Regional Ministerial Consultation
Monitoring and Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda –
The Regional Dimension

Geneva, 15-16 September 2014

Chair's Summary

Introduction

1.   The Regional Ministerial Consultation "Monitoring and Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda –The Regional Dimension" was organized by the United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE) and the Regional UN Development Group (R-UNDG) for Europe and Central Asia in Geneva from 15 to 16 September 2014.

2.   The Consultation was a response to the UN Secretary General's request to organize a regional meeting to discuss regional views on accountability and propose options based on existing mechanisms and possible new approaches.

3.   In preparation for the Consultation, a questionnaire was circulated to collect regional perspectives from a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the UNECE region on elements for an accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda, including the potential for a regional framework for accountability anchored at the national level and feeding into the global level.

4.   The Consultation was chaired by H.E. Mr. Michael Gerber, Ambassador, Special Envoy for Global Sustainable Development, Switzerland, and attended by around 170 participants, including experts and representatives of Governments, civil society, private sector and other international organizations.

5.   The main focus of the discussions was the possible role of the regional level in the overall monitoring and accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda, the linkages with the global and national mechanisms within a multi-layered architecture and the lessons that can be derived from existing mechanisms.

6.   This Chair's Summary will be submitted to the Secretary-General as an input to his synthesis report on the post-2015 development agenda which will be prepared by the end of 2014.

Monitoring and accountability as an integral part of the post-2015 development agenda

7.   The breadth and depth of the proposed sustainable development goals (SDGs) is unprecedented. While building on the MDGs, the post-2015 goals will be of universal character and require an integrated approach that breaks down the "sector silos". Participants agreed that this calls for actions to be taken in all countries and for wide cooperation amongst all relevant stakeholders.

8.   There was a general view among participants that the monitoring and accountability framework should be an integral part of the post-2015 development agenda and not an "after-thought". How the goals and targets are finally formulated will create different possibilities for monitoring and accountability mechanisms. Some participants emphasised the importance of measurability, so the goals and targets need to take into account what is monitorable and measurable.

9.   Many participants emphasized that good governance, peace and security, respect for the rule of law and human rights are fundamental requisites for, and outcomes of, sustainable development and an effective monitoring and accountability mechanism.

10.   Accountability for progress towards sustainable development goes beyond the mere review or monitoring of results. It was argued that the reviews provide an opportunity to consider the possible conflicts and trade-offs between different goals. Different starting points need to be taken into account, while shedding light on why progress may fall short of expectations. Understanding the impact of different actions provides the basis for allocating responsibility and creating effective accountability mechanisms.

11.   The importance of means of implementation in the post-2015 agenda, which include not only aid but multiple channels for resource mobilization, was also stressed. Some examples mentioned were trade, debt relief, access to technology, eliminating tax havens, fossil fuel subsidy reform and financial transaction tax. The accountability framework should therefore include means of implementation, including both financial and non-financial.

A multi-layered accountability mechanism

12.   There was a general view that a comprehensive, multi-layered and multi-stakeholder accountability framework is crucial for the success of the post-2015 development agenda. An overall accountability mechanism should ensure linkages between various levels (local, national, regional, global), actors (state and non-state actors) and sectors. The linkages between the different levels of accountability will need to be carefully considered.

13.   Accountability should be understood as a participatory and inclusive process, which envisages cooperation and an interactive dialogue between multiple stakeholders, thus resulting in wide ownership. A bottom-up approach needs to be combined with top-down political leadership committed to implementation.

14.   Some participants stressed that the post 2015 development framework must strengthen accountability of governments towards citizens, including women, children and vulnerable people, using participatory mechanisms for making the voices of the most marginalized heard and increasing public awareness of development goals. Social dialogue, bringing together governments, workers and employers, can make an important contribution to develop effective accountability processes.

15.   An appropriate balance should be struck between the local/sub-national, national, regional and global dimensions. Strong institutions are required to deliver results at these different levels. It was stressed that the institutionalisation of SDGs in governance structures is necessary to assure coherence and ownership, including regarding implementation and accountability. Some participants underlined that accountability is only possible if the responsibilities of the different actors involved are clearly delineated. Appropriate feedback mechanisms are also an important part of effective monitoring and accountability processes.

16.   At the local level, transparency and participation in policy-making, budgeting, service delivery and oversight can help building accountability. Strong accountability mechanisms at the municipal level, with the involvement of civil society, are required to provide a useful input to the national monitoring of SDGs, where relevant.

17.   There was a shared view that national mechanisms should constitute the foundation of the overall accountability system as national governments will be making commitments in relation to the post-2015 agenda. National strategies for sustainable development were considered a key instrument to promote accountability at the national level. It was acknowledged that the national process should be state-led but governments should put in place measures to promote the involvement of citizens, the private sector, civil society and other stakeholders.

18.   The relevance of different SDGs will vary across countries, and different roadmaps for implementation will be developed depending on national circumstances. Some participants drew attention to the importance of the country context and the preservation of a national policy space for implementation. It was also stressed that the SDGs under discussion reflect a universal, integrated and holistic approach.

19.   The regional level is well placed to facilitate exchange of best practices and lessons learned and identify solutions to shared challenges and transboundary issues. Inputs at the regional level can serve to prepare reviews at the global level. The regional level can also help countries to translate global goals into policies, guidelines, recommendations and standards that can be implemented at the national level, as well as mobilize partnerships at the regional level.

20.   Monitoring and review at the global level is essential and depends on high level political engagement. Many participants stressed that the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is called to play a central role in ensuring the coherence of the overall accountability framework. It was underlined that the HLPF, under the auspices of ECOSOC, will conduct meaningful reviews from 2016 onwards, also taking into account the results of regional reviews.

21.   The global level will facilitate more inter-regional exchange of experience and global partnerships for development. The important role of the Global Sustainable Development Report in the overall monitoring and accountability system was acknowledged by some participants.

An inclusive, participatory and transparent approach

22.   The involvement of stakeholders in the process of shaping the post-2015 development agenda has been unprecedented at all levels. This included outreach to different groups of society, including women, children and youth and marginalized and socially excluded people, such as indigenous people and people with disabilities, through national consultation processes. This engagement should continue in the lead-up to the adoption of the SDGs, as well as regarding its implementation and the associated monitoring and accountability issues.

23.   There was a shared view that the involvement of a wide range of stakeholders will be key in ensuring transparency and inclusion. In the UNECE region, the example of the Aarhus Convention, with its focus on access to information, participation and access to justice, was highlighted as a regional strength.

24.   Governments, as the primary duty bearers, are the key actors to be held accountable. Implementing the post-2015 agenda will require political will, alignment with national strategies, ownership by governments and the trust of citizens. Without that pre-condition, no monitoring and accountability mechanism will function properly.

25.   Parliaments are independent bodies that have the power to hold governments accountable and bring in people's voices. Institutions such as Courts of Auditors and Ombudsmen can strengthen this role. The members of Parliament can link governments and citizens and need to be integrated in the whole accountability and monitoring process within the future development agenda.

26.   Many participants underlined the importance of putting in place transparent accountability mechanisms with institutionalised participation from civil society. This should be a continued process, feeding back into policy design and implementation. Engagement of both organized civil society groups and citizens is crucial.

27.   Some participants stressed the importance of democratic governance as a critical foundation for sustainable development and the associated monitoring and accountability mechanisms.

28.   There is a need for better access to information and better involvement of the public in strategy, policy setting and implementation. It is important to raise awareness of the post-2015 development framework, including national and subnational goals and targets, among citizens. Civic education programmes to support the involvement of marginalized groups should be considered.

29.   Some participants stressed the important role that national human rights institutions (NHRIs) can perform in translating a universal sustainable development agenda into practice at the national level, while ensuring the integration of human rights in this process. NHRIs can contribute to monitoring that is participatory (including people directly affected and civil society), evidence-based (based on data which is appropriately disaggregated and integrates human rights indicators) and transparent and accountable (through parallel reporting to Parliaments, UN human rights bodies and international mechanisms which may be established to track progress in the post-2015 agenda).

30.   The importance of the involvement of the private sector in meeting SDGs was generally acknowledged. The private sector can contribute innovative solutions, data, knowledge and a variety of tools and instruments to advance the sustainable development agenda.

31.   There are already some mechanisms for reporting on environmental and social performance in the private sector, including within the framework of the UN Global Compact and the Global Reporting Initiative. It was argued that new indicators should be closely aligned with existing ones to facilitate their application and avoid duplication and double-reporting.

32.   On the other hand, the view was expressed that in order to hold the private sector accountable for their actions, there was a need for more robust mechanisms and legally binding frameworks that go beyond codes of conduct and voluntary Corporate Social Responsibility (CSR). The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human Rights provide elements for the involvement of the private sector in a monitoring and accountability framework that has human rights at its core.

33.   Partnerships with civil society and the private sector are crucial to the success of the post-2015 development agenda, to the mobilization of resources and to the engagement of the public and parliaments in reviews and accountability mechanisms. Some participants stressed that some of the most important future SDGs will be built around partnerships such as the Every Woman Every Child (EWEC) and Sustainable Energy for All (SE4All).

34.   International organizations need to support governments with the implementation of the new agenda. All international organizations, including the UN system and the international financial institutions (IFIs), should be subject to appropriate accountability mechanisms. Particularly, the role of the UN system, including through its Regional Coordination Mechanism and the Regional UNDG Team, in supporting governments in integrating the SDGs in national development strategies, mobilizing stakeholders around the new development agenda, as well as the monitoring and accountability for SDGs at the local, national, regional and global levels was emphasized.

The importance of incentives for participation

35.   The existence of suitable incentives for countries and other stakeholders to participate in a monitoring and accountability framework was mentioned as a critical

factor for success. In a voluntary, non-legally binding system, they need to perceive that their involvement adds value for them. Shared learning and positive rewards seem more effective to promote progress and participation than negative assessments.

36. The review process should be designed to encourage and stimulate countries to reach targets, by sharing experiences and demonstrating best practice, rather than simply adding reporting obligations. It was suggested that the regional level provides a particularly suitable platform for this shared learning. The UNECE Environmental Performance Reviews was mentioned as an example.

37. Some participants mentioned that ranking the performance of countries in achieving SDGs in a clear and transparent way could be a powerful incentive in meeting these goals. Information on relative performance would inform the decisions of investors and donors, thus unlocking access to funding for the best performers.

38. The private sector is interested in using resources efficiently. Hence, sustainability strategies are already in place in many companies. The private sector should incorporate the true social and environmental impact of their actions in their decisions, which would make a strong business case for SDGs and contribute to the success of the sustainable development agenda.

Data revolution for accountability

39. The need for a "data revolution" was emphasized to strengthen monitoring and accountability. Data needs for the post-2015 development agenda are significant but there are already some initiatives to build upon, including the recommendation of the Conference of European Statisticians, on how to measure sustainable development. Technological progress and "big data" offer opportunities to strengthen real time monitoring and contribute to a transparent accountability framework.

40. There was a general view that a robust set of indicators is necessary to promote implementation. The number of targets and indicators should be manageable, and they should be measurable and monitorable. A participant argued that 100 core indicators is the upper limit of what the international system can report on under the SDGs.

41. Some participants underlined that although information from governments and other public entities would constitute the bulk of inputs for the national reviews, inputs from civil society organizations, citizens and other stakeholders should also be considered and included. However, it was acknowledged that official data remains critical, and national capacity for creating and analysing data should be strengthened.

42. The importance of engaging business in monitoring and accountability was emphasized. This would require mechanisms that do not impose excessive bureaucratic burdens. Success in implementation will require moving away from retrospective accounting to more real time, real context, and real actor engagement.

43. Many participants emphasised the role of disaggregated data and appropriate coverage to identify areas where progress is insufficient and to ensure that there are no groups left behind. Vulnerable groups (including women, children and youth,

persons with disabilities and indigenous peoples) should be appropriately reflected, to ensure visibility and provide the necessary information to track progress and adopt the necessary initiatives in support of a truly inclusive development agenda.

Lessons from existing mechanisms

44.   The overall accountability framework should rely on the information, outcomes and lessons derived from existing monitoring and accountability mechanisms at all levels and in different areas related to sustainable development. A pragmatic, bottom up approach, building on existing mechanisms should prevail.

45.   The compilation of an inventory of existing monitoring and accountability mechanisms would facilitate putting in place this overall accountability framework. The inventory should list existing mechanisms, thus allowing a comparison with goals and targets and the identification of any possible gaps. After this analysis is completed, it would be possible to define areas in which more work is necessary and in which existing mechanisms can be used.

46.   While we should build on existing tools, some participants stressed the need to develop new or additional tools in areas where current monitoring and accountability mechanisms are insufficient, for example concerning violence against women and girls.

47.   There was a general view that the MDG monitoring system drove significant progress in data compilation and reporting capacities. However, attention was drawn to some shortcomings, including the lack of extensive consultative mechanisms and the absence of clear responsibilities of the different actors for implementation.

48.   Establishing clear linkages between different existing processes would reduce the reporting burden, reinforce the coherence between different components and avoid that individual mechanisms are excluded from the overall framework. The possibility that different monitoring and accountability mechanisms could be used for different goals was also raised by some participants, bearing in mind the cost and resources required by the different options.

49.   The European region, in particular, has a solid set of institutions and mechanisms with mandates and data capacity to review and monitor socioeconomic and environmental developments as well as democratic governance, the rule of law and respect for human rights.   These areas are all critical in the post-2015 development agenda. UNECE and the Regional UN Development Group, the Council of Europe, OSCE, the EU, OECD and other regional organizations have an important role to play in this regard, making useful contributions to share with the national and global levels.

50. Some participants stressed the potential role for subregional mechanisms like the UN Special Programme for the Economies of Central Asia (SPECA).

51.   National voluntary Presentations at the ECOSOC Annual Ministerial Reviews to be replaced by the regular reviews within the framework of the High-level Political

Forum on Sustainable Development under the auspices of ECOSOC were also mentioned as useful contributions to an overall monitoring and accountability mechanism at the global level.

52. The synergy between the human rights framework and the proposed sustainable development goals was emphasized. Many potential targets in relation to the SDGs are addressed by legally binding accountability mechanisms under existing treaty bodies such as the Committee on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights (CESCR), the Committee on the Elimination of Discrimination against Women (CEDAW), the Committee on the Rights of the Child (CRC) and the Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities (CRPD). These different mechanisms involve thorough review processes which cover most UN Member States.

53. Participants indicated that the Universal Periodic Review within the Human Rights Council also provides some useful lessons for the post-2015 monitoring and accountability mechanism. Participants proposed that reviews should be based on constructive dialogue with the full cooperation of the country reviewed. They should lead to policy-oriented recommendations that can be followed up in the framework of clear strategies and national plans. Stakeholders, including the most marginalised, should be involved at all stages and best practices widely shared.

54. Work relations and social policy have important implications for the implementation of many proposed SDGs. International labour standards, which are backed by a supervisory system concerning the application of Conventions and Recommendations adopted by the International Labour Conference and ratified by member States, can also play a role in the monitoring and accountability framework.

55. The value of peer reviews was recognised but the challenge of using peer reviews in a broad agenda that encompasses many policy areas was also acknowledged. Some participants stressed that these reviews should go beyond the exchange of best practices to identify areas of underperformance, analyse the underlying causes and propose means of improvement. Experience with the UNECE Environmental Performance Reviews shows that regular monitoring of recommendations to improve performance in different policy areas can lead to strong results if accompanied by political will.

56. Some features of an effective mechanism of peer reviews conducted by the OECD were stressed. A common framework ensures comparability across time and countries. However, some flexibility may also be necessary. There must be a clear understanding of responsibilities in the review process. Recommendations must be realistic and based on expert work. Sufficient time must be allowed between reviews to create room for policy changes but without losing momentum. The outcome of the reviews must be in the public domain to foster accountability and better understanding of the existing challenges.

57. In the private sector, there are already a number of mechanisms that promote reporting on environmental, social and governance factors, including at the global level initiatives such as the Global Reporting Initiative and the United Nations Global Compact. Such reporting provides the basis for sustainability assessments by the financial industry and other stakeholders.

The role of the regional level in monitoring and accountability

58.   There was a strong degree of consensus on the importance of the regional level in a multi-layered accountability mechanism as a link between the national and global levels. The Ministerial declaration adopted at the second meeting of the HLPF last July reiterated the importance of the regional dimension for sustainable development, as it was acknowledged in Rio+20 Conference, and invited the regional commissions to contribute to the work of ECOSOC and the HLPF, including through annual regional meetings.

59.   Participants also stressed that regional monitoring processes should not be disconnected but coordinated in a way that serves overall needs. The primary importance of the national level for accountability should not be forgotten. Complementarity between different levels in the accountability chain should be a key consideration, enabling a continuum of accountability from the local to the global level.

60.   The importance of strong monitoring and accountability mechanisms in Europe was underlined, as this will show the universal character of the post-2015 development agenda. A regional review can build ownership and understanding for the universal nature of the new agenda in the region. It was also mentioned that ECE could exchange information with other regions on how well developed accountability mechanisms work and the lessons that can be derived from them.

61.   Countries from the same region face similar problems and they will therefore benefit from sharing experiences. At the regional level, it is easier to identify the actions of the different actors and assess the transferability of their experiences. The regional level could therefore play an important role regarding peer reviews that evaluate policies and practices to meet SDGs, building on existing mechanisms. The dialogue with civil society, which should underpin all monitoring and accountability mechanisms, must also take place at the regional level.

62.   Participants identified multiple functions of the accountability framework at the regional level, although these may differ from region to region. Regional commissions like UNECE, as well as the Regional UNDG Teams like the one for Europe and Central Asia, can promote the exchange of experiences and good practices and facilitate capacity building. The regional level also is the natural platform to address pan-European or transboundary challenges like water cooperation or the green economy, which UNECE promotes through the Environment for Europe process, the Water Convention or the green economy toolbox.

63.   These transboundary issues have an important role in sustainable development. They require a regional mechanism of accountability since the region is the level at which many relevant policies, legal agreements and action plans are formulated. Given the intensity of economic relations and geographic proximity, the region appears as the appropriate level to effectively combine peer pressure with the provision of guidance and support to meet targets. A subregional focus is also important, as common features and shared challenges at that level are stronger.

64.   Participants acknowledged that regions can play a particular role in meeting the data and reporting requirements of the post-2015 development agenda. The region is the most appropriate level to provide support to countries, through capacity-building activities, and appropriate harmonisation and validation initiatives. The work of the UNECE and its multilateral environmental agreements could offer opportunities to facilitate data collection and sharing in a cost effective way and in cooperation with other interested partners (including UNEP, UNITAR and OECD). Data gathering could benefit from the ongoing development of a shared environmental information system (SEIS) across the pan-European region.

65.   Multiple monitoring and accountability mechanisms exist in the UNECE region covering different sectors (e.g. environment, transport, statistics) that could be integrated into a post-2015 monitoring and accountability framework.

66.   Participants stressed the need to reflect on how to use these mechanisms, including the possible elaboration of a strategic roadmap for their effective integration into a monitoring and accountability framework. UN interagency coordination mechanisms are called to play an important role in this regard.

67.   National information, analyses and lessons learned from the regional exchange of experiences can be collated and aggregated at the regional level and provided as input to the global meetings convened by the GA and ECOSOC, in particular the HLPF as a central forum for sharing lessons learned at the global level.

68.   Recognizing the importance of the regional level, it was proposed that progress in the implementation of SDGs be discussed at the sixty-seventh session of the ECE in 2017.

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