



BRIEFING NOTE ON THE WORKSHOP ON BUILDING AN EFFECTIVE REVIEW MECHANISM FOR THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA: 30 APRIL 2015

The Workshop on Building an Effective Review Mechanism for the Post-2015 Development Agenda took place in New York, US, on 30 April 2015. It was convened by the Permanent Missions of Egypt, Liechtenstein, Norway, Pakistan, Peru, the Republic of Korea and Switzerland to the UN, in cooperation with the International Institute for Sustainable Development (IISD), which also provided a briefing note as a basis for discussion during the workshop.

The workshop, moderated by Mark Halle, Executive Director of IISD-Europe, sought to create an open discussion on options for the architecture for review and follow-up of the post-2015 development agenda, in particular the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), in the context of the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development (HLPF).

The workshop was the third in a series co-sponsored by the seven governments. In two workshops held in 2014, participants discussed institutional design principles for review mechanisms. This third workshop was an opportunity to build on discussion of potential design choices, to help negotiators prepare for the upcoming fifth session of the intergovernmental negotiations on the post-2015 development agenda, which will focus on follow-up and review.

During the half-day workshop, participants engaged in an exchange of views and ideas about the roles of the national, regional and global levels in reviewing the post-2015 development agenda, and how they can work together. Participants also identified topics that will likely need to be resolved after the September 2015 adoption of the agenda.

This briefing note summarizes the comments and discussions during the workshop. The workshop was held under the Chatham House Rule and this briefing note therefore does not identify speakers in the plenary discussions.

REPORT OF THE WORKSHOP

WELCOMING REMARKS

The workshop opened on Thursday morning, 30 April. Gustavo Meza-Cuadra, Permanent Representative of Peru, welcomed participants on behalf of the seven co-sponsoring governments, and said follow-up and review is one of the “least-discussed issues” of the post-2015 development agenda. He said the HLPF’s follow-up mechanism should:

address means of implementation (MOI); be state-led with the participation of relevant stakeholders; and incentivize participation by all governments and relevant stakeholders.

Oh Joon, Permanent Representative of the Republic of Korea, said a national-level review should be a fundamental part of the review mechanism, complemented by regional and global-level processes. He suggested that the regional and global levels could use a “peer review formula,” and called for using existing mechanisms as much as possible, to make the review process efficient.

INTRODUCTION BY IISD

Mark Halle said that even “the best intentions in the world” can dissipate when it is unclear who is supposed to conduct follow-up, the timeline and means, and with what consequences for non-compliance. He said post-2015 follow-up should allow governments to learn from one another as they try to fulfill their obligations under the SDGs, in order to identify what is working, obstacles to progress, and MOI that may need to be mobilized to speed progress. He noted the need to incentivize countries’ participation and minimize their reporting burden.

OPTIONS FOR THE NATIONAL LEVEL

The discussion at the global level cannot work without the national level, said Robert Wolfe, Queens University (Canada) and IISD. He highlighted IISD’s recommendation of three national-level reports, from: international organizations, the government itself, and stakeholders. He explained that based on these three components of a “national conversation,” each government could report results up through the regional to the global discussions. Wolfe cited a trade-off between rigorous, effective reviews, and less onerous but “less useful” reviews, and suggested capacity support for States to participate.

Paul Seger, Permanent Representative of Switzerland, stressed the need for the outcome of the post-2015 summit to include a mechanism for universal follow-up and review, and agreement on its principles and core elements. He said the national review component is particularly important, and welcomed the proposed approach of three-part national reporting. He suggested that simple reporting templates could help to make national reports comparable. Finally, Seger said the review should foster learning, not “finger-pointing.”

Halle noted the “important innovation” being considered: making the national, local level the foundation of the review process, by focusing on a country’s experiences



in implementation and creating an inclusive process for capturing those experiences. He added that the national review mechanism will only work if countries see value in doing it, and receive means and services to support the reporting experience.

PLENARY DISCUSSION: The interactive plenary discussion on the national-level review focused on the importance of the national level, questions of inclusiveness and participation, ideas for ensuring comparability, and limiting the reporting burden on countries.

The “obvious central role” of national reviews was highlighted by multiple participants as the basis for the global review. Participants said the national review should serve to identify gaps in national implementation. Some said all countries must participate, while others expressed concern about the resources needed to produce national reports. Several stressed that the review must not add to countries’ existing reporting burden; coherence and reorganizing reporting requirements could be solutions to this, some suggested.

It was noted that “everyone should be reviewed by everyone else,” with developed countries held accountable, for example, for fulfilling their official development assistance (ODA) commitments.

On comparability, participants said: templates could help and simplicity is important, both in data collection and reporting. Data used in national reports must come from the government, said one participant, for quality and credibility. Another participant noted that some countries do not yet have a data collection process or the capacity to collect disaggregated data. Building such capacity should start even before the SDGs are adopted, he suggested.

Participants discussed the three-report approach proposed by IISD, with most of the attention on the stakeholder report. Some voiced strong support for a citizen role in assessing progress, with one delegate citing stakeholders’ first-hand knowledge of implementation, access to the most marginalized, and ability to spot emerging crises. Their input should be heard through an ongoing, continuous discussion using a national platform or mechanism, she said. National sustainable development councils were mentioned as one such platform.

A different view was that three reports will be too complicated, and that civil society will assess implementation, whether consulted or not, including through social media. One delegate said: “If the emperor has no clothes, he will be seen without his clothes,” and preferred to focus on governmental data gathering and reporting.

On the proposed report from intergovernmental organizations, one asked whether this would be based on national roadmaps, and another asked how it can be used in keeping with the bottom-up principle.

On the proposed government report, participants discussed the possibility of each country providing a report every four or five years.

With regard to the immediate timeframe, one delegate noted that capitals cannot report on indicators that have not been set and data that has not been collected: “we all know there is a lot of work that has to happen after September.”

OPTIONS FOR THE REGIONAL LEVEL

Wolfe asked participants to consider whether a regional-level peer review would be useful, how it could be done, and the practicality of involving stakeholders at the regional level. He suggested that a synthesis report prepared by the government after the national-level review could be the basis of regional discussions, and that the HLPF could invite regional organizations to report on the national reviews conducted each year.

On behalf of Amr Abdellatif Aboulatta, Permanent Representative, a delegate of Egypt said the HLPF should be the focal point for post-2015 follow-up and review. He highlighted the African Peer Review Mechanism (APRM), and explained that peer review has a “larger, more sensitive” meaning in the APRM, which serves as a platform to exchange ideas, preferences and lessons learned, and not comparing countries or “shaming and blaming.” He added that African governments’ ownership of the APRM means they are proactive and willing to enhance it.

Halle observed a long-standing consensus that the review should be a positive experience for governments. He asked participants to consider how the regional review will provide input to the HLPF.

PLENARY DISCUSSION: The interactive plenary discussion on the regional-level review focused on its potential advantages, views on a peer review at the regional level, implications for the reporting burden, what can be done in 2016, what can be decided before September 2015, and the role of a regional review in the universal agenda.

The regional level provides several advantages, said one delegate, including a wealth of knowledge, the “psychological comfort zone” of being considered in the context of one’s own region, and the alleviation of work for the global level. He highlighted the “subsidiarity principle,” according to which the higher level only does things that cannot be done at the lower level.

Concerns about the reporting burden emerged, with several participants expressing doubts about “too many layers.” One said that, “at the end of the day we should be reviewing progress,” not reviewing the review. Grappling with the fact that some are “spooked” by the potential reporting requirements, one delegate stressed the need to make the process efficient. Halle said the regional level can be a screen and filter for passing the right issues to the global level.

One delegate said the regional review should focus on best practices, as is the focus of existing reviews by the League of Arab States and the UN Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia, for example. It was noted that some regions are particularly diverse, which could make peer review difficult. Another said peer review can incentivize learning, and explore areas of concern that are only relevant to a particular region.

One delegate highlighted regional reviews in the context of universality: not every action will be common to everyone, but what is reported helps create a global picture of implementation of the SDGs.

OPTIONS FOR THE GLOBAL LEVEL

Reflecting comments voiced throughout the morning, Wolfe said the HLPF can only work if the national and regional levels work. He said the objective should be to

assess global progress towards sustainable development, drawing lessons from all the other reviews, and to enable mid-course adjustments to the review process.

Wolfe noted that the biggest challenge at the global level is how to review every country on a regular basis, with only eight days on the HLPF's agenda. For the global level review of national reports, he suggested: discussion by the HLPF of reports from regional bodies on national reports, perhaps with a synthesis prepared by the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs to elicit common themes and cross-regional comparisons; voluntary Ministerial presentation of selected national reports; and parallel, working-level review of all national reports completed that year.

Wolfe noted that the HLPF could also review progress thematically, perhaps using the same theme as the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC); or by selecting a cluster of goals and targets each year. He also mentioned the possibility of a link to the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCP) of UN operational activities for development.

Christian Wenaweser, Permanent Representative of Liechtenstein, suggested expanding the time available for the global review by adding informal or preparatory days for the HLPF. He noted that governments already agree that the review must be voluntary and State-led and that the intergovernmental negotiation process on the post-2015 development agenda still has space and time to settle additional questions on the global review, alongside outstanding work on the Declaration and SDG indicators. Wenaweser added that the September summit outcome must at least define the parameters of the global review, followed by additional decisions to be made at the 2016 HLPF session.

PLENARY DISCUSSION: In the interactive plenary discussion on the global-level review, delegates expressed broad agreement on the need for a review mechanism at the global level. But several questions remained to be answered, they said, such as: use of existing arrangements; the role of data; selection of annual themes; timing; and the role of stakeholders.

Delegates noted several existing structures that could be used as part of the overall review system, including the UN General Assembly, ECOSOC together with its Segments and functional commissions, multilateral environmental agreements, and the Committee on Food Security.

One delegate said her government considers the HLPF the global locus for all other levels of review and the follow-up for Financing for Development, and that the global level should bring the key information together to allow Heads of State and Government to have an informed discussion every four years and take decisions to guide the implementation of the SDGs. The essence of the current discussion, then, is how to bring all levels of the process to the HLPF, she said. Another, similarly, said the HLPF should be the "capstone" of a network of entities doing follow-up and review. An HLPF preparatory process may not be needed, he added, if ECOSOC could "do its job" and feed into the HLPF coherently.

Others responded that the UN system is not in a position to review this new, broader, and universal agenda, without strengthening the HLPF and providing some new resources.

Two delegates wondered how to make the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) fit in, one citing it as a tool for scientific input and reporting.

On data, one participant said real-time data can take the pressure off "static" reporting every four or five years. Wolfe noted, however, that data "doesn't analyze itself" and that smaller missions would benefit from more structure.

Participants considered whether the annual themes of ECOSOC and the HLPF should be aligned, and whether ECOSOC or the HLPF should guide the selection of themes for the global review.

Delegates said the HLPF's eight-day meetings do not allow much time for conducting the review, and that the schedule should be planned far in advance to ensure reports are taken up in a streamlined way. While clustering seemed a promising method to some delegates, one cautioned that the three dimensions of sustainable development should not be overlooked.

One participant said that based on the experience of the Annual Ministerial Review (AMR), a voluntary basis may mean as few as four or five countries undergo review in a given year. Another participant responded that the AMR is not a model; the HLPF review must be better and more interesting for States, precisely to avoid such a low level of interest.

On the role of stakeholders, one delegate said the global review mechanism should mirror the SDGs in terms of inclusion and participation, and she noted that NGOs must have an active and pragmatic role, particularly so that the review is about opportunities, not finger-pointing.

Delegates indicated that while some issues can be concluded by September (such as general contours of the review, and globally agreed principles on what follow-up and review would look like), discussion would continue later, and they must determine how this would take place.

Some issues that remain to be addressed in negotiations, as flagged by participants, include the outcome of the Third International Conference on Financing for Development (FfD3), the role of stakeholders, how universality will be applied, Secretariat arrangements to support the review process, and, as Halle noted, finding the right trade-off between a robust, complex and costly system, and the limited funding available within the intergovernmental system.

CONCLUDING REMARKS

Halle said the discussion had addressed "some of the most important material in the international system," and commended participants' openness and genuine interest in finding options. He said the SDG review mechanism is a key part of implementing and achieving the goals, noting the opportunity created by the newness of the experience.

May-Elin Stener, Deputy Permanent Representative of Norway, noted participants' creativity, and thanked Switzerland for financially supporting the workshop. She also observed messages from participants that: reporting burdens should not be increased, and duplication should be avoided; existing mechanisms and platforms should be explored; information must be taken into the HLPF from each level, to ensure meaningful monitoring; and progress toward the SDGs is in the interest of all Member States and all people.

Stener closed the workshop at 1 pm.