Towards a *Transformative* Post-2015 Development Agenda

Informal Member State Retreat #7
Columbia University, New York, 17 May 2015

Summary

On 17 May 2015, the Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda (IRF2015) hosted the seventh in a series of informal retreats on the overarching theme "Towards a *Transformative* Post-2015 Development Agenda." The purpose of the retreats is to provide an informal setting for open and substantive exchange of views (under Chatham House Rule) on issues critical to framing the global debate on the post-2015 agenda and its implementation.

The Governments of Denmark, The Netherlands, Peru, Rwanda, Switzerland and Trinidad and Tobago co-sponsored this seventh retreat, which included participants from 32 member states, UN and World Bank representatives, members of IRF2015 and other independent experts.[1] The meeting addressed the theme of "*Towards Accountability for Results: Building an Integrated Monitoring and Review Framework for the Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda*" and covered three inter-related topics:[2]

- *Framing the post-2015 accountability challenge:* (i) key concepts in accountability (e.g., dimensions, typology, levels); (ii) lessons from past efforts at global monitoring and review; and (iii) what is needed in a monitoring and review system for the post-2015 agenda.

- *Designing an accountability framework for global, regional, national and local levels:* (i) key principles for designing a framework; (ii) what are good examples and building blocks in the current framework on which to build a new system; and (iii) elements of a proposed "circular framework of multiple accountability" at global, regional, national and local levels.

- *Enhancing the role of non-state actors in a post-2015 accountability framework:* (i) opportunities for aligning global, regional, national and corporate reporting across social, economic and environmental dimensions; and (ii) key challenges (needs and gaps) and institutional options for ensuring engagement and accountability of non-state actors at all levels.

The following summary highlights key messages that emerged during the discussion.

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[1] Financial support was provided by the governments of Denmark, The Netherlands and Switzerland.
[2] Due to the limited time available, the retreat did not directly address the critical issues of data availability, the data revolution and related capacity building needs.

Key Messages

Participants discussed some of the key remaining questions on how to ensure that the post-2015 sustainable development goals have a follow-up and review system that is fit-for-purpose for monitoring and assessing progress, facilitating learning and ensuring accountability. Effective implementation and accountability for results will depend in part on a credible, robust and inclusive follow-up and review framework as an integral part of the post-2015 agenda. The universal and more comprehensive scope of the SDGs will place additional monitoring and reporting demands on countries, and will require changes in the way the UN system and other international institutions work together and with others to monitor overall progress. Key challenges include: facilitating participation and reporting by all states given capacity constraints for monitoring such a wide-ranging agenda; clearly defining the role(s) of the High Level Political Forum (HLPF); building consensus on the meaning of 'accountability' in a voluntary agenda; and fully engaging other stakeholders, including local governments and municipalities, parliamentarians, civil society and the private sector.

As this was the last planned retreat by IRF2015, participants also reflected on progress in the intergovernmental process to date.

It is critical that the follow-up and review process encourages real-time learning to continually improve SDG implementation. Participants emphasized that while follow-up and review should provide robust, timely and disaggregated information on global progress towards global goals, it also needs to help inform national and subnational efforts to implement the goals and targets – by governments as well as other stakeholders. Some were concerned that a focus on holding actors to account might come at the expense of or overshadow a system that encourages problem solving and is solution-oriented. Participants discussed how peer reviews, the HLPF, and other measures and mechanisms could be oriented to encourage discussion of barriers to progress and ways to accelerate action.

There are multiple shades and dimensions of 'accountability.' While definitions often emphasize a vertical (principal-agent) relationship, other interpretations are possible. Sharing perspectives on accountability, participants emphasized (mostly national) governments' responsibility to citizens as the area where accountability should be strongest in the post-2015 framework. Several shared experiences from their countries where governments were holding themselves or being held accountable for sustainable development implementation. However, some participants view accountability as a more general obligation to deliver on commitments at all levels. They recognized a vital role for governments, business and civil society to transparently monitor and hold one another to account for commitments made as part of partnerships or other international fora. This could be particularly necessary in areas where incentives at the national level either do not exist or are not likely to lead to sufficient action (e.g. global commons challenges requiring collective action).

The framework for follow-up and review needs to span multiple levels – from local to global – and effectively connect multiple stakeholders. Participants recognized the need for close coordination and engagement across levels – a 'spider web' of engagement and communication between

multiple stakeholders at subnational, national, regional and global levels – with feedback loops to ensure that local and national experience informs global dialogue, and global synthesis of lessons informs action at lower levels. However, participants grappled with the volume and complexity of possible connections across levels and between public, private and civil society actors, what the nature of those relationships might be, and how to streamline the structure as much as possible without sacrificing inclusiveness and effectiveness – with one participant suggesting that the aim should be "institution light and impact heavy."

A wide range of non-state actors have possible roles in national, regional and global monitoring and review. Participants discussed the importance of engagement by non-state actors – both the contributions that non-state actors can make in *informing* implementation and holding the public sector to account, and the importance of ensuring the accountability of non-state actors themselves. To date, it has been difficult or otherwise not practical for many non-state actors to engage in what has been largely a New York-based process, and so some groups have yet to fully participate or may not see what is in it for them. As a voluntary agenda, participants recognized that follow-up, review and accountability systems will have to be designed in a way that encourages the active engagement of non-state actors. Of particular importance is the need to recognize the central role of local governments and local organizations in implementing the SDGs and the need to give them voice and to learn from local experience.

Further, a major difference between the MDGs and SDGs is the greater focus on private sector involvement. Growing private sector awareness of the importance of sustainability along supply chains and the need to support local development, together with expanding adoption of sustainability reporting, offer potential models and entry points for private sector engagement.

There are numerous existing mechanisms for tracking progress on sustainable development commitments on which a post-2015 follow-up and review framework can build. Using and strengthening existing mechanisms would in many cases be preferable and more cost-effective than creating new institutions, which would require further resources and introduce new complexity in a crowded institutional landscape. Given its many levels and actors, the post-2015 agenda's monitoring, review and accountability mechanisms will be an ecosystem of numerous initiatives and platforms. Presentations and discussions provided examples of current initiatives that could incorporate or be adapted to facilitate monitoring of progress against goals and targets. However, the post-2015 development agenda is intended to be transformative, and so the use of existing mechanisms must go beyond 'business as usual' and should not lead to a reduction in ambition, but instead must be used to accelerate progress.

While an up-front design is important, future follow-up and review mechanisms must also be adaptable and flexible. The challenges that countries face, and the data and information available to them, will change over the 15-year time horizon of the post-2015 agenda. Therefore, the emerging system and structure for review will also have to be able to adapt (as did structures under the MDGs). For example, future adjustments might help to focus global attention on issues that are the furthest off track, incorporate new challenges as they arise, or update systems for monitoring to reflect new technologies and data availability.

Reflecting on the post-2015 process thus far, participants pointed to several core principles that have shaped the debate and agenda to date. When asked about moments or ideas that have been impactful, participants pointed to core principles of the post-2015 agenda that have taken root over the past two years. *Universality*, '*leave no-one behind*' and *integration* across the dimensions of sustainable development were not a given at the outset of the process. Yet these concepts have grown to be accepted and embraced, and provide the foundation for a transformative agenda. Similarly, participants felt the unprecedented level of consultation and an inclusive process had been critical to reaching the current point in negotiations. Looking ahead, participants recognize the imperative to continue to engage a wider range of stakeholders, including reaching beyond ministries active in the negotiations. Making progress from the first day of the new agenda will require channeling the energy from the agenda-setting process into a global mobilization for implementation.

Retreat Background Materials

Session 1: Framing the post-2015 accountability challenge

Background Paper #1: *From Count-ability to Accountability: An Overview* (Kitty van der Heijden, WRI)

Supporting Document #1: *Lessons on Monitoring and Reporting from the MDGs and other Major Processes* (Sonya Suter and Adam Fishman, WRI)

Session 2: Designing an accountability framework for global, regional, national and local levels

Background Paper #2: *Building Blocks of a Global Follow-Up and Review System for the Post-2015 Development Agenda* (Jorge Laguna-Celis, NYU Center for International Cooperation)

Session 3: Enhancing the role of non-state actors in a post-2015 accountability framework

Background Paper #3: *Monitoring for Sustainable Development: The Need for Alignment* (GRI/A4S/SEI/IIED/GEC Measure What Matters)

Background Paper #4: *Role of Non-State Actors in Monitoring and Review for Effective Implementation of the Post-2015 Agenda – A Case Study Analysis* (Anshul Bhamra, Kriti Nagrath and Zeenat Niazi, Development Alternatives)

* Background materials and presentations are available at www.irf2015.org

Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda

IRF2015 is a collaboration of leading sustainable development research institutes from across the globe that brings together a rich diversity of analytical skills and perspectives, engagement methodologies and networks. IRF2015 responds to the need for independent, rigorous and timely analysis to inform the evolution of the post-2015 development agenda and the concurrent intergovernmental process on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed to at Rio+20. 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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