

## The post-2015 development agenda

### SUMMARY

Fruit of two different but increasingly converging processes, the post-2015 sustainable development agenda is set to become the universal framework guiding global and national efforts to support human development in conjunction with environmental durability, from 2016. As the final stage in negotiations approaches, the post-2015 agenda is taking shape in a novel institutional setting, characterised not only by its twin-channels – with Rio+20 state-driven and post-2015 UN-led tracks – but also by its highly participative nature. Indeed the process has ensured large space for public participation and opportunities for input from stakeholders.

The broad reactions to the shape the agenda is taking, expressed as the main outcome documents are published, show that the results may not satisfy those who were expecting a truly transformative shift in the way the international community faces global challenges. According to commentators the working documents do not address the roots of poverty and economic inequality, although they follow the growth-centred path supported by the business lobby. A true human-rights approach to development is not at the basis of the agenda, although it is stressed that substantial progress has been achieved through its universal scope and the inclusion of the rule of law and peace and security-related goals in the new framework.

*This is an updated version of a [briefing](#) published in June 2014.*



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#### Abbreviations

**MDG:** Millennium Development Goals

**SDG:** Sustainable Development Goals

**UNGA:** United Nations General Assembly

**HLP:** High-level Panel of Eminent Persons

**OWG:** Open Working Group

### Issue definition

Although the assessment of the degree of achievement of the Millennium Development Goals ([MDGs](#)) varies – some see the glass as half empty, others as half full, although all recognise the geographical variation in results – the consensus appears widespread on the necessity for the international community to continue to aim at a common set of global goals. The on-going worldwide debate on the post-2015 agenda is approaching its conclusion with the final intergovernmental negotiations, which started with a stock-taking session on 19-21 January 2015, ahead of the **MDG review summit** planned for **September 2015**. Once agreed, the post-2015 agenda will shape development activities globally from 1 January 2016.

### Twin-track process: features and innovations

#### Two channels converging

The debate on the post-2015 agenda has taken place in the framework of two separate institutional settings, although these have been converging as the result of clearly emerging political preference for one integrated approach.

The first, an **intergovernmental process**, was launched at the [Rio+20 Conference](#) in 2012, where the resolution '[The future we want](#)' set the aim of establishing sustainable development goals to complement the MDGs. To work these out, the [Open Working Group](#) (OWG) was created in January 2013. It has 30 seats, occupied by states selected by five UN regional groups through an innovative system of representation, with some seats being shared by one to four countries. The eighth OWG session took place in February 2014, and ended the input phase, in which the OWG collected contributions from member countries, stakeholders and experts. The five sessions of the following phase focused on the intergovernmental negotiation of the final output, which was released at the 13th session held in July 2014.<sup>1</sup> It reported back to the 68th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2014 at the same time as two other bodies: the [Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing](#) and the [High-level Political Forum](#). The 27-member forum, convened at the level of Heads of State or Government, or ministers, should provide political leadership to the process and review its progress, and therefore some expect the new targets to be agreed politically in this framework.<sup>2</sup> Although intergovernmental in nature, its meetings are open for stakeholder participation.

Intergovernmental negotiations are taking place in 2015, with nine [sessions](#) due to be held up to the end of July 2015.

The second channel, at **UN level**, opened following the 2010 MDG summit, is structured by the UN system task force, created in September 2011, that launched global and national consultations, under the name of **Global conversation**. The [High-level Panel of Eminent Persons](#) (HLP) was created in July 2012 and has held several meetings. Its [report](#), together with the results of consultations and OWG focus documents, has been among the main outcomes of the process so far.

### Contribution of private actors: 'participative democracy' in the UN process

At UN level, public consultation has been seen as a necessary precondition for the achievement of good multilateral policies since the mid-1990s, with the aim of fostering democratic legitimacy. The UN institutions, for a long time the playing field of sovereign states alone, have gradually opened up to public participation, and engaging non-state actors, in particular NGOs and business.<sup>3</sup>

#### *Global conversation*

The **Global conversation** has been one of the most innovative ways of including multiple civil society organisations and individuals across the globe in the post-2015 process. The extensive set of thematic and national consultations were organised by UN country teams and facilitated by the UN development group. Not less than 88 national dialogues as well as 11 thematic dialogues have been held. In addition, a worldwide online survey has enabled more than 1 million people to express their views on the post-2015 development agenda.

Civil society organisations were also involved in several dialogues conducted by the official bodies involved in the process. In particular the UN Non-governmental Liaison Service held a four-month long dialogue, in writing and via teleconference, with 120 civil society networks, culminating in a meeting organised ahead of the September 2013 UN General Assembly Special Event on the Millennium Development Goals.

#### *Corporate involvement*

Business players' influence<sup>4</sup> on the post-2015 process has been exercised through several channels, mostly the HLP, the [Sustainable Development Solution Network](#) and the Global Compact. Their main inputs are summarised in the box below.

Among the 27 HLP members were two representatives of business – Betty Maina, CEO of Kenya Association of Manufacturers and Unilever CEO, Paul Polman. They conducted, in preparing the HLP report, an extensive consultation among bosses of 250 leading companies in 30 countries.

The [Global Compact](#), a strategic partnership between the UN and more than 7 000 participating companies, aimed to establish corporate responsibility standards on a voluntary basis. Its LEAD group of 55 major corporations is considered an official work stream of the post-2015 process.

One of 11 thematic groups of the [Sustainable Development Solution Network](#), created by the UN Secretary-General to establish a link between scientific, technical research and policy-making, focuses on the 'redefinition of the role of business for sustainable development'. However business representatives also sit in the other 10 and are reported to have strongly influenced their work.

### Main outcome so far

The first assessment of the progress made in elaboration of the post-2015 agenda was made during a special UNGA event on the MDGs on 25 September 2013. The meeting received six main contributions from five work-streams initiated by the Secretary General, including:

#### Key messages of business

- 1 Growth, via use of new technologies as precondition for sustainable development
2. Major role of private sector in delivering sustainable development
4. Government role in realising the 'enabling environment' and incentives for business to engage in favour of sustainability
5. Focus on multi-stakeholder (public-private) governance.

- [Realising the future we want](#), report from the UN System Task Team on the UN Development Agenda
- [The world we want](#), a summary of the national and thematic consultations facilitated by the UN Development Group.
- UN Global Compact [report](#) on Corporate Sustainability and the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda, presenting the business perspective on the post-2015 agenda.
- Sustainable Development Solution Network outcomes.

The three-page outcome [document](#) recognises the intrinsic inter-linkage between poverty eradication and the promotion of sustainable development, and confirms the aim of one single, universal set of goals with differentiated application. It stresses that the new framework should also promote peace and security, democratic governance, the rule of law, gender equality and human rights for all.

### **The Report of the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda (May 2013)**

The [report](#), which opens by declaring its refusal of 'business as usual', proposes a reform of the development agenda to make it more comprehensive, inclusive and universal, with objectives set both for developing and developed countries.

Five 'big transformative shifts' are proposed in the HLP report:

1. *Leave no-one behind* – ending of extreme poverty keeping in focus the excluded groups.
2. *Put sustainable development at the core* – integrating the social, economic, and environmental actions.
3. *Transform economies for jobs and inclusive growth* – creating good job possibilities while moving to sustainable patterns of work.
4. *Build peace and effective, open and accountable public institutions* – recognising peace and good governance as core elements of wellbeing and basis for development.
5. *Forge new global partnership* – based on a new spirit of solidarity, cooperation, and mutual accountability that must underpin the post-2015 agenda, and would include all stakeholders.

The panel recommends formulating a single set of goals covering both development and environmental issues, and to focus more attention on financing sustainable development.

Some question the legitimacy of the panel itself, made up of 27 leaders from across the world appointed by UN Secretary-General Ban Ki Moon in July 2012. Indeed the panel can be seen as challenging the traditional intergovernmental process of the OWG, which published its [report](#) in September 2014.

### **OWG focus areas**

The [Focus areas document](#) was adopted in February 2014 but has been further [revised and expanded](#) during subsequent sessions. The approach adopted integrates the interrelated economic, social and environmental issues which are key to achieving sustainable development in all its dimensions. Under each focus area a main goal was formulated, followed by concrete targets proposed by a group of states.

A total of 16 focus areas provide a framework for the future intergovernmental negotiations to determine the goals and targets of the development agenda:

1. Poverty eradication, building shared prosperity and promoting equality (equality was a standalone area in the first draft)

2. Sustainable agriculture, food security and nutrition
3. Health and population dynamics
4. Education and life-long learning
5. Gender equality and women's empowerment
6. Water and sanitation
7. Energy
8. Economic growth, employment and infrastructure (infrastructure and employment were separated in a previous draft)
9. Industrialisation and promoting equality among nations
10. Sustainable cities and human settlements
11. Sustainable consumption and production
12. Climate change
13. Marine resources, oceans and seas
14. Ecosystems and biodiversity
15. Means of implementation
16. Peaceful and non-violent societies, rule of law and capable institutions

Commentators [stress](#) the difficulty of building on and prioritising among such a large number of proposals, and a clear lack of consensus concerning some sensitive points. The inclusion of the political goal of 'peaceful and non-violent societies, rule of law, and capable institutions' is an example of a highly divisive issue, as well as goals on inequality and climate change.<sup>5</sup>

#### **OWG proposal for SDG**

The 'Open Working Group [proposal](#) for Sustainable Development Goals' was presented at the 68th session of the UN General Assembly in September 2014. The proposal is articulated in 17 goals, each accompanied by targets (169 in total) and to be further elaborated through indicators focused on measurable outcomes.

- 1 End poverty in all its forms everywhere
- 2 End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture
- 3 Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages
- 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all
- 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls
- 6 Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all
- 7 Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all
- 8 Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all
- 9 Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation
- 10 Reduce inequality within and among countries
- 11 Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable
- 12 Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns
- 13 Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts<sup>6</sup>
- 14 Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development
- 15 Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss
- 16 Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

17	Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the global partnership for sustainable development
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UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon endorsed the above mentioned goals in his Synthesis [Report](#), 'The Road to Dignity by 2030'. Ban acknowledges that the OWG's report does not propose radical changes from what member states have already agreed, but recognises that, had it done so, it would likely have been rejected outright by the member states. According to the UN Secretary-General, while the report provides six essential elements for delivering on the SDGs – dignity, people, prosperity, planet, justice, and partnership – it [does not clarify](#) the relationship between the elements and the goals.

### Stakeholders' reactions

The [reactions](#) of stakeholders to the shape that the post-2015 agenda is taking is quite nuanced, with some recurrent positive comments and some substantial criticisms.

#### *Positives*

The **universal character of the new goals** is commonly praised as a modification from the MDG approach, which was often criticised as a donors' agenda for developing countries only. This, together with a **stronger focus on poverty eradication** instead of (extreme) poverty reduction, is judged as positive by several commentators who also welcome the recognition of its multidimensional character. The **stand-alone goal on gender equality and women's empowerment** is [perceived](#) as an important element to be kept in the final agenda, which should also be a cross-cutting target for all other goals. Civil society [stakeholders](#) also praise the **inclusion of good governance and political human rights**, including the human right to water, as intrinsic to development. It is stressed that the two goals on peaceful and inclusive societies – since violence and conflict hinder development – and the rule of law and capable institutions should be kept in the post-2015 agenda. Beyond2015 also ask that a standalone political goal of good governance should include targets for both national and international levels.

Concerning the corresponding targets, several of them needed to be reformulated to be effective according to stakeholders. For example, several NGOs criticised the wording of the target 'remove unnecessary restrictions of freedom of media' which leaves it to states' discretion to define 'unnecessary restrictions'. This target has not been included in the OWG proposal for the SDGs.

#### *Criticisms*

Beyond2015, while welcoming several commitments, [stresses](#) that the current OWG proposals **fall short of defining safe ecological limits to development** and equitable distribution of resources, while concentrating on growth at all cost. The **over-emphasis on economic growth** as motor of development is, according to some [stakeholders](#), an indicator of a *business as usual* approach that does not question the prevailing economic paradigm and misses the opportunity to propose a far-reaching reform of economic, financial and governance structures. For some the debates so far **fail to address the roots of poverty** and inequality. The elimination of the stand-alone goal on income inequality, a focus area in the first (February 2014) draft but then integrated in focus area 1 in the May 2014 version, is thus contested.

Indeed as stressed in the [position paper](#) by the International Trade Union Confederation, at the same time as the world economy has seen substantial growth, economic inequality, in terms of wealth and income, has been growing to

unprecedented levels: according to recent reports 1% of the world population has 40% of global wealth while 50% gets only 1%; 85 individuals own as much as 60% of the population put together! The redistribution of wealth and income, as well as power, should, according to those stakeholders, be at the centre of the sustainable development agenda.

As noted in the [UNCTAD paper](#), high and growing inequality levels make global growth alone an ineffective means to address poverty. UNCTAD highlights **the need to reform the global economic and financial system** in order to cut the vicious circle between the instability of unregulated financial markets, profiting the top 1% of the world population, and the growing social and economic insecurity of the great majority. Setting a target for reducing the ratio between average wages and average chief-executive remuneration may be a route to reducing growing income divergence – considered morally unacceptable as well as economically and politically damaging.

According to the Women's Major Group, the 'new' development agenda presented in the HLP report gives **predominance to the business/corporate sector perspective**, mainly by keeping the growth-centred economic model and through a purely voluntary rather than legally binding accountability of corporations as regards their respect of human rights and environmental standards. In particular, the **responsibility of trans-national corporations in exacerbating food insecurity**, for example through the promotion of genetically modified organisms and seed patenting, is not taken into account in the HLP report.<sup>7</sup> The report is also said to neglect the **destructive role of extractive industries**, causing among other things forced displacements and environmental and health damage in developing countries. The HLP report also stresses the 'huge potential' of using public money to leverage private investment for sustainable development, which is a clear but controversial trend in development finance.<sup>8</sup>

In order to avoid, what some already call the 'corporate capture of the UN',<sup>9</sup> Lou Pingeot proposes to embody in the post-2015 agenda the revision and monitoring of the UN partnership approach with the private sector. Such interactions should be built on a system-wide set of norms, a mandatory 'conflict of interest' and disclosure policy; and a clear distinction between public and private-interest NGOs, which up to now have had the same status while participating in the UN system.<sup>10</sup>

The **lack of a truly human rights approach to development** is also often quoted as a main shortcoming. Such an approach would put references to [international human rights instruments](#) at the core of the agenda.<sup>11</sup> Civil society representatives [stress](#) that recognition of human rights as a socio-economic target would enhance enforcement and accountability and underline the indivisible character of human rights. In this perspective, governments, companies and international organisations should clearly commit to respecting human rights standards in their policies and actions aimed at the realisation of the future SDGs. It is noted that one of the main weaknesses of the approach presented so far by the OWG is the lack of clear provisions to ensure that the private sector and international financial institutions are accountable and fully respect human rights and the environment. Moreover, in several parts of the HLP report, application of some human rights (rights to property and land) extends to business.<sup>12</sup>

Trade unions and other stakeholders stress that the ratification and implementation of International Labour Organisation conventions, including those related to freedom to association and collective bargaining, should be an integral part of the new agenda. [UNCTAD](#) stresses that the human rights approach of the post-2015 agenda should

include a higher poverty level (US\$5 a day) since the US\$1.25 currently in use cannot be seen as enabling the fulfilment of a 'standard of living adequate for health... and well-being', as stated in the Universal Declaration of Human Rights.

### EU contribution

The EU is participating actively in the post-2015 debate via several direct and indirect channels. Former EU Development Commissioner Andris Piebalgs was one of the leaders of the HLP, and 13 EU Member States<sup>13</sup> are involved in the OWG.

The overall EU position was developed by the Commission after a series of consultations, and endorsed and completed by the Council and Parliament. The ['Decent life for all'](#) communication of February 2013 ('Ending poverty and giving the world a sustainable future') lays the foundation of the EU position on the post-2015 agenda. At the core of the EU approach is the integration in a single framework of sustainable management of natural resources, basic human development challenges and drivers for sustainable and inclusive growth. The framework, universal in scope, should also include goals related to human rights, democracy and the rule of law. The ['Decent life for all'](#) communication of June 2014 ('From vision to collective action'), while building on the existing position, formulates possible priority areas and potential target topics for the post-2015 framework.

In its [resolution](#) of 13 June 2013 on the Millennium Development Goals – defining the post-2015 framework, the EP agrees that there must be a single, comprehensive and integrated framework, with clear benchmarks incorporating both development and sustainability issues. It stresses that the post-2015 sustainable development framework requires a human-rights-based approach, encompassing social and economic rights, while also including civil and political rights related to peace and security, as well as the right to development. Recognising that inequality between and within countries is a major issue in the context of poverty eradication, the EP recommends the creation of an overarching equality goal.

The [Council Conclusions](#) of 25 June 2013 followed the same line, emphasising the need to fully integrate all relevant international processes, with participation of all stakeholders, including the private sector, in order to arrive at one comprehensive set of goals integrating the three interrelated dimensions of sustainable development, (economic, social and environmental). Universal in scope, the framework should however according to the Council, take into account different national contexts, capacities and levels of development, and respect national policies and priorities. In its conclusions of [19 May 2014](#) the Council of the European Union reaffirmed the EU commitment to a rights-based approach in the post-2015 agenda.

In its [recommendation to the Council of 2 April 2014](#) on the 69th session of the United Nations General Assembly, the EP again confirmed its support of the work towards the adoption of a single, comprehensive and integrated post-2015 framework for the MDGs, with the human-rights approach at its core. In [April 2014](#) the EP, recognising that 2015 will be a pivotal year for global development policy, expressed its support for the EC proposal of the 2015 European Year of Development.

In the [resolution](#) 'on the EU and the global development framework after 2015' adopted on 25 November 2014, MEPs sent a clear message to the Council. They underline that the MDGs did not address underlying structural factors that lead to poverty and inequality. They stress that the global sustainable development framework after 2015

should be transformative by addressing the root causes of poverty and inequality. The Parliament endorses the conclusions of the UN OWG, but considers that the balance between poverty eradication, fighting inequalities and the three dimensions of sustainable development should not be achieved at the expense of the rights-based approach, nor at the expense of the more ambitious and innovative goals.

Council [conclusions](#) on a 'transformative post-2015 agenda' were adopted on 16 December 2014. The Council reaffirmed its previous positions.

## Main references

[Beyond 2015: reconciling development and climate change goals](#), Manrique Gil M., European Parliament, Policy Department DG EXPO, September 2013.

[Post-2015: Special Event on Post-2015-Stuck in the process?](#) Rippin N., German Development Institute, Briefing paper 19/2013.

## Endnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Outcome Document - Introduction to the Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals, 19 July [2014]
- <sup>2</sup> [What happens now? the post-2015 agenda after the High-level Panel/](#) Evans, A., Steven, D., Centre for International Cooperation, New York University, June 2013, p. 6.
- <sup>3</sup> [The United Nations and global democracy: from discourse to deeds/](#) Thérien, J-P., Bélanger-Dumontier, Cooperation and Conflict, 2009 44: 355.
- <sup>4</sup> This section is mainly based on [Corporate influence in the post-2015 process/](#) Pinget, L., January 2014.
- <sup>5</sup> [Why would peace be controversial at the United Nations? Negotiations towards a Post-2015 Development Framework/](#) Slotin J., Elgin-Cossart, M., Centre for International Cooperation, December 2013.
- <sup>6</sup> Acknowledging that the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change is the primary international, intergovernmental forum for negotiating the global response to climate change.
- <sup>7</sup> [Reflections on HLP post 2015 report - by far not good enough!](#)/ Women's Major Group, June 2013.
- <sup>8</sup> [Corporate influence in the post-2015 process/](#) Pinget, L., January 2014, p. 22. On this subject see also: [L'engagement du secteur privé dans la coopération au développement: Les formes de coopération public-privé/](#) Latek, M., EPRS, 2014.
- <sup>9</sup> [Ending the corporate capture of the UN/](#) Joint civil society statement, May 2012.
- <sup>10</sup> [Corporate influence in the post-2015 process/](#) Pinget, L., January 2014, pp. 29-30.
- <sup>11</sup> [Beyond 2015: reaction to the Open Working Group Focus Area document/](#) 3 March 2014.
- <sup>12</sup> [Reflections on HLP post 2015 report - by far not good enough!](#)/ Women's Major Group, June 2013, p. 4.
- <sup>13</sup> UK, Ireland, Denmark, France, Germany, Italy, Spain, Hungary, Bulgaria, Romania, Croatia, Slovenia, Poland.

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