for backdoor “re-engineering.” Alternatively, lower political pressure could provide opportunities to improve the quality and ambition of the agenda. Whether the choice becomes to scale up or scale down, measurement will largely determine what's visible, what's financed, who's accountable, and what can actually be claimed as progress (or the opposite).

Many areas of the sustainable development agenda have not yet been measured, but that does not mean that they cannot be measured—in some cases, the obstacles are as much political as technical. Similarly, many statistical offices especially in poorer countries have low capacities—one delegate described how enacting the much simpler set of MDG indicators took 11 years. But capacities can be developed with adequate support, particularly from those with the greatest ability (and responsibility) to provide assistance. The indicators are, again, a chance for aiming high—or remaining stuck in the status quo.

A few good ideas...

Since the post-2015 agenda is universal, it will call on rich countries, for the first time, to report to the United Nations on progress under each of the targets and indicators. The March session saw a number of rich countries starting to describe their plans to implement the agenda within their own borders. Their presentations included acknowledgement that a paradigm shift is at work, and that they need to take steps including to improve their own statistical capacities—providing an unusual “leveling” sense of how all countries, rich and poor, face some similar issues. Presentations by diverse developing countries injected a further note of optimism, with some already well advanced in integrating the SDGs in national planning.

Another positive was repeated emphasis on the integrated nature of the post-2015 agenda—beyond the so-called “delicate political balance,” many people realize that while the agenda may feel messy and complex at times, all issues must be dealt with together. Some calls to simplify and aggregate indicators were met by equally strong voices emphasizing that even if it requires more time and resources, disaggregation is critical to making everyone and every issue visible. One developing country delegate underscored that the real point is to start looking at causes, not just symptoms.

What's Not on the Agenda?

While rich countries have started to talk about how they will implement the post-2015 agenda, their fo-

cus is almost exclusively on actions they will take at home—to improve gender equality, reduce food waste, green the economy and reduce child poverty, for example—and on how they will spend foreign aid budgets. But if the goal is transformation, rich countries need to act equally on the principle of do no harm, and embrace a broader notion of international responsibility. Do no harm is contradicted by current global spillover effects from tax evasion and currency manipulation, to cite just two examples. International responsibility is not just about aid, but about addressing systemic obstacles, such as undemocratic international financial governance and a lack of financial regulation. For more, see [Goals for the Rich](#).

Unpacking a Word...

Technical. It sounds desirable, coming with the imprimatur of evidence and scientific purpose. The word has been used often in discussing the alignment of goals, targets and indicators in the post-2015 agenda. And yet, in an environment where trust is shaky, the technical easily verges on the political. A proposed technical proofing of the targets soon became referred to as a political proofing by developing country delegates, aware of how political choices were being made through the language and selection of the targets and indicators. Rich countries repeatedly claimed to be upholding high technical standards, but here's how that can work. One such delegate suggested making "meaningful technical improvements" to a target on development-oriented policies that support productive activities. He first defined this as being about an enabling business environment, and then proposed a new target with a number for new business start-ups, cutting out previous references to development and decent job creation. He argued for being clear and precise.

There is, however, a great deal of clarity about how starting businesses does not automatically translate into enough decent jobs. Precision, at least in terms of alignment with the post-2015 agenda, requires making the link between business growth and employment, because the point is not just to create new enterprises and hope for trickle down, but to reduce poverty and inequalities, and improve human well-being—decent jobs being basic requirements for all these aims. For more on decent work, see the most recent [ECOSOC Integration Segment](#).

Looking ahead to FfD3

The next post-2015 session (20-24 April) will take up the issue of means of implementation, on the heels of the first round of negotiations on the draft outcome document for the Third Conference on Fin-

ancing for Development (13-17 April). Each of the first 16 SDGs includes targets on means of implementation; the 17th goal is about strengthening the means of implementation overall, through targets on finance, technology and capacity building, among others.

There is currently a lack of clarity on how the two processes intersect. What is clear is that the structure of the global economy—which determines the flow of finance, investment, technology, capacities, and so on—will define the success or failure of the goals. Some rich countries would like to incorporate the FfD3 outcome agreement as the means of implementation "pillar" of post-2015; many developing countries fear this could potentially undermine the means specified under each goal. It could also dilute the scope of the FfD3 agreement, which has a mandate beyond the SDGs, and places stronger and more detailed emphasis on systemic, structural issues.

The post-2015 agenda, for example, currently talks about improving domestic tax capacity—in part to pay for the many public services essential to a variety of the SDGs. FfD3 provides scope for moving efforts to stem illicit financial flows, 80 percent of which are due to tax evasion, outside the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development and into a more democratic and globally representative UN Tax Commission.

The post-2015 agenda calls for addressing the external debt of poor countries, which can soak up resources that might otherwise go towards development. FfD3 could establish a debt workout mechanism that is situated in a neutral, intergovernmental forum, rather than being run by creditors, unbound by responsible lending principles, as is current practice.

Looking forward to FfD3, some issues to keep an eye on include discussions around access to countercyclical finance during downturns in order to stimulate recovery. The concept of the global partnership for sustainable development could be more precise in defining the roles and obligations of different actors, and upholding the central roles of states.

Definition is particularly needed for the private sector, where current incentive structures more often than not undercut sustainable development. Businesses may make logical partners for some infrastructure projects. Their activities can also be the source of financial instability and crisis, not to mention many social and environmental ills. For their part, private foundations, while offering an influx of new funds in recent years, have run up against criticisms that they distort public programmes with little in the way of accountability beyond their own boards.

What's Happening Next

Post-2015 negotiations

- 20–24 April: Means of implementation and global partnership for sustainable development
- 18–22 May: Follow-up and review
- 22–25 June: Intergovernmental negotiations on the outcome document
- 6-8 July: High-level Political Forum, “Strengthening integration, implementation and review—the HLPF after 2015”
- 6-10 July ECOSOC High-level Segment, “Managing the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals: What will it take?”
- 20-24 July, 27-31 July: Intergovernmental negotiations on the outcome document
- 25-27 September: UN Summit: “Delivering on and Implementing a Transformative Post-2015 Development Agenda”

FfD3 negotiations

- 8-9 April: Civil Society and Business Sector Hearings
- 8-10 April: Development Cooperation Forum, “Development cooperation for people and planet: What will it take?”
- 13–17 April: Intergovernmental negotiations on the outcome document
- 15–19 June: Intergovernmental negotiations on the outcome document
- 13–16 July: 3rd Conference on Financing for Development

To Find Out More

- [UN Sustainable Development Knowledge Platform](#)
- [Proposals for the SDGs](#)
- [Financing for Development III: official website](#)
- [Statistics Commission](#)
- [ECOSOC Integration Segment](#)
- [Goals for the Rich](#)
- [Reflection Group](#)

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