

multilateral accent

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Editorial

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is one of the multilateral highlights of 2015.

Last September, over 190 UN member states declared their willingness to jointly achieve seventeen global targets for sustainable development (Sustainable Development Goals, SDGs) by 2030. The heads of state agreed to enshrine both the means of implementation as well as the foundations for review mechanisms into the Agenda. This is to be viewed as a multilateral success and is key to achieving the targets and providing future generations with a better world by 2030.

From the outset, Switzerland worked together with countries from different continents as part of an intergovernmental process to ensure that an effective and efficient review mechanism would be part of the 2030 Agenda. The involvement and cooperation of all the relevant players is crucial.

At present the plan is to make the cornerstones of this mechanism more concrete and to set a good example: Switzerland will continue to work multilaterally to implement and monitor the goals of the 2030 Agenda, both as part of the intergovernmental process and via its priority multilateral institutions. The latter will play a key role not only in providing support for implementation but also in the monitoring and review of the Agenda.

Nicole Ruder
Daniel Birchmeier

Sustainable development that can be measured



The Sustainable Development Goals adopted by the United Nations in September 2015 require close monitoring, and the necessary tools to accomplish this are currently being developed.

There is clearly no point in setting targets if there is no way of measuring the progress made or knowing what the right course of action to take is. Put simply, this reflection led the United Nations to include the tools for verifying the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the body of its framework document entitled the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Adopted in September 2015, the seventeen goals also form a compass for steering the activities of development organisations between now and 2030.

This commitment to monitoring progress and to including the relevant tools in the 2030 Agenda itself is based on a widely shared premise that the Millennium Development Goals (which preceded the SDGs, 2000-2015) lacked the tools necessary to verify their implementation.

The SDGs represent a real paradigm shift away from the Millennium Development Goals. Rooted in wide-ranging consultation under the leadership of interdependent member states, the SDGs will apply to all countries and not just nations from the developing world, as well as to all development stakeholders including the private sector (see page 4). The United Nations System is also active on this basis, including in its monitoring function.

Monitoring and Review

In a study published in early 2015, the German foundation SWP (Stiftung Wissenschaft und Politik) insisted on the fact that SDG monitoring required more than a mere review consisting chiefly of making observations and collecting data for control purposes which was deemed necessary but not

sufficient. The follow-up and review implies “a critical analysis of the reasons for the implementation being successful (or not). The ultimate goal is quality assurance and fact-finding in order to identify the necessary changes”. By committing to the process very early on through an inter-regional group made up of seven countries, Switzerland is well positioned and has played a key role as “honest broker”.

The Sustainable Development Agenda stipulates that the tools used for monitoring purposes must be universal, regular, transparent, fact-based and results-oriented, while taking all stakeholders into account. These tools are voluntary. This was evidently the only way to gain wide-scale support, as numerous countries feared for their sovereignty. According to the UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon, governments will nonetheless be encouraged to participate in monitoring and review as the process is universal, encouraging emulation and facilitating the exchange of experiences, without naming and shaming the worst performers. The role of civil society as a stimulus will be crucial.

Three levels of intervention

It is not a case of reinventing the wheel given that many ‘surveillance’ systems already exist within the United Nations and the World Bank. The goal is to avoid duplications, if possible, instead using or adding to pre-existing systems. All countries are already expected to report to various committees, councils and assemblies with regard to economic, social and cultural rights, human rights, the eradication of discrimination towards women, or climate change.

The central platform for monitoring Sustainable Development Goals (emerged from the Rio+20 Final Document. This High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) is at the heart of the SDG monitoring tool worldwide. The forum operates under the aegis of the General Assembly of the UN and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and will accept all national, regional and thematic reports and provide political leadership.

Regionally, countries are encouraged to identify institutions best able to facilitate



The 2030 Agenda forms the basis for sustainable development in favour of future generations. Photo Dominic Chavez/World Bank.

the sharing of experiences. The African Peer Review Mechanism is a case in point. The success of the Sustainable Development Agenda depends above all on the way in which states translate the goals into reality, with local initiatives constituting the foundation. Countries have to establish a solid statistical system if one does not exist already, because without reliable data there is no means of measuring progress. These nations also agree to carry out regular and inclusive progress reviews in relation to implementation. The key indicators for data collection will form the backbone of monitoring the SDGs and are defined by the United Nations Statistical Commission.

A four-year cycle

In concrete terms, each country is invited to present a progress report to the HLPF every four years. This model was inspired by the Human Rights Council’s Universal Periodic Review mechanism. The document should include the seventeen SDGs, but each country is allowed to set out its own priorities. Whilst a number of issues are obligatory (preventing discrimination, human rights, etc.), others are dependent on the local context. Each country is required to identify its own targets and fulfil them. Other interest groups within the country representing civil society, the private sector and even large conurbations are also invited to contribute. Some countries are going to present the first step of the implementation process in 2016 — the year tools are to be introduced.

Governments can present yearly the progress made on specific theme or objectives. In parallel, United Nations’ specialised agencies and programmes like the Commission on the Status of Women or the Committee on World Food Security will update the HLPF on the progress made in their respective fields during a theme-based review. The HLPF will also ensure that the commitments made during the Conference on Development Financing held in Addis Ababa in July 2015 are honoured.

Supporting the poorest countries

The collection, comparison and analysis of data and the inclusive national review processes will enable progress to be evaluated more closely. While industrialised and emerging economies generally have a statistical system in place adapted to this ‘data revolution’, the situation varies greatly in developing countries. Under the name ‘Post-2015 Data Test’, a group of institutions carried out studies in eight countries, including Canada, Bangladesh and Senegal, to evaluate the statistical capacity of each one. Sierra Leone, which was recovering from a civil war (1991–2002), is an example of the improvements that need to be made in less developed countries. The data generated by the country are scarce, the tools at its disposal are mostly inadequate for monitoring progress in relation to SDGs and the necessary financial resources are not available.

The UN development system (the UNDP playing a leading role) and the World Bank will contribute by training staff, providing financial support as well as collecting and analysing data. The fifteen year SDG plan should create the momentum for an effective monitoring system in most countries.



Meeting of the High-level Political Forum that coordinates the Sustainable Development Goals, New York 2015. Photo IISD.

Three Questions to Thomas Gass



Thomas Gass is UN Assistant Secretary-General in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs since 2013. He holds a central position for the implementation and review of the SDG.

1) The mechanism of follow-up and review of the SDG is ambitious. But is it realistic?

The 2030 Agenda is complex and ambitious. It represents the large diversity of needs and challenges of an interdependent and interconnected world. Unlike the MDGs, which were a kind of global strategy for development cooperation, the SDGs are a shared vision of humanity. They can only be achieved if everyone participates, if all financial flows are leveraged, and if the 2030 Agenda becomes a subject of national policy dialogue in every country.

The mechanism proposed relies strongly on review activities carried out at the country level, led by states with the strong involvement of all stakeholders. At the regional level, countries are encouraged to exchange experiences, including through peer reviews. While the thematic global

reviews rely very heavily on the work of existing intergovernmental forums such as the Commission on the Status of Women, the Committee on World Food Security, the Human Rights Council, etc. In addition, the Secretariat will produce an annual SDG Progress Report, containing aggregated data, and a Global Sustainable Development Report, looking at the SDGs from an analytical scientific and academic perspective.

The High Level Political Forum is actually quite lean, but relies heavily on contribution from other actors and forums. The challenge will be to keep these engaged.

2) Many developing countries, especially the least developed, don't have the capacity to gather and analyse data on the implementation of the SDG. Who will support them and with which funding?

Strengthening capacity of national data systems and institutions is critical to monitor progress and adjust policies. It is

essential for the accountability of states to their people. Efforts to implement Agenda 2030 will require commensurate investments into data capacity building. This needs to be reflected in national and institutional budgets and in development cooperation strategies.

3) How do you see the role of the UN multilateral agencies and of the World Bank in the follow-up and review of the SDG?

They have a critical role to play in supporting developing countries to achieve the goals, and they must uphold the ambition, the universality and the integrated nature of the SDGs. They must refrain from seeking exclusive responsibility for any specific goal or target, and will have to mainstream into their strategies and instruments 2030 Agenda principles such as "leaving no one behind", and "strengthening the relationship between duty bearers and rights holders".

A compass for the private sector

The Sustainable Development Goals aim to include all stakeholders of society and in particular the private sector. A guideline aimed at mobilizing the latter has been issued.

“Governments worldwide have already agreed to these goals. Now it is time for business to take action.” This call features at the head of a thirty-page document intended for the private sector entitled SDG Compass. “The SDG Compass explains how the SDGs impact your business – offering you the tools and knowledge to put sustainability at the heart of your business strategy.”

This guide and the website that accompanies it were created by three organisations: the Global Reporting Initiative (GRI), a pioneer in the area of environmental responsibility; the World Business Council for Sustainable Development (WBCSD) and the UN Global Compact, the United Nations platform for the private sector. The SDG Compass brings together the resources of these three entities in relation to the private sector’s contribution to sustainable development.

Businesses are encouraged to support the SDGs on the basis of long-term shared interests. The SDG Compass highlights how the SDGs can enable companies to identify new markets, improve their image, and strengthen relationships with their clients, staff and investors. Further, it points out that reducing poverty also means “creating new consumer markets around the world”. The private sector can also position itself in areas that underpin development such as agriculture, water treatment and infrastructure. In late January 2016, the International Chamber of Commerce (the biggest private sector

organisation) and the UNCTAD pledged to work together to implement the SDGs.

Over 8,000 companies from 162 countries have joined the United Nations Global Compact. They have agreed to take into account its “Ten Principles” reflecting the universal goals of the UN. Each year, companies are expected to issue a public communication on progress on how they implement the ten principles as part of their business activities. Companies that qualify as ‘GC Advanced’ are expected to additionally provide an external evaluation report on their conduct and progress.

The same will apply for the SDGs. In a recent document on gauging progress, UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon “encourages the private sector and civil society to inform the UN of the efforts under way to implement the SDGs”, as a contribution to follow-up and review.

The value of this contribution will initially depend on the choice of indicators. To help companies find their way through a maze of seventeen SDGs and 169 related “targets” and above all find out what resources and references already exist, the SDG Compass website has drawn up two inventories: one classifying 57 business tools in accordance with the goals selected, and the second listing 834 business indicators which refer to the SDGs in one way or the other.

In the first category, let us take the example of a company that is active in the water sector or is a high water consumer and therefore concerned by the objectives contained within SDG 6: Clean Water and Sanitation. By clicking on the link entitled “Biodiversity in Global Water” contained in the proposed list, the company is directed to the website of SDG Compass stakeholder WBCSD which provides access to a series of references and resources. Reference is made to the relevant objectives and very diverse origins (institutions, organisations, UN agencies, etc.) of each tool.

In turn the table of business indicators addresses each of the 17 goals and details the relevant indicators for each one. It also sets out a number of references. Some 75 indicators with their source are displayed for “sustainable consumption and production” — a topic which primarily concerns the private sector.

While a set of indicators is essential for collecting data, their compilation and analysis requires an additional step before conclusions can be drawn. As the Global Compact highlights in a presentation on the place of the private sector in relation to the SDGs, “a major priority is finding the best way to measure the impact [of their efforts] on sustainable development”. Contributions made by the private sector should be taken into account in each national report (this is already the case with other relevant stakeholders) in a form which has yet to be defined.



Construction of a steel tube in the Philippines. The private sector has an important role to play in the application and monitoring of the Sustainable Development Goals. Photo Nonies Reyes/World Bank.

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