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Reviewing the Implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

“Early Movers” Can Help Maintain Momentum

Marianne Beisheim

At the Sustainable Development Summit in September 2015 the heads of state and government of all the UN member states adopted the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Several countries, including Germany, committed to move rapidly on implementation. During the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in July 2016, twenty-two countries volunteered to conduct national reviews of their implementation. Moreover, UN member states plan to adopt a resolution on the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda before that meeting. What initiatives would be most helpful for maintaining the momentum and making ambitious progress on implementing and reviewing the Agenda?

According to its title and preamble, the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development seeks to bring about nothing less than a “transformation of our world”. The Agenda comprises a political declaration, the seventeen sustainable development goals (SDGs) and two sections dealing with the means of implementation and the follow-up and review process. The Agenda reflects political compromises around conflicting goals, but also an international minimum consensus on how the member-states wish to shape their futures. It is no longer just about development policy, but transformative politics in *all* countries. The SDGs are correspondingly broader in scope and more strongly integrated with respect to the three dimensions of sustainable develop-

ment (ecological, economic, social) than for example the preceding millennium development goals (MDGs). This also makes implementation more challenging, starting with the sheer number of targets (169) and indicators (230), as well as the large number of actors and institutions that need to be included.

The SDGs were originally suggested in 2012 in the context of the Rio+20 conference. There followed a long phase of intense consultations and open discussions straddling the UN’s otherwise rigid North/South divide. The same positive spirit also largely prevailed in the subsequent negotiations under the auspices of the UN General Assembly. State and non-state actors praised the process as transparent,

fair, inclusive and largely shaped by reciprocity and understanding.

The SDGs draw on and develop the objectives of the MDGs, including poverty, hunger, health, education, gender equality, water and sanitation. New goals have been added for energy, economic growth and decent work, infrastructure and innovation, urban development, and reducing inequality. Environmental aspects are much more closely integrated throughout, as well as being covered by goals for climate, oceans and marine resources, terrestrial ecosystems and biodiversity. Although some countries opposed the move – on differing grounds – SDG16 on peace and governance was ultimately included in the Agenda. Its objectives are to promote peaceful and inclusive societies, to ensure universal access to justice, and to build strong, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Another new feature is that the means of implementation form part of the agreement, both under all the individual SDGs and in a goal of its own (SDG17).

The substance and format received criticism as well as praise. Many complain that their large number make the goals hard to communicate, and that they are formulated in rather abstract terms. There is also praise for goals tackling obstacles to development that had hitherto been ignored, such as conflicts, corruption, inequality and inhumane working conditions, as well as systemic problems concerning trade, finance and patterns of production and consumption.

Points of Controversy

Although the negotiators lauded the spirit of a “new global partnership”, old North/South conflicts still shine through in some of the goals and implementation issues. For example, the supposed conflict between development and environment was behind the G77’s rejection of “planetary boundaries” and their insistence on the prime importance of tackling poverty. The struggle between donor countries and the G77 over

responsibility for funding implementation is another classic. The issues here are official development assistance (ODA) and technology transfer (demanded by G77) as against domestic taxation-funded contributions and innovative multi-stakeholder partnerships (favoured by the donors).

There is also ongoing controversy over how to follow-up and review the implementation of the Agenda and SDGs. At the beginning of March, the UN’s Statistical Commission welcomed the proposed global indicator framework as a “practical starting point”. Now, the indicators still await approval by the UN Economic and Social Council and the General Assembly.

UN member states also came round to agreeing to follow-up and review processes during the annual HLPF. However, the delegates have yet to reach agreement on the details of those thematic, regional and voluntary national reviews. In January, the Secretary-General presented a comprehensive report containing proposals. After informal exchanges revealed that many member states still saw a need for clarification, the President of the General Assembly initiated a new round of consultations and negotiations. In April, the co-facilitators of this process issued the zero draft of a resolution on follow-up and review, to be finalized by the end of May. The consultations on the draft are not going well, however, and exhibit a lack of consensus and ambition.

National Implementation

Everybody agrees that national-level implementation is key. “Early movers” – like the nine leaders of the High-level Group led by Sweden or the twenty-two countries that volunteered in the first round of HLPF national reviews – are in a good position to make credible suggestions on how to jump-start implementing the SDGs. If their own implementation succeeds in being innovative, inspiring and exemplary, they have a good chance to inspire others. Review processes are a

means to identify such good practices and to share them at the HLPF.

For each country, the first step is to translate the global goals into national ones and to reconfigure sustainability strategies and development plans. The German government has decided to revise its National Sustainability Strategy of 2002 and to bring it in line with the SDGs, both for implementation *in* Germany and for international implementation *with* Germany. Each country should clarify where it wishes to set strategic priorities and be especially active, and explain where and why it might be less active (“comply or explain”). Already these first steps create substantial challenges: How to motivate all the relevant ministries to participate? How to meaningfully involve parliament and municipalities? How to include the regional level, especially when – as in the case of the EU – regional organizations have the relevant competencies in certain policy areas? Representatives of UN member-states are already complaining that it is difficult to get their *entire* government and civil service on board for implementation. But that is the precondition for a comprehensive and coherent policy shift. In Germany, for example, the State Secretaries’ Committee for Sustainable Development under the auspices of the Chancellery could offer more institutional leverage. Colombia set up an SDG Commission that includes seven ministers and has a mandate to coordinate between the different institutions, including local governments. Morocco plans to organise a two-day workshop with representatives from all the ministries. Only if the sustainable development goals can be successfully anchored in all ministries is there a chance of fulfilling the Agenda’s transformative ambitions.

Expand Participation

The negotiations over the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda featured a gratifyingly strong level of participation. In this spirit, national processes for selecting goals and policies should also be organised in a participatory and inclusive fashion, appropriately involving parliament, local government, civil society, business and the general public. Participatory processes will help achieve broad ownership and reinforce the visibility and thus relevance of the national strategies and institutions for sustainable development. And only with meaningful participation will it be possible to identify concrete needs and challenges, as well as best practices and innovative policy ideas.

The German government, for example, has held five regional dialogue events on updating the national Sustainability Strategy. That is a good start. But the public discussion urgently needs to be expanded, the expert debate deepened. A more reliable and representative dialogue structure could be institutionalised to discuss future reports on indicators and progress. In line with the “whole of government” approach, such a dialogue group could be situated in the Chancellery under the State Secretaries’ Committee, but over the course of the year hold consultations in all the ministries. Whereas membership of the German Council for Sustainable Development (RNE) is by personal appointment, societal groups should decide themselves who they send to represent them in such a dialogue group. In the scope of these processes, non-governmental organizations could also report on their own contributions to implementation.

As the 2030 Agenda places particular weight on improving the situation of disadvantaged and marginalized groups, these groups need to be identified and integrated from the outset in the processes. A voluntary fund for enabling the participation of these stakeholders in the HLPF reviews would be another step towards “leaving no one behind”.

Inspiration Needed

In July 2016, twenty-two member states, including China, Egypt, Germany, Morocco, Mexico, South Korea, Sierra Leone, Switzerland and Turkey, intend to report implementation measures to the HLPF. Work is under way in New York and the national capitals to prepare the reports, presentations and meetings, but much remains unclear or is still under negotiation. That opens up opportunities for influence. Interesting ideas and good suggestions for process are currently especially welcome, so proceeding with a good example could convince and inspire others.

In that context, the “early reviewers” should convey ideas for substantive implementation and also for future follow-up and review processes at national or HLPF level. This starts with ideas about how to institutionalise a “whole of government” approach and how to facilitate meaningful participation processes. Reports and presentations should address problems that are also relevant for other countries and focus on those areas, where countries can offer innovative and transformative solutions. Measures that successfully integrate economic, ecological and social dimensions are of particular interest. Many countries are also interested in how synergies between goals can be generated and how conflicts of goals can be dealt with. There should also be space for self-critical reflection and difficult issues should not be ignored. Only when reports openly address mistakes, obstacles and difficulties, can the needs for future learning and support be identified.

Joint efforts are also of interest. The g7+ grouping of fragile and conflict-affected countries, for example, committed to joint reporting against selected indicators. African ministers encouraged the African Union and UN Economic Commission for Africa to develop an integrated monitoring and evaluation framework and a common follow-up and review platform.

In order to maintain a high level of ambition and pass on experience, the states involved in the 2016 HLPF review could join

with other interested states to reflect on which national or regional preparation processes and HLPF reporting formats have proven useful. They could also explore how the findings and helpful suggestions from the HLPF reviews can best be communicated back to the national level. Lessons learned should also be fed into the ongoing process of further developing voluntary common reporting guidelines for the HLPF reviews.

The use of resources for follow-up and review processes should not be placed in false opposition to resources for implementation. It is important not to lose sight of the fact that these processes are means to an end: In order to achieve sustainable development, we need political will, public support and effective instruments. The voluntary follow-up and review procedures will gain traction if the first rounds of reviews deliver results to this effect and subsequently lead to improved implementation of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs. If such successes can be realised, UN member states might be willing to invest more time and resources into future HLPF reviews.

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Further Reading:

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Reviewing the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Goals and Partnerships. A Proposal for a Multi-level Review at the High level Political Forum

SWP Research Paper 1/2015, January 2015,
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Working Paper, FG 08/No. 02, May 2016,
SWP Global Issues Division