

What is needed to set up an effective monitoring and reviewing system for SDGs?

Presentation by Derek Osborn, President Stakeholder Forum,

to the ESDN Network Meeting on 16 June 2015

1. It has been recognised from the outset of the SDG discussions that the whole global system will stand or fall according as to whether it can be effectively monitored and reviewed. If the goals and targets are to act as a real inspiration and dynamic for change towards sustainability at all levels in the world they must be kept constantly in view. Progress towards them must be regularly monitored and corrective action taken where outcomes are falling short.

2. The Zero Draft of the HLPF declaration which has just been released has many useful things to say about implementation, monitoring and review, and lays out a programme for implementing the goals and then subjecting progress to a regular multi-level system of review at all levels. I would pick out the following key elements from that text:
 - The need for national (and European) sustainable development strategies to elaborate how the global goals and targets will be implemented in the national context. (ZD, III Para 4 (Page 29))
 - The need for regular review of progress on a 4 year cycle under HLPF in order to maintain momentum towards long term SDGs. (ZD III para 5).
 - The need for a multi-level review process. National progress to be reviewed both in terms of its own objectives and for the adequacy of its contribution to the global goals.
 - The need for many actors and stakeholders of all kinds to be involved in creating strategy in implementation and in monitoring progress. (ZD, Para 37. (page 7))
 - The potential role of institutional arrangements such as National Councils for SD, ombudsmen, parliamentary oversight etc. for illuminating key issues and helping to maintain broad national support for the sustainability transition.

Timetable. The 2015 HLPF will launch SDG process in September 2015. The next major review of progress is planned to be at HLPF in 2019. To have significant progress to report by then countries (and the EU) will have to get moving promptly as soon as the SDGs are in

place or earlier preferably. They might aim to establish national strategies and plans during 2016. Then they will need to get on with implementing key programmes so that there is some significant progress to report in 2018 or early in 2019 in time to report into the international review process during 2019.

Scoping SDG implementation.

The first step for developed countries such as Member States of the EU (and the EU itself) might be to establish the scope of strategy. Two views on this are still around:

- SDGs are primarily about needs of developing countries, centred around poverty eradication; and the primary task of developed countries is to help developing countries, particularly the least developed countries to accelerate their progress towards development sustainably preferably. This would imply focusing the implementation task of developed countries around the work of development assistance administrations and departments. They might focus their efforts on Goal17 and the individual targets in each of the other goals directed towards development assistance policies and measures.
- At the other extreme other players argue that universality means the SDGs apply to all countries, and that developed countries need to tackle the full range of issues identified in the SDGs in their own domestic circumstances as well as dealing with the development assistance agenda. Poverty issues for example still exist in developed countries even if not to such a severe extent as in the developing countries, and even developed countries should use the SDGs as the context for framing new approaches to these issues.

In a recent report on the implications of the universal SDGs for developed countries [Available at www.stakeholderforum.org] SF have identified a middle way. We have assessed all the goals and targets from the developed country perspective against three criteria: applicability, implementability and transformationality. The goals and targets that are assessed as transformational are particularly significant because these are the ones that will require the biggest shifts in current policies, practice and behaviours both within Government and amongst other actors in society. They are also the ones on which the world as a whole most needs radical change within the developed countries in order to reduce their adverse impacts or footprint on the rest of the world. SF therefore suggests that European member states and the EU itself should give particular attention to these major transformational challenges in planning for their own domestic implementation of the SDGs.

In SF's initial analysis, the methodology identifies the goals of sustainable consumption and production (SDG 12), sustainable energy (SDG 7) and combating climate change (SDG 13) as the three most transformational challenges facing developed countries – and as being the challenges on which the world at large needs to see the developed world place a strong emphasis for action so as to relieve the overall anthropogenic pressures on the

planet and its natural systems. Other goals involving significant transformational change in developed countries include the need to achieve more sustainable economies and growth pathways, the goal of greater equality, and the goals to achieve better protection of the oceans and of terrestrial ecosystems.

Social problems of poverty, health, education and gender issues are, of course, still present in developed countries as well as in developing countries (though to differing degrees) as are all the other issues covered by the SDGs. And the universal applicability of the SDGs stresses to the need to continue to confront all of these issues comprehensively in all countries. But further progress on these issues in the developed world cannot be expected to have such a large, transformational effect either within those countries themselves or in its impact on the rest of the world.

The report suggests that the method of analysis it employs should now be used more widely to explore more deeply the major transformational challenges which the SDGs present to developed countries, as they begin to plan their SDG implementation strategies. It could also be applied to help other countries or groups of countries to identify the major transformational challenges which the SDGs imply for them.

Co-ordination arrangements within Governments (and within the EU).

Governments need at an early stage to determine their own internal arrangements for implementation and co-ordination. Different Departments and Ministers might naturally take the lead for different goals. Goal 3 for example will naturally fall to Ministers of Health; while Goal 4 will be for Ministers of Education to take the lead on. Since many different Departments will need to be involved, and since many of the objectives will have expenditure and fiscal aspects there will need to be strong co-ordination from the centre of Government and with strong input from economic and finance departments. If the EU and member states do adopt something like the middle way suggested by SF as to scope the co-ordination arrangements will need to focus particularly on those departments involve with sustainable consumption and production, energy and climate change, overall economic management as well as on key environmental issues such as the oceans, biodiversity and water.

Applying the global goals in a national (and EU) context.

1. Each goal at a time. The next step might be to conduct open-ended consultation with all relevant stakeholders as to how to define and apply goals and targets in national context. Initially each of the 17 goals (or the priority goals identified as above) might be the subject of a separate consultation with the relevant stakeholder community.

The consultation should both solicit views on the shaping and calibrating of appropriate national targets to support the global objectives, and should, include consultation on what part might be played by various partners (local government, business, professional groups) in relation to the different goals and targets, and how they could join together in partnership. So far as possible the resultant strategy should not just be a strategy for what the Government will do, but should also include commitments by other sectors to the part they will expect to play in implementation.

2. An over-arching national strategy for Sustainable Development.

At a second stage the separate strands of consultation on each separate goal or subject area might then be drawn together in a single over-arching draft strategy establishing relative priorities and costings, and defining how overall economic management will contribute to the achievement of the strategy as a whole.

This could then be subject to a more wide-ranging high level consultation deigned to secure buy in and support from all the major stakeholder groups. It might also be opened to Parliamentary discussion at that stage, prior to formal Parliamentary endorsement.

The whole process should result in national strategies approved and endorsed by Government, by Parliament and by representatives of all the other main sectors of society concerned with implementation by the end of 2016.

Monitoring and Indicators. A crucial part of the consultation will be designed to establish quantified targets and timetables for action by all the different actors concerned to ensure the delivery of the overall SD goal and target in each country, together with the quantifiable indicators that will be used to measure progress. The global statistical community is already at work on creating appropriate indicators to assess progress on the SDGs and targets. For the developed countries it will be particularly important to create appropriate indicators for the transformational challenges that will involve big changes in society such as sustainable consumption and production. In Europe this should be a particular challenge for national statistical services and Eurostat and the EEA.

Allocating responsibility for delivering targets and making progress against indicators. It will be crucial to establish which Department or which community of actors have individually or collectively the responsibility for making due progress against those indicators. Assigning such responsibilities clearly is essential if progress against the indicators is to be used effectively as a means of holding relevant actors to account, and for requiring corrective action from them if performance falls short.

Reporting. The first major round of reporting progress against the national and European strategies to be established in 2016 will need to take place at the end of 2018 or early in 2019 in order to fit into the UN's HLPF timetable for reviewing progress in 2019. In 2018 there would need first to be statistical reports of progress against the defined national and European indicators, together with qualitative reports from stakeholders, academic sources and other relevant material to enable a rounded overall assessment of progress to the UN. The report itself should be prepared in draft and then subject to wide consultation before submission.

Global review. Reviewing all the national reports and the separately commissioned UN global sustainable development report will no doubt reveal different rates of progress at global level in relation to different goals and targets. This should enable the HLPF to take stock of progress overall and to identify areas which deserve priority attention and greater efforts in the next iteration of the cycle. In the light of the HLPF deliberations in 2019 it would then be appropriate for countries (and the EU) to review their own strategies and plans in 2020 and to make appropriate adjustments to keep on track towards the overall global goals and targets.

A new EU sustainable development strategy?

The EU will need to develop its own response to the challenge of SDG implementation up to the reference year of 2030. The EU currently has a moment of opportunity in relation to its own sustainable development processes. In the EU all this action at national level should be complemented by parallel action at EU level to consult on and create a new European Sustainable Development Strategy for dealing with those issues on which European level action or co-ordination may be needed. At EU level the same stage should be gone through – defining responsibilities within the Commission, separate wide-ranging consultations with stakeholder on the subject areas of each goal, followed by a more wide-ranging consultation on the European SD strategy as a whole to shape overall priorities and flagship programmes.

The second renewed EU sustainable development strategy of 2006 which was agreed by the Council and the Parliament as well as the Commission has been allowed to fall into some neglect, and is ripe for renewal or a new beginning. Similarly the 2020 Strategy which provided an over-arching framework for much of the previous Commission's work needs renewal or replacement. This could be a good time for the Commission and the other institutions and to create a new overarching strategic framework in 2016 that would base itself around European implementation of the universal SDGs, and provide for regular monitoring and review of progress. Many groups of stakeholders including the EESC in its opinion on the review of the Europe 2020 strategy are beginning to argue for this to happen, and for a new integrated post-2015 strategy focused on 2030 objectives to be established in 2016.

Such an objective would need to include a robust and wide-ranging process for engaging stakeholders of all kinds in the creation of the strategy, and in its implementation, monitoring and review. For consultations on each separate goal the consultations would no doubt take place with the separate regular communities around each of those subject areas. For the second-stage broader consultation the consultation might appropriately take place with a broader grouping.

A Sustainable Development Forum?

The EESC's Sustainable Development Observatory is currently exploring with other Brussels-based stakeholders concerned with sustainable development issues the possibility of creating a standing Sustainable Development Forum, whose first task would be to engage collaboratively with the Commission on the preparation of the post-2015 strategy. Such a Forum would in principle be open to stakeholders of all kinds concerned with sustainable development issues, and with all having equal rights to be heard and to contribute to the conclusions. It might also reach out to similar stakeholder bodies in Member States such as National Councils for Sustainable development so as to develop a more integrated stakeholder approach at all levels in Europe.

What could go wrong?

- Excessive ambition. Too many goals and targets. Too many levels. Too many stakeholders. Too much paper generation. Not enough action.
- Half-hearted political and public commitment. No urgency for change.
- Timescale too long. Progress too slow. People lose interest. Impossible to maintain momentum
- Stakeholders lack capacity or willingness for long haul.

Some possible answers identified in this paper.

- Prioritise goals and targets where there is a real need and appetite for transformational change. [Cf SF Universality report cited above].
- Pay particular attention to long-term thinkers, systems analysts, NGOs.
- Institutionalise arrangements so as to have system disciplines in place even if (or when) political attention is diverted. Legislate for goals and targets and reporting and review processes. Legislate for ombudsmen with particular responsibility for compiling regular SD reports. Create standing national Sustainable Development Councils to bring all major interest and actors together in common purpose.
- Support capacity building in this sector or academic world to keep an eye on long-term progress. National Councils. Ombudsmen. Commissioner for Future Generation. European Sustainability Forum or platform.