



COMMENTARY

Taking Stock: A brief analysis of the UN Sustainable Development Summit

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September 2015

The UN had at least two clear purposes in convening the Sustainable Development Summit—to adopt its development agenda for the next 15 years, the “2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development,” and to demonstrate that all countries are committed to its implementation. Although Member States had joined the consensus at the conclusion of the negotiations on the Agenda on 2 August 2015, their Heads of State and Government needed to look each other in the eye—figuratively, literally, collectively and publicly—to affirm their intention to keep this commitment. As they did so, speakers called the meeting a “moment of hope,” with some comparing it to what happened 70 years ago when leaders came together to meet the challenges of the post-war world and created the UN.

While largely a celebration of the decision to move collectively in a new direction, participants were fully cognizant that they would be judged on the implementation of the agenda and not by the words on paper they had just adopted. Speakers offered sober reminders of the enormity of the challenges ahead, and reflected on the MDGs, which were supposed to have been achieved by the end of 2015. Laments about unachieved MDG targets were voiced alongside reports on successes in increasing levels of education, raising citizens out of poverty, and empowering women and girls.

Many at the Summit also reflected on the successful negotiation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which had led to this point. The negotiation of the SDGs took place during a period of glacially slow progress in other multilateral environmental negotiations. As such, the Summit was not only a moment of hope, but also an opportunity to reflect on the elements for further success.

The negotiation process of the SDGs—which comprise the central focus of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development—began with an extended “stocktaking” period, during which governments collectively considered the options and elements for inclusion in the final outcome. Many have attributed the successful negotiation of the SDGs to this deductive process. Although more limited in scope and time, the three-day UN Summit for Sustainable Development could be viewed as a stocktaking exercise for the implementation period. It is through this lens that this brief analysis reviews the UN Summit on Sustainable Development.

Success of the OWG on SDGs

The Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs, which was created by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development to develop a proposed set of sustainable development goals, worked in two phases.



Throughout the first phase, called “stocktaking” (March 2013 to February 2014), experts and various stakeholders were invited to provide information on the status of knowledge, progress and challenges related to themes under consideration. Based on that stocktaking, the OWG undertook the second phase of the process (February to July 2014), deliberating on a proposal for SDGs and targets for submission to the 68th session of the UN General Assembly. If the purpose of the OWG was to not only elaborate a set of SDGs but also to build a sense of universal ownership of the goals and targets, it was clearly a success.

During the Summit, many praised the OWG experience and leadership, and reflected on the honor of having been involved in the process. Serbia noted, for example, that it participated actively in the OWG and highlighted that the OWG had been launched during Serbia’s UNGA Presidency. The Rio+20 mandate had been for the OWG to comprise 30 seats, but this configuration was stretched to accommodate the 70 Member States who wanted to participate in the OWG: seats were “shared” by countries that were not always in the same geographic or issue-based coalitions. This unusual composition (30 small groups of countries, also called troikas) was credited with having facilitated discussions and breaking traditional positions to arrive at innovative, consensual solutions. Reflecting the comradery that developed during the OWG, Cyprus thanked his troika-mates Singapore and the United Arab Emirates, and indicated his country’s pride in having contributed to this agenda.

According to many speakers, the OWG’s success also lay in the good guidance and management provided by its Co-Chairs, Ambassadors Macharia Kamau (Kenya), Csaba Kőrösi (Hungary), as well as David Donoghue (Ireland) who, with Kamau, co-chaired the final year of negotiations on the 2030 Agenda. Speakers commented on the transparency and inclusiveness of the process, which had engaged constructively with Major Groups and other stakeholders, and its unwavering focus on the international community’s shared goals. Attention

during the Summit reflected this focus, as delegates pledged to collectively strive to achieve the SDGs and the new Agenda.

Assessing Commitment to Implementation

From the speeches at the Summit, it was clear that the implementation of the SDGs has already begun; the sense of ownership over the negotiated outcome has extended into stakeholders’ commitment to implement the 2030 Agenda. Governments reported that they have taken steps to assess how the SDGs will be implemented within their ministries. Others said they had referred to the SDGs while developing their INDCs to address climate change. Intergovernmental and non-governmental organizations enumerated the SDGs addressed in their mandates. And representatives from the private sector reported that they have already begun using the SDGs for their own sustainability assessments.

Some highlighted sustainable development initiatives already in place or announced significant funding commitments, further demonstrating their commitment to implementation. Panama’s President committed to restoring 50% of his country’s deforested areas over the next 20 years. The King of Spain noted that his country established, with UNDP, the first SDG fund, which is financing projects in over 17 countries. China’s President laid out an attention-grabbing list of financial commitments, including the establishment of a US\$2 billion assistance fund for South-South cooperation to implement the SDGs, and increasing investment in LDCs to US\$12 billion by 2030. The Russian Federation said his country has written off US\$20 billion in debt and is instituting debt-for-aid swaps for the poorest countries.

Outstanding Issues

In an agenda that seeks to “leave no one behind,” as speaker after speaker implored, some called attention to the final element of the SDG package—indicators—which are necessary for measuring and



verifying that their lofty goals are attained. By March 2016 the 17 goals and 169 targets will be joined by a set of indicators currently under development by the UN Statistical Commission. These indicators have the potential to demonstrate which goals are on track, and where further effort should be expended. Disaggregated data also will be critical, Summit participants emphasized, for measuring each indicator and ensuring that the 2030 Agenda leaves no one behind. Once the indicators are adopted, speakers highlighted the need for capacity building to ensure that each of the UN's 193 Member States can gather the requisite data to track and assess the indicators. Some refer to this element of implementation as the “data revolution,” and many noted that the 2030 Agenda will be incomplete until this component is finalized.

In addition to the indicators and data, the Agenda's follow-up and review mechanism also must be further detailed. While the 2030 Agenda outlines general modalities for follow-up and review at the national, regional and global levels, operational details remain to be defined. Discussions are expected to take place in the next several months to clarify the HLPF's organizational arrangements for state-led review, institutional responsibilities, and annual themes and the sequence of thematic reviews to be considered, among other aspects of the follow-up and review framework. Some speakers highlighted the need to complete the discussion of these issues, and a few indicated that they would present proposals to UNGA in the coming months

Completing the 2015 Agreements: Climate Change

While speakers hailed the AAAA as the financing framework for the 2030 Agenda, and celebrated the 2030 Agenda and its SDGs, it has been widely noted that the true legacy of 2015 will only be known once the Paris Climate Change Conference concludes. Many speakers stressed the linkages among the 2015 agreements, and looked to the final event for the full completion of the Agenda. Croatia's President Kolinda Grabar-Kitarovic said, in the first speech

after the Agenda's adoption, that only with an outcome from Paris will we be able to say we have set the framework for the SDGs. Prime Minister Ahmet Davutoglu of Turkey said the Paris outcome will add “another ring to the chain,” and the three events' results “will establish the framework of the global development agenda for the next 15 years.” Hungary's President János Áder reflected many statements when he noted that if climate objectives are not met all of the SDGs will be affected.

Given the importance attached to the Paris Climate Change Conference, it is not surprising that many governments used their speeches to flag their latest positions on climate change. Many speakers supported a legally binding agreement, and many SIDS said it should aim to keep global warming under 1.5°C. Others outlined the limits of their flexibility, or “marge de manoeuvre,” such as Tuvalu who called for a loss and damage mechanism as a stand-alone element in the Paris outcome, and declared that this is a “red line” for his country.

Capitalizing on the gathering of Heads of State and Government, the UN Secretary-General held a high-level, informal lunch on the sidelines of the Summit, to “inject greater energy” into the climate change negotiation process leading up to Paris. In a press conference that followed the meeting, François Hollande, President of France and President of the Paris Climate Change Conference, outlined that the 2030 Agenda and the Paris agreement are mutually supportive and said leaders had pledged to continue working closely with each other. He appealed to all leaders to show flexibility, vision and leadership, and reviewed his proposal to have Heads of State and Government gather in Paris on 30 November, at the opening of the meeting, to “make sure we have an agreement we can sign” at the end of the conference.

Sometimes it Falls on a Generation to be Great

In the midst of hundreds of national and world leaders, two figures who received repeated requests to appear in other participants' photos and selfies



were Malala Yousafzai and Mark Zuckerberg. Well below the average age of plenary, dialogue and side event speakers, they drew a level of attention and celebrity that some found fitting for this Agenda, which seeks to leave the world in a better place for the next generation. As an activist for girls' education and chief executive of Facebook, respectively, they demanded safety, peace and education for children, and extolled the possibilities from connecting the world through the Internet. Their messages resonated with participants because they were not just talking about lofty ideas; despite their age, they have had a real, global impact on the issues about which they are passionate. The attention to these two figures, who have become cultural icons beyond the sphere of girls' education and social media, bodes well for the future of the 2030 Agenda as the focus shifts toward practical ways to transform our world.

Among the inspirational quotes discussed during the Summit, Nelson Mandela's statement that "sometimes it falls on a generation to be great" resonated with many. Summit participants recognized that the 2030 Agenda represents a last chance to set the world on a sustainable footing, and accepted their responsibility to leave the world a better place for their children. And statements during the Summit demonstrated that UN Member States recognize that the process to develop the SDGs has resulted in an outcome that stakeholders around the world can be passionate about.

Many recognized that the negotiation process was unique, and the outcome was embraced proudly and fully. Going into the talks, many people thought agreement on this expansive an agenda would be unattainable, but the skillfully handled negotiations and the possibility for innovation through the troika method contributed to an approach in which participants explored the possibilities together, and reached an agreement their Heads of State and Government embraced. While the three days in September were a celebration of an agreement, they also lent high-level support for moving forward, and sent some clear signals about priorities. Governments announcing so many commitments surely gave

support to the UN, which, in a world of broken promises, can usually inspire, cajole, urge, but never threaten or coerce. The final decisions on the indicators, follow-up and review, and climate change will be critical elements for the Agenda's success, and their full shape has yet to be determined, as is the full scope of the 2015 pivot towards sustainable development.

This analysis, taken from the summary issue of the Earth Negotiations Bulletin © enb@iisd.org, is written and edited by Rishikesh Bhandary, Faye Leone, Leila Mead, Delia Paul, Nathalie Risse, Ph.D., and Lynn Wagner, Ph.D. The Editor is Pamela Chasek, Ph.D. The Director of IISD Reporting Services is Langston James "Kimo" Goree VI. The Sustaining Donors of the Bulletin are the European Union, the Government of Switzerland (the Swiss Federal Office for the Environment (FOEN), the Swiss Agency for Development Cooperation (SDC)), and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia. General Support for the Bulletin during 2015 is provided by the German Federal Ministry for the Environment, Nature Conservation, Building and Nuclear Safety (BMUB), the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Trade, SWAN International, the Finnish Ministry for Foreign Affairs, the Japanese Ministry of Environment (through the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies - IGES), the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), and the International Development Research Centre (IDRC). Funding for translation of the Bulletin into French has been provided by the Government of France, the Wallonia, Québec, and the International Organization of La Francophonie/Institute for Sustainable Development of La Francophonie (IOF/IFDD). The opinions expressed in the Bulletin are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the views of IISD or other donors. Excerpts from the Bulletin may be used in non-commercial publications with appropriate academic citation. For information on the Bulletin, including requests to provide reporting services, contact the Director of IISD Reporting Services at , +1-646-536-7556 or 300 East 56th St., 11D, New York, NY 10022 USA.

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IISD is registered as a charitable organization in Canada and has 501(c)(3) status in the United States. IISD receives core operating support from the Government of Canada, provided through the International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and from the Province of Manitoba. The Institute receives project funding from numerous governments inside and outside Canada, United Nations agencies, foundations, the private sector, and individuals.

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