Accountability for the post-2015 era[*]

At the United Nations summit for the adoption of the post-2015 development agenda to be held in September 2015, Member States will express their mutually agreed vision for sustainable development in the post-2015 era. The Committee recommends that the Council consider the following actions:

(a) Invite Member States of the United Nations to prepare and make public their national commitments to achieving the sustainable development goals, adapting the targets to their national context and designing appropriate policies to meet those targets nationally, and contribute to their achievement at the global level;

(b) Invite the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to focus its follow-up and review of progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments on the global partnership for sustainable development (sustainable development goal 17), which is necessary to support the implementation of those commitments;

(c) Instruct the United Nations regional commissions to facilitate the conduct of open, inclusive and participatory regional peer reviews of the implementation of the post-2015 agenda;

(d) Encourage all multilateral international organizations to support the accountability framework for the post-2015 agenda.

The success of the post-2015 development agenda depends on the adoption of global goals for sustainable development and on designing a robust accountability system, with strong incentives for the implementation of commitments. All stakeholders (Governments, the United Nations system, other international organizations, civil society organizations and the private sector) should be involved in the accountability framework and their achievements should be monitored globally. While the sustainable development goals are universal in character, countries need to adapt them to national contexts, taking into account their specific constraints and opportunities. That requires a process of democratic consultation, including with national parliaments and civil society. Countries also need to specify their global commitments to creating an enabling environment for sustainable development worldwide. The adaptation of global goals into national targets ensures ownership and facilitates the answerability of all stakeholders to citizens and to the global community. It also enables the accountability framework to be an inclusive, transparent and participatory bottom-up process.

1. Introduction

For the past few years, the Committee has dedicated significant attention to the possible contours of the post-2015 United Nations development agenda. As the Member States considered the main elements of that agenda, a proposal on 17 sustainable development goals was put forward in 2014 by the Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals. While a consensus on global goals is necessary for the realization of the agreed vision of the world in the future, such agreement does not ensure that the necessary policies aimed at meeting those goals are adopted and implemented. A strong monitoring and accountability mechanism also needs to be in place to track progress and to hold States and their partners (multilateral organizations, civil society organizations, the business sector and private foundations) to account for their commitments to citizens and the international community.

The concept of accountability implies three main dimensions: the obligation of public officials to provide information about and explain their actions (answerability); a clear delineation of responsibilities; and enforcement through the threat of disciplinary action. Accountability as answerability aims to create transparency. It relies on the dissemination of information and the establishment of adequate monitoring and oversight mechanisms.

The concept is important in systems of governance at the national level, but difficult to operationalize at the global level, particularly in the context of the post-2015 agenda, where commitments are largely voluntary. Incentives could be put in place to report on actions taken, while enforcement through the threat of punitive measures is obviously not a feasible option. A further complication is that commitments, such as ending abject poverty and freeing the human race from want, are "imperfect duties", as responsibility cannot be easily attributed to one single agent. The

delineation of responsibility is difficult at the international level. In addition, the degree of interdependence in the global economy implies that actions at the national level are no longer sufficient to ensure the delivery of agreed outcomes.

Nonetheless, while imperfect, those voluntary obligations are morally binding. Governments are accountable to the peoples to whom those commitments are made. They are also accountable to each other, as providers and recipients of the "means of implementation" (financial resources, technology and expertise) and as facilitators of an enabling environment for the implementation of the agenda.

A robust accountability mechanism can be identified and institutionalized as a process that contributes to the implementation of the political commitments to be made in September 2015. It also improves policymaking and the allocation of the resources needed for the implementation of those commitments. The post-2015 agenda should thus include a mechanism of "accountability for results and constructive change". Through that mechanism, progress towards agreed objectives should be monitored, obstacles to implementation examined, successful approaches identified and guidance provided on changes and remedial actions to those policies deemed ineffective in meeting internationally agreed goals.

2. Moving forward: transitioning from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals

For the Millennium Development Goals, some components of answerability on the pledges included in the Millennium Declaration have been put in place. Measurable targets have been identified and the United Nations system, with the support of other specialized agencies, has developed and introduced a statistical data base to support a monitoring framework. That framework also includes several progress reports and a system of voluntary country presentations within the context of the annual ministerial reviews sponsored by the Economic and Social Council. Nonetheless, there has been dissatisfaction with the framework, as analysed in earlier reports of the Committee.

To address those concerns, it is crucial that the sustainable development goals are recognized as universal objectives, but with each country adapting the targets to their national context in a democratic and inclusive way, including in particular through consultations with national parliaments and civil society. Countries should design and report on the appropriate policies they will be implementing to meet the targets nationally and on how they will contribute to their achievement at the global level. That will facilitate ownership, provide a clearer delineation of responsibility, improve transparency and contribute to producing a more efficient accountability system geared to transformative change.

In addition, in designing the accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda, the objective should be to build upon existing accountability mechanisms, strengthening them where necessary, and support new ones where applicable. The promotion of effective and coherent links among the various accountability mechanisms at local, national, regional and global level is also needed.

While a reliable data system is critical for exercising accountability, it should be emphasized that indicators are intended to help monitor progress towards objectives and need to be used in combination with qualitative analyses of progress, challenges and constraints. Global governance and the inequalities that characterize the global economic system will be sidelined in international development debates if quantitative targets and indicators alone drive the agenda. Excessive reliance on indicators as a framework for accountability is therefore not only inadequate, but will distort international development priorities.

Principles for effective accountability for the post-2015 development agenda

To overcome the asymmetries that hamper development cooperation process in delivering results, the Committee recommended that reform of the accountability framework for the post-2015 agenda needed to rest on a few critical principles, as set out below.

Subsidiarity. Issues ought to be addressed at the lowest level at which they can be tackled. Given the central role that countries will play in the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda and the lack of horizontal accountability at the international level, strong ties to the national accountability exercise should be established, supported by very active international and national social accountability. Linking national parliaments with international social accountability is essential, as they are the formal institutions in charge of making Governments accountable for international commitments.

Universality. The post-2015 development agenda will reflect an agreed shared vision of the future for the world. It will require efforts by all Government and their development partners to turn that vision into reality. That universality also needs to be reflected in the accountability system for the post-2015 agenda and particularly in the design of platforms of accountability for all those involved.

Ownership. The post-2105 development agenda should leave ample space for national policy design and allow for the adaption of targets to local settings, as explained above. That critical element guarantees national "ownership" of the agenda and creates incentives for accountability.

Coherence. This calls for building a genuine, mutually reinforcing system among existing accountability mechanisms and for establishing linkages and complementarities among them to avoid inconsistency and duplication of efforts.

Inclusiveness and transparency. Global governance institutions need to be representative of, and accountable to, the entire global community; moreover, decision-making procedures need to be democratic, inclusive and transparent. In the absence of those characteristics, they will lack universal legitimacy and their effectiveness will be compromised. Balancing the inherent power asymmetries is mandatory for effective horizontal and transparent accountability. That requires a stronger voice for partner countries in order to overcome the imbalances in the aid relationship, a high degree of surveillance of the commitments of all countries by independent secretariats and high-profile political debates.

Results-oriented commitments. The requirement that all positions of authority should have clearly defined duties and performance standards, which enable their behaviour to be assessed objectively and transparently, is a necessary prerequisite for both answerability and the incentives to comply.

3. Essential elements of effective accountability for the post-2015 development agenda

The Committee recommended that a reformed and strengthened monitoring and accountability framework, based on the principles described above, should include the essential elements set out below.

First, it should be a bottom-up process and rely on the broad use of national accountability mechanisms. Parliaments should be at the centre of the post-2015 accountability exercise. National follow-up processes should also include local and regional governments. At the international level, the regional layer of accountability should be designated for peer reviewing and other forms of horizontal accountability. Those national and regional processes would then converge at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development which has been mandated by the General Assembly to provide political leadership and review implementation of sustainable development commitments.

Second, a strong monitoring mechanism at both the regional and global levels is required. Monitoring should have a certain level of independence to assure impartiality and should be assigned to the secretariats of relevant multilateral and regional organizations.

Third, a robust information system is required. For the vast majority of the targets for the sustainable development goals, reliable, timely and accurate information is currently lacking for a large number of developing countries, including most of the least developed countries. That implies that strengthening the statistical capacities of developing countries to produce basic data about their own economic, social and environmental conditions should take precedence over developing a more sophisticated information system.

Fourth, monitoring should feed into the first dimension of accountability — answerability. The High-level Political Forum, including its annual ministerial meetings during the high-level segment of the Economic and Social Council and, on the subject of development cooperation, the Development Cooperation Forum of the Council, should provide the "institutional home" for Governments to discuss the assessments provided in the various monitoring reports and the recommendations arising from them.

Given the complexity of the post-2015 development agenda, it will be necessary for the Economic and Social Council to undertake annual follow-up accountability exercises with a thematic focus, while reflecting the three dimensions of sustainable development. The same thematic focus should be applied to regional consultations. In that regard, the Council as the "principal organ in the integrated and coordinated follow-up of the outcomes of all major United Nations conferences and summits" (see General Assembly resolution 67/203) could mandate its main subsidiary bodies to undertake specific responsibilities for much closer follow-up of specific development goals, which should be integrated with their own follow-up of the global conferences and summits under their purview.

Fifth, the system should use peer reviews of different character. Those peer reviews should be undertaken in a context in which partners see themselves as equals and therefore avoid frameworks that reflect the power imbalances in donor-recipient relations. The regional processes, facilitated by the secretariats of the regional commissions and by the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development in the case of developed countries, should be the basic institutional framework for such exercises. Peer review exercises could be also introduced for other types of partners besides Governments (see below).

Sixth, mutual accountability should be used for development cooperation and, more broadly, for the global partnership for development. The development agenda is not only about technical cooperation and financial flows, but also about the rules that should ensure an "enabling environment" for development. Both dimensions need to be included in the new accountability system and monitored by the Secretariat to ensure impartiality in the light of power imbalances. Moreover, meeting the commitments on furthering the global partnership for sustainable development (sustainable development goal 17) should be considered at the four-yearly meetings of the High-level Forum at the level of heads of State. The major objectives of those summits should include the consideration of new actions to accelerate those elements of the agenda that are progressing at a slow pace and to unblock perceived obstacles that might be determining such slow progress.

Seventh, active social accountability, exercised by multiple civil society organizations at the national, regional and global levels, should be an essential component of the follow-up process and specific accountability frameworks, including peer reviews, would also have to be put in place for civil society organizations and the private sector in order to assess their contribution to meeting the sustainable development goals.