

Three Ways to Make the Post-2015 Accountability Mechanisms Fit for Purpose

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Marc A. Levy

Center for International Earth Science Information Network
Earth Institute, Columbia University

mlevy@columbia.edu Twitter @marc_a_levy www.ciesin.columbia.edu/levy.html

What the UN has done in the past two years is equal in ambition to the work that was done in 1945 to produce the UN Charter. That ambition is worthy of an accountability mechanism that is equally ambitious and fit for purpose. The post-2015 agenda will fail if it has to survive on pre-2015 accountability mechanisms. You wouldn't want to fly in a 1945 airplane; you don't want to navigate to 2030 without the newest accountability innovations.

The premise

In other UN venues I have explained the implications of sustainability science for coping with accountability.¹ I won't rehash that whole argument, but just briefly summarize the three key points and then explain the practical imperatives.

- 1) The biggest challenges we face are increasingly systemic in nature – problems arise through complex interaction of multiple, connected parts.
- 2) The solutions that don't target systemic transformation fail – this is too bad, because in the past we made a lot of progress through more simple interventions, such as investing in the green revolution or reducing trade barriers. We've reached the limit of those easy fixes and now have to focus on the harder, systemic transformations.
- 3) It isn't just that the problems are systemic, but that we have connections across multiple systems: security, energy, water, food, livelihoods.

The process that has led to the SG synthesis document yesterday has remained quite faithful to these observations. That is a great accomplishment. Now the challenge is to build an accountability system that will support it.

¹ "The Accountability Framework we Need: Lessons from Sustainability Science for the Post-2015 Development Agenda," Paper prepared for President of the General Assembly's Interactive Dialogue: Elements for an Accountability Framework for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, 1 May 2014, Economic and Social Council Chamber, United Nations Headquarters, New York. <http://bit.ly/1n30Y9D>

Design Principles

This won't be easy. The UN system is best at measuring stocks and flows. How many people, how much literacy, how much hunger, how many water points. Those are absolutely essential. But for the post-2015 agenda, they aren't enough. In particular, we need measurement systems that do these things:

- 1) They must make visible and prominent the linkages across sectors, across regions, and across stakeholders.

We can no longer hope that people figure out the connections that matter by reading separate tables, columns and reports. We must bring these linkages into sharp focus.

- 2) They must be built on information systems that are fit for purpose.

There are basic requirements for any effective information system that include accurate baselines, updates that are frequent enough to guide decisions, and inclusivity that brings together all relevant information.

The post-2015 agenda is a chance to design information systems from first principles that actually meet these needs, rather than merely tweaking the existing systems. The existing systems are powerful, relevant and useful. But some of these needs require dramatic innovation. For example, we have the know-how to rapidly roll out country-wide geospatial baseline data sets on all major development infrastructure, as evidenced by Nigeria's example. Instead of muddling through with incomplete, delayed baselines, why not aim for extending the Nigeria model globally?

- 3) They must be organized around a spirit of learning, discovery and mutual adjustment.

One of the most interesting hallmarks of the SG synthesis document, and the inputs that went into it, is the great ambition it stakes out in achieving goals that we are collectively still learning how to make progress on. Certainly if we accept the premise that the key feature of the post-2015 agenda is acquiring an ability to diagnose and steer complex, interlinked systemic change, we must admit that that's a skill we don't yet have.

The implication for accountability mechanisms is profound. They must do more than simply carry out the literal task of holding countries to account, they must foster learning and discovery. In primary school, you know what the students are supposed to achieve and you tick off if they've done it. With doctoral students you

are engaged in a mutual search for usable knowledge, and you evaluate them very differently. We need to track and encourage both kinds of progress.

Specific things we can do

We have a complex agenda before us, in the lead up to Addis. Here are three specific suggestions to keep in mind as we sort out this difficult task.

Every goal should have at bare minimum:

- 1) Targets and indicators that zero in on the key systemic features that will let us know if the system is functioning safely or dangerously. The watershed indicator that has been discussed having to do with extraction to recharge ratio is an example of such an indicator – we need many more such indicators. This will drive focus on dynamics and system health.
- 2) Targets and indicators that focus on the key regions, groups, stakeholders whose interaction will shape systemic transformation. Don't assume national-level peak indicators will suffice – make the moving parts visible. This will drive a focus on linkages.
- 3) An explicit focus on risk – for each goal there should be targets and indicators that characterize risk – not just the current level of achievement but the risk looking to the near and medium future. This will drive collection of information that is cross-cutting and relevant to preventing catastrophic failure as opposed to inching towards incremental progress. A focus on risk would constitute an updating of the “freedom from fear” ambition that helped drive the creation of the UN and was enshrined in the 1948 Declaration of Human Rights. Today we fear more than invading armies and repressive governments, and systemic risk, whether it manifests as an Ebola epidemic, a financial crisis, or a spike in disaster vulnerability, is high on our list of fears.

Conclusion

We have before us a collection of goals that are revolutionary in scope and ambition. It has been exhausting getting to this point. Let's not take the easy way out and treat monitoring and accountability in a less ambitious, less transformative manner. In particular, let's give serious consideration to strategically chosen targets and indicators that will pull with them a systemic risk sensibility.