

The Way Forward: Positioning the UN development system in a post-2015 era

Summary Points from the Talk by Robert Chambers 29 May 2015

1. CONTEXT

- The universalism and focus on the 'last' in the SDGs makes this a thrilling time to be alive and active in development. *Can we seize the opportunity to make this transformative, a tipping point?*
- For those most excluded and left out and behind – poor, vulnerable, marginalised, and powerless - change is accelerating in the conditions they experience and in their awareness, priorities and aspirations. Different from the low-hanging fruit of the MDGs, *it matters more than ever to be continuously in touch and up to date with their diverse and rapidly changing realities.*
- The fashionable Newtonian paradigm which demands pre-set and measured results misfits the complexity, diversity, dynamism, emergence and unpredictability of much development experience. Increasingly the key is to be alert and sensitive with rapid adaptive learning and nimble actions to meet diverse and changing needs and to exploit opportunities. *Can the UN Development System lead in this?*
- At a 'higher' level, our new multi-polar and universalist world needs to extend and expand multidirectional mutual sharing between LDCs, BRICS, MICs, S and N, all learning from each other... *Reciprocities and the equal relationships of peers are already, and will become increasingly, key ways forward.*

2. THE 'WHAT?' FOR THE UN DEVELOPMENT SYSTEM

- To be 'transformed and transformative' business as usual has no place. This 'time for the rebirth of the UN development system' cries out an injection of new DNA, *for radical and inspirational rethinking and action.*
- Coordination, integration and coherence are easy and plausible rhetoric, but often carry high transaction costs which outweigh benefits. *Coherence should be optimised, not maximised.*
- The responsibility of the UN development system is to do what it is uniquely best placed to do in the new post-2015 world, building on, adapting and extending its humanitarian, specialised and niche strengths and its normative leadership, universal legitimacy, neutrality, and global reach. *Convening power is a key strength, and global, system-wide and context-specific skilled facilitation, catalysing and supporting processes of sharing, learning and adaptation is a major need and opportunity.*

3. THE HOW?

Here are five practical ideas:

1. **Putting the last first, leaving no one out or behind, as in the SDGs, promoting and taking measures to be in touch and up to date with their realities, needs and aspirations.** The Reality Check Approach (<http://reality-check-approach.com>), pioneered in Bangladesh, Indonesia, Mozambique, Ghana and Nepal, can be recommended for all including the richer countries
2. **The Secretary-General to challenge all agencies in the UN Development System** to reflect, review, plan and decide how they will incorporate and act on the SDGs, with new actions, procedures and accountabilities, these then to be subject to peer review, with human resources and finance staff involved at every stage.
3. **Recruiting and orienting staff**, ensuring that those who do the recruiting, those who orient, and those who train, are committed and passionate about the new priorities. This means new assessment criteria in recruitment, staff appraisals and promotion, including that all should have the experience of immersions, staying in poor communities. Participatory behaviour, attitudes and mindsets will be critical, supported by training in facilitation.
4. **Convening a Dream Tank for imaginative, creative reflection and proposals**, to be visionary, to think the hitherto unthinkable, to map pathways to translate dreams into realities, and to drive and inspire transformations in the UN Development System and more widely in the world in the spirit of the SDGs.
5. **Passionate and committed leadership. For transformations that leave no one out or behind, that truly put the last first, leadership is fundamental.** We need leaders with vision and courage to inspire and enable others to strive to achieve the SDGs. This must be the hope – that many, many leaders like yourselves, at all levels and in all contexts, will act decisively to make this unique moment in the history of humankind a turning point. I believe this is possible. So, can you, can we, seize this opportunity which may never come again? In the hope that we can, let me offer you a toast – to those we will not leave behind, and to those who commit and struggle in the spirit of the SDGs to put them first and make this a better and fairer world for them and for us all.