Assessing the Open Working Group on SDGs Outcome Document: Initial Recommendations on Way Forward

17 November 2014

This informal note follows IRF2015's earlier response to the release of the Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) Outcome Document.[1] Our initial assessment of the OWG Outcome Document highlighted several key challenges that need to be addressed in the year ahead to ensure an agenda that is universally relevant and transformative. This note addresses how to move forward.

I. Building on the OWG outcome

The SDGs potentially serve several purposes:

- to articulate an intergovernmentally agreed normative framework for sustainable development (to be translated into national policy and institutional frameworks);

- to mobilize action and resources at all levels towards a shared global agenda;

- to provide benchmarks for measuring progress toward agreed goals, and to enable citizens to hold governments and potentially other actors accountable;

- to set priorities for development cooperation.

For the first purpose, the OWG proposal provides a balance between technical rigor and political consensus, and we believe there is a rationale not to re-open the goals to further intergovernmental negotiation – although there is a need to technically improve many of the proposed targets. The proposed SDGs have emerged from a member state-led and broadly consultative process and reflect a truly universal development agenda. While we believe there is scope for consolidating some of the goals without sacrificing their content, this may risk upsetting the balance achieved by the Open Working Group. Further, the larger number of SDGs compared to the MDGs responds to the OWG's mandate to ensure a better balance between the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development – and reflects the broader scope of a universal agenda that aims to be 'fit-for-purpose' to address today's global development challenges.

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[1] http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/news/sustainable/sdgs-post2015.html

This note proposes three ways to build on the OWG outcome that can help achieve the second purpose of mobilizing action, and contribute to the third purpose of measuring progress and strengthening accountability:

(i) how to effectively communicate the goal framework to a diversity of stakeholders, from heads of state to the general public;

(ii) the potential for 'meta-metrics' to measure overall progress toward sustainable development; and

(iii) ways to more effectively link the SDGs and post-2015 process to other major global processes.

II.Communicating the goals: 4 'principles' for transformative change

IRF2015 proposes four overarching 'principles' for a transformative post-2015 sustainable development agenda. These four principles, or strategic directions, are interconnected and cut across the 17 SDGs – and thus provide an overarching framework (vision) that can be used to communicate the full agenda in ways that resonate with and secure buy-in from diverse stakeholders.

'Leave no one behind'
Includes eradication of extreme poverty and meeting basic needs for nutritious food, health, education and access to essential services for all people everywhere. Also includes building resilience at the level of individuals, households, communities, population groups and nations.

'Ensure equity for all'
Includes civil and political rights and reducing inequalities amongst people and nations, including the importance of fundamental freedoms and good governance that can help ensure that people have a voice in decision-making.

'Build economies that work for people and planet'
Includes sustainable consumption and production, economic transformation, climate change, and all the goals and targets directly related to ecosystems that underpin economies and livelihoods.

'Mobilize collective action on a shared global agenda'
Includes elements of a Global Partnership for Sustainable Development that engages state and non-state actors at all levels and the policy actions required to enable implementation of the agenda, including the need to ensure alignment with the three other major processes to be concluded in 2015 – the successor to the Hyogo Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, the UNFCCC COP and the Financing for Development Conference.

III.Measuring overall progress: A set of 'meta-metrics'

The SG's Synthesis Report could propose to engage the scientific/technical community to devise a limited number of 'meta-metrics' that reflect the four principles of the vision. These meta-metrics would be closely linked to the OWG's proposed goals and targets, capturing their essence and the interlinkages among them. They would complement the full set of SDG indicators to be developed, but would provide a more easily communicable means of tracking progress against the whole

agenda. The following are examples of potential meta-metrics to illustrate this approach (and which would need to be worked out in much greater detail).

Leave no one behind	• A meta-metric (building on target 1.1) could be derived from a subset of OWG targets relating to the minimum conditions required to lead a life free from multi-dimensional poverty (e.g. a social protection floor, a safe and healthy living environment, economic rights, peace and security, etc.). 'Leaving no one behind' implies the need to track the progress of the bottom 5%, 10% and 20% income groups as well as that of all marginalized population groups (and need for disaggregated data collection). • A meta-metric for resilience could be possible from a subset of targets relating to a multi-dimensional resilience threshold and key components of strategies to mainstream resilience. Alternatively, a practical indicator for tracking resilience would be the economic and human life costs of disasters. • An ambitious meta-metric for eradicating the LDC category by 2030 would show that leaving no one behind is a real ambition.
Ensure equity for all	• A meta-metric for inequality within countries could utilize some of the known measures of inequality (e.g. for income inequality, education inequality, inequality of opportunity, etc.), such as the Gini index and the Palma ratio. • A meta-metric for governance could use a governance index or barometer to track good governance – including equitable legal, political and financial systems – that incorporates a combination of SDG targets, including those under goal 10. This could include an assessment of the extent to which applicable human rights had been enacted and enforced and inclusive, participatory, transparent decision-making processes were in place.
Build economies that work for people and planet	• A meta-metric could be defined to measure the performance of nations whose citizens enjoy 'well-being within environmental limits' and in societies free from glaring inequalities. This could be considered as an extension of the inequality-adjusted human development index (HDI) based on a wider set of issues from among the SDG targets. • 'Beyond GDP' meta-metrics could track decoupling of economic growth from environmental degradation and inequality – this could be measured through proxies of GHG emissions, resource consumption or (at the global level) planetary boundaries; and/or through measures based on integrated economic-environmental accounts. The Genuine Progress Indicator is another alternative 'beyond GDP' metric. • A process-based meta-metric of the conditions required to build economies that work for people and planet could track the use of participatory, integrated natural resource management and policy.
Mobilze collective action on a shared global agenda	• A meta-metric to track progress towards the necessary collective action to deliver the SDGs could incorporate the establishment and implementation of multilateral agreements, and efforts to improve policy coherence

	(international enabling environment), to safeguard global public goods and address other 'problems without passports.'

IV. How the post-2015 agenda links to other major processes

The three major international agreements to be concluded in 2015 – the successor to the Hyogo Framework on Disaster Risk Reduction, the UNFCCC COP in Paris and the Post-2015 Agenda (including the Financing for Development Conference in Addis) – are all intended to contribute to the pursuit of sustainable development globally. The OWG proposal, which will be the main basis for the negotiation of the SDGs, provides the clearest vision yet of what needs to be done to put the world on a pathway to sustainable development. The other international agreements should recognize this agreed articulation of sustainable development in the 21st century. Practical steps to ensure coherence between the objectives of the different agreements and to encourage sustainable development processes that are mutually reinforcing could include:

- Map out each process to identify key moments and specific opportunities to improve alignment. Those leading these processes should proactively anticipate how to make best use of these opportunities.

- Align the narratives of post-2015 and related processes so that they put forward a shared vision of sustainable development.

- Identify possible shared measures of progress. Sharing indicators between different processes can help to improve efficiency in data collection and align implementation efforts.

Given the critical importance and complexity of aligning these major global processes, there is an urgent need for analysis and action to enhance their convergence.

About IRF2015

The *Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda* (IRF2015) is a collaboration of 11 international research institutions providing critical thinking, integrated analysis and awareness-raising to inform the post-2015 development agenda. IRF2015 partners envision a post-2015 development agenda that is universal in scope, takes an integrated approach to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of global development challenges, and can lead to more sustainable and equitable development outcomes for all.

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www.canari.org

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