FOLLOW-UP AND REVIEW OF THE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS:

Building on, and breaking with, the past

Abstract

This issue brief presents a brief overview of the current follow-up and review mechanisms of the Sustainable Development Goals. It then draws attention to five possible pitfalls to effective review and proposes possible ways forward in addressing these pitfalls.

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Follow-Up and Review for the Sustainable Development Goals: Building on, and Breaking with, the Past

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) have the potential to place the world's development trajectory on a more sustainable course over the next 14 years. To make sure the world is changing direction, a well-designed follow and review (FUR) process will be needed to track progress. The need for such a process was recognized before the implementation of the SDGs began. For instance, Agenda 2030 calls for a "robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework."[1] But as this FUR framework has begun to be put in place, a number of pitfalls have appeared.

The main purpose of this Issue Brief is to introduce the FUR process and outline some pragmatic ways these pitfalls could be overcome to bolster FUR and SDG implementation. In particular, the Issue Brief suggests the following:

1) The FUR process should create "constructive" spaces that encourage governments to share their implementation challenges in addition to the progress reporting;
2) The FUR process should allocate more time to ensure sufficiently in-depth country reviews;
3) Countries and international organizations should be open to learning from past FUR failures so they do not repeat them;
4) Countries should view the SDGs as a holistic system and use qualitative or proxy indicators to fill data gaps when necessary; and
5) The regional and global reviews should be inclusive, providing marginalised peoples opportunities to voice their concerns in line with key principles in the 2030 agenda.

The remainder of the Issue Brief is broken up into three mains sections. The next section provides a brief overview of the FUR. This is followed by a discussion of the five recommendations above. A final section reiterates key points and outlines ways forward.

An Introduction to FUR

To understand the opportunities and challenges for FUR, it is essential to provide background on how the process works at different levels. At the global level, the main review body for FUR is the High Level Political Forum (HLPF). The HLPF was created to facilitate annual exchanges between countries and other stakeholders on a limited sub-set of the SDGs, focusing on the interlinkages between goals. Over the course of one 4-year cycle of reviews, the intention is that the entire set of goals will have been reviewed by a differing set of countries. Goal 17 on means of implementation (MOI) is discussed every year, as this goal determines action on all other goals.

At regional levels, reporting structures are likely to differ but are guided by global guidelines as documented in key declarations and resolutions (see, for instance, UN General Assembly resolution 70/299 on Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development at the global level).[2] In the Asia-Pacific region, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (UNESCAP) facilitates regular review of the SDGs. The 2017 Asia-Pacific Forum for Sustainable Development (APFSD), (29-31 March) focused on SDGs 1,2,3,5,9,and 14. At the Forum, the focus was on regional

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[1] (United Nations General Assembly, 2015)
[2] (United Nations General Assembly, 2016)

perspectives and how they relate to global and national action, among others, through a regional road-map that the Commission drafted in close consultation with Member States and other stakeholders. Out of the 40 countries that are scheduled to report at the global HLPF in 2017, [3] at least 12 are from the Asia-Pacific region. [4]

Ahead of the annual AFPSD, civil society regularly meets to discuss and prepare inputs to the official agenda. In addition, they also reach beyond the official agenda, thereby focusing on existing and emerging barriers to change, which may not be sufficiently emphasized in the official processes. Whilst being a part of the official UN Major Groups and other Stakeholders system, the civil society representatives in 2012 established their own independent engagement mechanism, the Asia-Pacific Regional Civil Society Engagement Mechanism (RCEM), [5] which promotes essential shifts of countries' economies towards Development Justice. [6]

The following chart illustrates the global, regional and national FUR processes in place for the 2030 agenda. For this process to work smoothly, at least five areas require greater attention; the first such area involves spaces where countries can learn from each other's successes and failures.
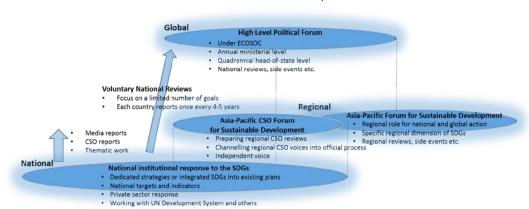
Chart: SDG review processes

Learning from progress and challenges

Events such as the HLPF and the APFSD are good opportunities for governments to share their success stories and exchange good practices. However, since the SDGs challenge business-as-usual, sharing only good experiences would fail to capture the whole picture as there are bound to be difficult challenges to work through when taking action on the SDGs. Learning from others' challenges and difficulties in implementation is perhaps as important as knowing about their successes. To accommodate this, the APFSD, or other independent organisations, should set up dialogue forums that adhere to Chatham House Rule and which could be located away from the usual UN negotiating spaces – as 'constructive' spaces for governments and stakeholders to share information on implementation challenges. Globally, this type of informal facilitation was employed on the side-lines

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[3] Countries from the Asia-Pacific to report in 2017 so far are: Afghanistan, Bangladesh, India, Indonesia, Iran, Japan, Malaysia, Maldives, Nepal, Tajikistan and Thailand. It is possible that other countries volunteer as well.
[4] (Risse, 2016)
[5] (RCEM, 2013)
[6] (Asia-Pacific Women Law and Development, 2016)

of the Open Working Group (OWG) meetings between 2013 and 2015. Temporarily moving delegates from their negotiation spaces at the UN to more relaxed retreat surroundings to discuss implementation challenges can help build important trust and collegiality for collective action.

Lack of time for in-depth reporting

Another concern is the limited duration of the FUR meetings. UN Resolution 67/290 ascribes eight days for the global HLPF per year. This means when 20 or 30 countries have to report, and the reporting time for each will be too limited to allow for any in-depth reporting. At the Asia-Pacific regional level, the situation is even more constrained. The annual APFSD takes place on only three days, which is hardly enough time for governments and other stakeholders to provide the justified depth to share information on their progress with the 2030 agenda. This does not necessarily mean longer and costlier meetings at global and regional levels, but rather relying solely on the official reporting mechanism could be insufficient. In addition to the official reporting track, it would also be desirable to take advantage of existing mechanisms (such as dashboards for reporting and information exchange) and use the latest technologies to ensure constant attention to action on the SDGs. National media regularly comment on government policies. Media scrutiny could shed an important light on policy impacts on the SDGs. Moreover, national and regional research agencies, NGOs, business and other stakeholders should dedicate some of their work to following up on the SDGs on an ongoing basis. For instance, the private sector and civil society could share insights on progress, thereby providing additional inputs to the global agenda.

Avoiding past problems with integration at the HLPF

Generating action on the SDGs should take into account lessons of past institutions that undertook FUR, such as the now-defunct Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The CSD started out with enthusiasm in the early 1990s, but over time it failed to attract audiences representing the three dimensions of development in a balanced manner.[7] Instead it gradually became a congregation focusing mostly on environmental sustainability, whereas important decisions on economic and social aspects took place at United Nations Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) or entirely outside the United Nations. To be transformational, the HLPF must succeed at substantially involving key institutions such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund at its regular review sessions. Additionally, SDG advocates should try to ensure that the spirit of the 2030 Agenda does not remain confined to the 'usual' advocates for sustainable development, but that it permeates all sectors and agencies that have an impact on countries' development priorities. Economic summits, meetings and other regular events such as G7, G20, and World Economic Forum could dedicate sessions to the SDGs to encourage greater integration. Current trends indicate that some parts of the SDGs have been reflected at the G7 in Japan in 2016, and at the recent World Economic Forum in Davos, where famous actors advocated for the SDGs. It would be good to see this type of mainstreaming of the SDGs' discourse across a broader range of policymaking processes.

Where data is lacking progress can be tracked creatively

A fourth need concerns the SDG indicators that are crucial for tracking progress. Many of the currently 231 proposed indicators suffer from methodological as well as data availability issues. So as not to stall progress, countries should be allowed to use any relevant existing indicators, and then gradually improve measurement and data collection over time. This may reduce international comparability but

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[7] (United Nations, 2001)

will ensure that national progress can be tracked. In addition, a recent IGES publication finds that the environmental indicators are among those with the greatest methodological weaknesses,[8] and this skewed strength of data across the different aspects of development is partly a legacy of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). In the future, international funding agencies and other supporting agents should help bolster the measurability of environmental indicators to avoid a neglect of the environment. [9]

In this regard, NGOs and other development stakeholders may publish independent reports on a chosen set of goals or other issues they feel have not received necessary attention to date. A good example of such a shadow report comes from the independent *Spotlight Report*.[10] Other organisations could consider adopting the focus on different SDGs year-by-year, which the UN FUR has determined, to contribute to following up on action taken on the SDGs, when governments may lack capacities to do so. The question is how they could contribute to overall monitoring while ensuring their inputs are reliable and accurate.

Really leaving no-one behind

A fifth need area involves the spirit of inclusiveness and with the purpose of 'leaving-no-one behind' that are supposed to underpin the SDGs. Indeed, the success of the SDGs will arguably hinge on broad participation among all sectors of society. It is especially important to amplify the voice of the many marginalised peoples in the Asia-Pacific region. The UN could consider restructuring its accreditation mechanism, which currently allows only accredited organisations to participate at official meetings. While the list of accredited organisations is extensive, and accreditation is an important element of civil society accountability to UN Member States, accredited organisations include the arms trade sector and others not normally associated with sustainable development. It could thus be prudent to start thinking about revamping the current accreditation mechanism, making it easier for marginalised and other key stakeholders to participate in relevant processes. The accreditation mechanism would still continue to fulfil its function - perhaps with the ESOSOC's current list as an overarching umbrella. In addition, subsidiary processes could develop additional criteria to ensure that accredited organisations really reflect relevant concerns and have access to processes. Such a redesign should be done carefully, however, to ensure that any additional mechanism really facilitates increased participation by different actors relevant to different SDG processes.

Conclusion

To reiterate, action on the SDGs is likely to overcome the major challenges beyond what has been briefly summarised above. It will be important to share challenges among governments and stakeholders and not limit reviews to success stories. Reviewing the SDGs in-depth will take more time and require more resources than provided at global levels; other ways to keep an ongoing tab on activities should be found and will need support from interested stakeholders at all levels. Lessons from the past, especially of the failures to integrate environment with other dimensions of development, should be considered going forward. Indicators to track progress depend on data—but many of the environment-related goals and targets lack data. Ways should be devised to allow for use of proxy and qualitative indicators, at least as stop gap option until additional data collection capacities are built. Allowing countries to take a creative approach in bridging data gaps may limit the scope for

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[8] (Zusman, Yoshida, & Olsen, 2016)
[9] (Zhou & Moinuddin, 2016)
[10] (Reflection Group, 2016)

international comparison. That does not negate the value of countries being able to track and compare their own progress over time. Finally, the trend of shrinking space for civil society and marginalised peoples at national levels should be countered at regional and global levels to ensure that those most desperately in need of development remain included.

Further reading

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