



The 2015 Declaration: Meeting great expectations (maybe)

By Barbara Adams, Gretchen Luchsinger

The most recent step in the post-2015 negotiations was the 17-20 February debate in New York on the Declaration, meant to be the framework political statement. Despite strong emphasis on transformation and high aspiration, traditional lines were drawn between (mostly) Northern and Southern positions.

At the same time, the debate was rich and nuanced, reflecting the increasing diversity of developing country concerns and their willingness to engage substantively on issues that will be critical to transformation. The process continues to suggest there is historic potential for redressing some of the longstanding imbalances driving deep social and economic disparities, and the impending collision with planetary boundaries. The notion that post-2015 is supposed to universally apply to every country and person in the world is unprecedented—never before has there been a development agenda this broad in scope.

Post-2015: Early Days on the Declaration

Negotiators discussed a first ‘elements paper’ and a ‘discussion document’, both emphasized as a chance to exchange ideas. Some issues that cut across the talks:

What’s transformation really about?

Many delegates agreed that post-2015 should be about transformation. But what does that mean in practice? Given planetary boundaries, can we talk just about poverty eradication—as essential as that is—and not about gaping inequalities? How can the billions of people who need to consume more to reach the most basic standards of a decent life do so without the smaller number of “over-consumers” giving up some of their dispropor-

tionate advantages? Can we talk about sustainable development without consistent financing that is not only pro-cyclical but also counter-cyclical, in other words, available in good times and bad? How can we say the poor need dignity, when as one delegate pointed out, some of the most undignified behaviour is among wealthy people with a distorted sense of entitlement? What’s transformative if the powerful remain mainly accountable to themselves—and not to all?

Common but not so differentiated

CBDR—that’s common but differentiated responsibility—bounced back and forth like a ball throughout the talks. Developing countries want it in the declaration, because it recognizes that we are all working towards common aims, but those with greater capacities have an obligation to do more. Rich countries want CBDR out of the declaration, claiming that it is a legal principle that has been agreed only in a narrow environmental context. Yet it is central to the Rio+20 agreement and all three pillars/dimensions of sustainable development. The outcome document of the 2013 UN Special Event on the MDGs set up the framework for post-2015 with an explicit reference to CBDR.

Some delegates were also lobbying hard for a diminished understanding of universality, referring to “shared responsibility,” where everyone is responsible for doing their own thing to achieve the SDGs. In a global economy and given a common planet, how is that possible if countries don’t have policy space for sustainable development, can’t grow their economies to take care of their societies, and struggle with environmental consequences not of their making? If the goal is really universality, even beyond the moral arguments, CBDR is a practical necessity. Some developing country delegates stated outright that universality without differentiation is a deal breaker. Others

proposed a focus on outcomes, such as by replacing “shared responsibility” with “shared prosperity.”

Dabbling with data

While weak on alignment with international norms and standards, among other constraints, the MDGs had merit in focusing attention on certain issues, and improving the collection and use of data. But there were clear problems with the MDG indicators—like the fact that some regions had already achieved all of them, and some issues were captured in a fashion so narrow as to be almost meaningless. Now the moment for indicators has arrived in post-2015, and the discussions about future indicators for the SDGs will become another contested area in the process.

The preliminary list of proposed SDG indicators makes a major effort to identify measures for each of the 169 SDG targets. Most of the proposed indicators are SMART (specific, meaningful, appropriate, relevant and time-bound), for example by promoting the Palma ratio between the income of richest 10 percent and the poorest 40% as a measure of inequality. But when the target is highly political, the proposed indicators show a trend to “lower the bar”. For example, the suggested target for respecting national policy space measures the willingness to share fiscal information. The target on encouraging public, public-private and civil society partnerships could rest solely on counting the number (and not its size) of public-private partnerships, and the development on new indices to measure sustainable development could rely on the gross national happiness index.

Indicators define what is valued (or by omission, what is not). Questions for developing them include: Are they consistently tied to norms and standards fully aligned with the UN Charter, human rights, sustainable development, equality and so on? Do all of them need to be applied on a global level? Which would be better on a national level? On a regional level? And who is being measured? Since the agenda is to be universal, what indicators explicitly apply to and challenge rich countries? Are they going to be reporting on these and having real conversations about their own weaknesses and gaps in universal international forums—as is the expectation for developing countries?

Inspiring...or spinning?

There were quite a few calls for making the political declaration inspirational and understandable by people around the world. But at times, the discussion seemed to veer towards a public relations exercise, as several delegates pointed out, undercutting the declaration’s political seriousness. Was that the point? There was a lot of emphasis on page length. One delegate called for limiting negative references that might demotivate people, like the unfinished business of the MDGs. Another proposed handing the drafting over to a speechwriter. Yet another suggested the declaration be mesmerizing. Most people, however, distrust spin around what they know are fundamentally critical issues, and are inspired and mesmerized by good ideas that make a real difference in their lives.

A few good ideas...

An interesting (and highly welcome) dimension of post-2015 is that (almost) everyone seems to agree on gender equality and women’s empowerment. Delegates repeatedly insisted it must be prominently featured in the declaration. Migration was well positioned by a number of speakers as a rights issue; they also emphasized migrants’ very significant contributions to economies.

There were encouraging calls for deepening engagement with capitals, where the real business of advancing sustainable development is an urgent reality, and involves all parts of society and levels of government. The diverse and shifting alliances of Member States were also positive, allowing more nuance in the debate through references to specific national experiences and different stages of development. New coalitions came together around issues, such as the rule of law, culture, gender, the family and disaster risk reduction.

What’s Not on the Agenda?

Systemic issues. Despite all the rhetoric about transformation, few delegates (and neither of the discussion papers) called attention to the trade and investment environment that “enables” achievement of the SDGs. It’s hard to talk about health care, poverty, education, employment, women’s rights and so on when systems with such a heavy influence on them are invisible. Right now, investors seem to have more rights and freedoms than many people. This needs re-dress, as do unsustainable patterns of consumption and produc-

tion. If correcting imbalances like these is not at the heart of post-2015, what meaning will it have?

Unpacking a Word...

Leave no one behind. It sounds good—helping out all those who are poor, excluded and lack basic services. Identified by the High-Level Panel on Post-2015 as one of five transformative shifts, it is becoming the catch phrase for post-2015. But it implies integration in the current unsustainable model of development. It puts all the focus on one group that has not caused the problems plaguing the world today. And it neglects those who have caused those problems while drawing most of the benefits. In order to leave no one behind, we must leave no one out.

Goals for the Rich: It's About Time

Leaving no one out requires that the rich have goals, just like everyone else. The Reflection Group on Global Development Perspectives has developed a [typology of goals and targets for the rich](#), comprising three categories: those related to domestic sustainability, “doing-no-harm” beyond national borders, and international responsibilities given greater capacities and resources. Key goals under these must be to reduce inequalities within and among countries, to shift to sustainable consumption and production patterns, and to remove financial and structural obstacles to the global achievement of sustainable development. Without these goals, post-2015 is destined *not* to be transformative, *not* to be universal and *not* to be sustainable. Goals for the rich, in short, are measurements not just for some countries and people, but of how serious the entire post-2015 agenda can be.

Many Processes, One Larger Purpose

With a number of important international processes happening between now and the end of the year, some political fuel is being spent on sorting out intersections among them. All are big pieces, but should be aligned with one larger purpose—a world that really operates along the lines of universal inclusion, equality, human rights, protection of the planet and so on. Otherwise, we are back to fragmentation and a few dominant interests, or business as usual.

The first process is related to the UN Statistics Commission, about to discuss a [preliminary set of global indicators](#) for the SDGs at its meeting in March. Despite some claims that indicators are mainly a technical issue and destined to somehow flow from the already agreed goals and targets, they have clear political implications; not recognizing this, as some delegates pointed out, will endanger the post-2015 process. In January, the co-facilitators informed delegates that the indicator selection process would evolve under the expert guidance of the Statistics Commission. Given what have been put forward as indicators so far, and the sparring that has already gone on over the proposed “technical proofing” of the goals and targets (suspected as a back-door means to renegotiate the SDGs), some Member States are unlikely to view any proposed indicators as a simple sealed deal.

A second process is Financing for Development. Some rich countries have suggested folding it under post-2015, where it might become mainly about financial resources for development. Developing countries have pushed back because they see FfD3 as needing space to get into big systemic issues that add up to real change—like trade, debt and the international financial system. Noticeably, developing countries in post-2015 stressed building on MDG 8, because despite its many weaknesses, it does cover systemic issues *and* it implies a global partnership grounded in state relationships, not the more diffuse—and less accountable?—multistakeholder ones prominent so far in post-2015.

A third process is the December UN Framework Convention on Climate Change summit in Paris. Many countries want a serious agreement out of it, with varying views on how much detail should be in the post-2015 agreement. In any case, the success or failure of the post-2015 summit in September will influence essentially the outcome of the Paris summit and the future of multilateral climate diplomacy.

What's Happening Next

Post-2015 negotiations

3-6 March: Statistical Commission, Friends of the Chair conversation on post-2015

23-27 March: Sustainable Development Goals and targets

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

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

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](#)

- [FfD III: official website](#)

- [Statistics Commission](#)

- [The A-Word for the SDGs](#)

- [Reflection Group](#)

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