

Embedding the environment in the Post-2015 Agenda

CHAIR'S CONCLUSIONS

Civil society and think tank representatives from ten countries from around the globe met in Berlin in January 2014 to discuss the United Nations' Post-2015 Agenda and the future sustainable development goals (SDG). Participants exchanged views on regional and thematic priorities, and agreed that the environmental dimension needs to be better embedded in the Post-2015 Agenda.

Perspectives on the Post-2015 Agenda

Country and regional reports about the state of discussion on the Post-2015 Agenda opened the workshop. While the consultative process has raised expectations among experts, a broad based societal debate has yet to emerge. Language barriers, a general lack of information about the international negotiation process, and the abstractness of the discussions thus far may explain why the debate about how to best integrate the environmental dimension in the combined Post-MDG/SDG-Agenda is not very advanced yet, particularly in local and rural communities of the global South.

While the impacts of environmental degradation, biodiversity loss, and climate change are increasingly felt in every region of this planet, environmental concerns nevertheless remain low on the domestic political agenda in most countries. It is a paradox: Depleted eco-systems are already having an impact on poor people's livelihoods and affecting development opportunities – yet, at the same time, development and environment are all too often still framed

as an either/or choice, ignoring the existing positive and negative linkages.

Analysing the reluctance of governments to commit to sustainable development in more than just general terms made up a recurrent issue in our deliberations. The discussion touched on flawed measurements of development or national wealth such as GDP, but also on subsidies that distort realities.

»It is not sustainability that is expensive, but unsustainability that is cheap« was one conclusion drawn in the workshop.

Environmental sustainability as a vital basis for development

The political priorities in most developing countries are developmental and social aspects. Participants agreed, however, that deteriorating ecosystems increasingly affect livelihoods and development. This is, for example, obvious in the case of agricultural productivity when soil degradation negatively affects strategies to overcome hunger. Participants felt the need to point out the obvious linkages between environment, poverty eradication,

inequality and justice. A sustainable development goal for cities was brought up as an example to enhance the visibility of the Post-2015 Agenda at societal level.

Civil society representatives strongly advocated for an appropriate balance of social development and the environment in the Post-2015-Agenda. A positive – development-centred - narrative, combining the issue of a rights-based approach to development with the protection and the sustainable use of natural resources was favoured as the most promising approach: »The environmental dimension will only fly with all the others, not as a stand-alone dimension«.

The sustainable development paradigm stresses that securing access to resources for future generations depends on the protection of ecosystems by present generations.

Participants embraced the concept of »planetary boundaries«. However, since the term is politically controversial among some governments – stressing limits rather than opportunities – some participants felt the term should be avoided for that reason. Rather, we should use proactive, positive, non-threatening language. The core message should nevertheless come across: the carrying capacities of the earth have already been more than stretched. In this vein, participants agreed that the current model of resource-intensive development needs to be questioned and revised.

Mainstreaming environment to complement stand-alone environmental goals

Evaluating various approaches for integrating the environmental dimension in the Post-2015 Agenda, participants felt that mainstreaming the environmental dimension into all goals should comple-

ment one or several stand-alone goals for the protection of the global commons, ecosystems or the environment in general. If a stand-alone goal cannot be achieved, there should at least be strong and explicit environmental targets.

Goals and targets should be »climate-smart«. Some argued for a stand-alone climate goal on the merits of the dimension of climate change. This could not only create political momentum for the UNFCCC negotiations but also address relevant development and investment aspects. Others argued against it to avoid duplicating the existing negotiations – and if governments cannot agree there, they are unlikely to agree on the same issues somewhere else. With regard to substance, a climate target could reaffirm the aim of keeping global warming below 2°C or even go beyond this.

Participants agreed that goals should be universal, visionary and comprehensive and that underlying targets need to be aspirational, ambitious and specific. Some participants cautioned against having too many goals and targets and argued for setting priorities, whereas others raised concerns about excluding important issues for the sole reason of keeping the number of goals limited. Most agreed that goals should focus on ends and outcomes in order to achieve a transformational shift, while targets and indicators also need to reflect underlying processes, drivers and linkages.

Not to be forgotten: Means of implementation

Concerning means of implementation (Mol), there was general agreement that without them many of the commitments could become empty promises. Participants argued that the full suite of Mol (financial and technology transfers, eco-

conomic frameworks, fiscal and investment policies, debt relief, remittances, innovative sources etc.) needs to be considered, reflecting countries' common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities. Some participants cautioned against making MoI an integral part of each goal since this would most likely lower the level of ambition. Most preferred having ambitious goals and mobilizing MoI as incentives for a prompt and effective implementation. In this context, a participatory follow-up process should review and facilitate implementation, comprising access to MoI for scaling-up successful national activities and also small-scale, local initiatives.

Way forward

Participants expressed the strong need for an open and intensified discourse on the Post 2015 Agenda. This refers to both substance (sustainable development paradigm and goals) and processes of active engagement. The Post-2015 process must become meaningful for peoples' lives. To get local traction, the participation of stakeholders must be ensured, especially in the global South. Participants pointed

out that meaningful participation should not be limited to sending submissions to the United Nations in New York. Rather, civil society needs to work through their own governments, while governments should intensify their consultations with civil society, reviewing, for example, the stock-taking paper after February 14, 2014. This could also enhance the transparency of the on-going negotiations.

The group agreed that the window for embedding the environment in the Post-2015 Agenda is open and new opportunities for active engagement will emerge after the stock-taking report by the Co-Chairs of the Open Working Group has been published and negotiations start in March 2014. Participants showed great interest in the continuation of this kind of dialogue.

The debate in Berlin indicates that there is a need for a well-orchestrated approach of interested actors worldwide to ensure that environment is a substantial part of the future Post-2015 Agenda. Participants stressed that this message needs to be carried forward during the further negotiations in New York and at home.

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