



Towards an Accountability Framework for the Post-2015 Development Agenda:

Perspectives from the UNECE region

Questionnaire

Please complete

ORGANIZATION: Royal Society of New Zealand

NAME OF FOCAL POINT: Phillippa Gardiner

FUNCTION: Acting CEO Royal Society of New Zealand

TELEPHONE: 64 4 470 5767

E-MAIL: Phillippa.gardiner@royalsociety.org.nz

Please return the completed questionnaire by FRIDAY, 8 AUGUST 2014 to:

**United Nations Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE)
Development Policies and Cross-Sectoral Coordination Unit**

E-Mail: dpccu@unece.org

The electronic version of the questionnaire is available at:

www.unece.org/post-2015/regionalministerialconsultation2014.html

For questions or assistance, please contact Mr. Michael KUNZ at the UNECE secretariat

(michael.kunz@unece.org; phone +41-22 917 24 45)

I. Objective

This questionnaire is meant to collect regional perspectives from a wide spectrum of stakeholders in the UNECE region, including member States, civil society, private sector, and other regional organizations on elements for an accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda and the potential for a regional framework for accountability anchored at the national level and feeding into the global level.

The UNECE Secretariat will compile and synthesize the responses received. The synthesis report will be submitted as an input from the region to inform the Stocktaking Event of the President of the General Assembly (New York, 11-12 September 2014) on the elements for a monitoring and accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda. The synthesis report will also serve as a background document for the Regional Ministerial Consultation on “*Monitoring and Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda – The Regional Dimension*”, to be held on

15 and 16 (a.m.) September 2014 at the Palais des Nations in Geneva that will be convened upon the request of the Secretary-General.

“Accountability for a universal agenda can be understood as the joint commitment of the global community to monitor, evaluate, share and discuss progress towards the implementation of the agreed goals. An accountability framework could allow each Government and development actor to contribute to and benefit from a better global understanding of challenges and effective strategies. The concept of accountability extends beyond Government, and applies to all stakeholders being held accountable for their role in implementing a universal development agenda, within their respective governance frameworks and scope of responsibility.”

Source: Background note for the interactive dialogue on elements for a monitoring and accountability framework for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, convened by the President of the General Assembly on 1 May 2014

II. Background

In July 2013, the General Assembly decided on the format and organizational aspects of the High-level Political Forum (HLPF) in its resolution 67/290. Paragraph 8 of 67/290 “Decides that the forum, under the auspices of the Economic and Social Council, shall conduct regular reviews, starting in 2016, on the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments and objectives, including those related to the means of implementation, within the context of the post-2015 development agenda.” The reviews shall be voluntary, state-led and provide a platform for partnerships.

Recognizing that a transformative, people-centred and universal post-2015 agenda requires an accountability framework at all levels, the President of the General Assembly convened an interactive dialogue on 1 May 2014, to address the “Elements for a monitoring and accountability framework for the post-2015 development agenda.” The dialogue reaffirmed the importance of an accountability framework at the regional level as countries in the same region shared similar challenges and were likely to make greater progress by collectively addressing them. The [background note](#) prepared to that event elaborated on a number of experiences with accountability mechanisms, including through peer reviews at the regional level.

The [main messages](#) that emerged from the dialogue were:

(a) a universal and transformative agenda would require a strengthened accountability framework that is inclusive, participatory and engages people at all levels; (b) a decentralized system of accountability would ensure that all stakeholders take ownership and are incentivized to share, evaluate and adjust their policies; (c) national and regional accountability frameworks need to be anchored in a global accountability framework that is simple, focused and provide clarity on the roles of different actors; and (d) a multi-layered approach could work with parliaments at the national level, peer review mechanisms at the regional level, and with HLPF and the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) at the global level.

III. Questionnaire on Elements for an Accountability Framework at the Regional Level

A) Overall accountability mechanism

As noted above, there is an emerging view that the accountability mechanism for the post-2015 development agenda should be multi-layered.

Question 1: In general terms, what should an overall accountability mechanism involving the national, regional and global level look like and what could be the role of the regional level in this mechanism?

The UN's proposal for a paradigmatic shift to a new co-production Monitoring and Accountability framework and the UN's knowledge infrastructure efforts are probably not widely known in New Zealand. This said, the questionnaire delves into issues that are being actively explored by many New Zealand social scientists as part of their research programmes. This response draws on insights from this diversity of research but the short response time has precluded wider discussion with other science areas. The response is prepared by Professor Richard Le Heron (FRSNZ), Vice President (Humanities and Social Science) on the RSNZ Council. Email: r.leheron@auckland.ac.nz

The commitment by the UN to a more agent or actor-centric monitoring and accountability system makes sense given the UN work programme ahead and the continuing calls to make progress on sustainability goals. It is a sharp departure from the purely national statistics driven monitoring that has been the norm. The new agenda is suggestive of a global mapping of social licences (in whatever form these take, their focus, who is involved, the processes being used etc) to operate from country to country in the first instance and a recognition that 'practices' of actors are what finally count. Unless practices change, indicator shifts could be spurious. It is also a commitment to an ongoing process of monitoring and accountability that veers away from relying only on the static aggregate summaries that provide no links to actors and their investment and operational behaviours. This has implications for broad knowledge communities and organisations in different countries.

An ideal would be to have broad information on what major players (commercial, government, community, indigenous people and so on) are doing around the planet and what their trajectories of engagement with sustainability initiatives look like. This would acknowledge that most major actors are potentially if not actually multi-location and multi-country but it also throws up the complex issue of developing information frameworks that focus on named entities and track their behaviours, public commitments and assesses these against accountability criteria. This will only be possible if the four 'principles' articulated in the recent UN Dialogue of a bottom-up monitoring system are diligently adopted in each country. The point about collecting such data has to be following the emergence of sizeable and therefore influential actors to get a better sense of how performance contributions are actually being made or how they are being evaded.

New Zealand's experience indicates some of the challenges ahead in terms of designing an inclusive bottom-up system focusing on initiatives in regions, regional interactions and regional dynamics. They are: (1) creating a bank of case studies which are the responsibility of stakeholders may seem

straightforward but the costs for many could be burdensome without public assistance, (2) the number of case studies in early years need not be large; it is probably better to have detail on selected (criteria known) actors who are thought to be strategic players in shaping sustainability behaviours, (3) in the short run it would be strategic to encourage experimentation over a range of indicators of performance so as to see how easy/difficult it is to get information on relevant actors and how to gauge information usefulness, (4) this will enable the different cultures of understanding of sustainability that exist in any context to be part of the accountability framework. (5) a principle of triangulation of information from several sources would aid in validating what is being provided (e.g. government, private sector, community, NGO and other sources) but would depend on cross-nation dialogue amongst those involved in different contexts because of the territorial configurations of many actors, (6) minimum third party involvement would be desirable as this would reduce rigging of details, and (7) there could be a temptation to retrofit the existing monitoring frameworks rather than starting afresh in ways that genuinely involve those affected or who want to be part of long term monitoring

The regional level is very important in giving new lenses on the locational specificities of actor behaviours and practices. It will make visible who is involved, what they are doing from context to context, provide evidence of workable and effective developments in industry, farming, fishing, urban design and other areas of practice, and give an evidential foundation for debate and decisions.

In the past, review of progress on sustainable development was carried out under the auspices of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). In the area of development, monitoring and accountability under the MDG framework has been carried out through various mechanism and procedures.

Question 2: What are the major lessons from CSD progress reviews and MDG accountability that can inform and help improve the post-2015 accountability framework? Have CSD progress reviews and MDG accountability been adequate and if not how should this be different for the SDGs?

Having had a look at the CSD progress reviews and MDG accountability it is very clear as to why efforts are going into developing new kinds of assessment structures. While the MDG indicators for example may give a statistical overview they do not allow any connection to be made to the originating actions and actors that have been 'squeezed' into aggregate numbers. Numbers can't speak, but actors linked to new metrics can speak about numbers, especially why they are making progress on sustainability indicators.

The post-2015 agenda is clearly trying to shift attention away from retrospective accounting to more real time, real context, and real actor engagement. The new approach gets over how to communicate and translate sustainability issues from abstracted indicators and the ever present challenge of trying to 'find' interested ears to talk to. The new approach has the promise to 'build in the doers, the interpreters the impacted' and put more of them into purposeful processes.

In New Zealand it is very apparent that there is multi-directionality to sustainability initiatives, that there is a plurality of politics, and that at any moment any assessment will show both actors/actions advancing practices and commitments and those who are heading in different directions. The previous CSD and MDG assessments are unable to give such level of insight.

B) Nature of possible review at the regional level

Scope of the review

In terms of the substantive scope of the review, there are a number of options. For instance, the progress towards all SDGs could be reviewed in one review cycle. Alternatively, the review could be limited to certain selected SDGs or themes. It might also involve other existing commitments that are not directly part of, but nevertheless relevant to the SDGs. There are also different possibilities in terms of the country coverage. For instance, all member States could be reviewed over a multi-year cycle. Alternatively, only governments volunteering to be reviewed could be included. In addition, the reviews could also cover other stakeholders that have responsibilities for achieving the SDGs (e.g., private sector).

Question 3: What should be reviewed and who should be reviewed?

The question really contradicts the process being advocated by the “*Monitoring and Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda – The Regional Dimension*” in that it assumes the ‘what’ can be decided in advance, by detached observers and analysts. The principles outlined would strongly emphasise that there **will be** multiple processes to co-generate options and settle on the doable in various contexts. This is foreshadowed in the preamble to the question but the question risks closing this variety down, even though the intended purpose of the questionnaire is to scope possible and plausible options. There is also a hint of an assumption that governments alone will be reviewed when a range of actors of different territorial jurisdictions would be also be appropriate and it could be argued that a decoupling of Big politics from deciding on timetabling should at least be considered a reasonable position in some settings.

On a more encouraging note the regional focus is exciting as it offers a new knowledge space in which to develop a co-produced ‘living’ knowledge framework (however modest at the beginning) and to re-approach the information/data requirements of the new sustainability agenda.

Review process

Accountability can take different forms and modalities, ranging from more basic monitoring to more comprehensive reviews and, accordingly, with a different capacity to assist, support and advise governments and other stakeholders in achieving the SDGs:

- Monitoring of data on SDG performance which highlights where progress is and is not on track.
- Analytical reports on SDG implementation in the region which would provide an analysis of best practices and make policy recommendations where progress has been poor.
- Discussions and exchange of experiences and best practices at regional meetings, for instance Regional Forums on Sustainable Development convened by UNECE.
- Review of progress of members States by other member States (peer reviews).

Monitoring of data and tracking progress against the agreed goals will be the basis of any further analysis or review process. Different information and inputs will be needed for the various types of reviews, e.g. quantitative data or qualitative assessments and policy analysis. Different parts of the UN system (Regional Commission, the inter-agency Regional Coordination Mechanism and the regional UNDG, specialized agencies on specific SDGs) could play a role in the various reviews. While the review process will be state-led, it will also benefit from the contributions of other stakeholders (civil society, the private sector, academia).

Question 4: What type(s) of review should be conducted and what kind of information should it be based on? What should be the role of the UN system and other stakeholders in the process?

Again the link to grounded processes does need to be taken seriously. One could imagine that policy makers in different Ministries in a country might have a very different attitude towards this question because they are influenced by their short term political pressures than say scientists and social scientists and community, NGO and other watchers who are more attuned to how outcomes are being generated, by which actors and the range and reach of the actions in and beyond single countries.

However, the UN system is vital to any new kind of co-produced global monitoring and accountability system. The stress on independent origination of information from sources outside the grips of the present framework gives some hope that institutional rigidities will be transcended and not captured by existing interests who have 'performed' the problems the monitoring and assessment is being designed to overcome.

A forum for regional reviews and discussion would enable much co-learning and more detailed understanding of what is going on and assist in the development of new narratives about sustainable development

e-Conferences could be a cost effective and more open way to create regional data gathering. A big challenge is changing the narratives that reflect the mind-set that sustainable development is somehow universally definable to narratives that express more localised, national and regional achievements. In this regard, the false lure of 'best practice' which implies 'good for anywhere'

should be replaced by achievement accounts that show what is being done in context, in the current conditions, by those involved.

Peer review mechanisms are considered to be an effective instrument to strengthen accountability in a multilateral context with strong ownership by participating governments. Some examples are the [Universal Periodic Review](#) conducted under the auspices of the Human Rights Council, the [OECD Peer Reviews](#), ECOSOC's [Annual Ministerial Review](#), the WTO [Trade Policy Review Mechanism](#) and the [UNECE Environmental Performance Reviews](#).

Question 5: If you favour peer reviews, what could such reviews at the regional level look like and what existing models do you consider relevant?

The difficulty at the moment will be capacity and capability of both 'experts' and mobilised 'public participants'. 'Peer' is interpreted here in an unorthodox manner. It is really who has the 'authority' and 'mandate' to be involved from the diverse knowledge communities that will be part of the data collection processes. Reviews in this conception would be carried out by peers from different knowledge traditions and worldly experiences.

A preliminary to commencing regional level reviews would be building up reviewer expertise in a number of quarters. The UN as a seed funder of reviewer learning is essential. As mentioned in the preamble this response, the breadth and depth in New Zealand of exposure and comprehension of UN activities and its many initiatives is very uneven and probably low. This may hold elsewhere. This means at least two things for start-up conditions: those committing to the new framework will come at it with variable knowledge and competencies to engage and this could be compounded in regional discussions.

Those in New Zealand's social science community who are examining evaluative reasoning are suggesting that there will need to be an openness to diverse ways of evaluating data, its interpretation and how it might related back into processes. Given the transformative kinds of engagement central to the Monitoring and Accountability initiative the notion of pre-given expertise and experts will need to be abandoned.

Linkage with global and national reviews and other mechanisms

A regional accountability mechanism needs to be part of a multi-layered structure with a strong national and global dimension. This requires regional reviews to be anchored at the national level and to feed into the global level. Reviews at the global level will be carried out by the High-level Political Forum. For example, the regional level could therefore provide a regional synthesis to the global deliberations and align its theme with the global review. It could also go beyond merely complementing the HLPF and be more systematic and ongoing, taking into account the regional priorities and particularly transboundary issues. A key pillar of the overall system will be national accountability. National SDG reports, prepared by governments and supported by the UN Country Teams and the UNDG agencies as appropriate, could play a key role in the review process and provide important inputs into the regional review. National parliaments could also be involved. In addition, it will be critical to build on and integrate existing accountability mechanisms in the post-2015 follow-up process, for example those under relevant existing legal instruments or programme activities or carried out in other fora.

Question 6: How should the reviews at national, regional and global level be linked? And how can existing accountability mechanisms be integrated?

The idea of global, regional and national gazes on sustainability commitments and accountability using the principles articulated for the post-2015 agenda is a step change in approach to sustainability. A companion methodology is ‘following trajectories’ not just of nations and regional groupings of nations but of significant actors and their investment patterns and operational practices. In New Zealand there are several organisations that do some of this longer term work around organisations although this isn’t there immediate mandate (e.g. Environmental Defence Society, Parliamentary Commissioner for the Environment).

To be consistent with the proposed framework it may be helpful to think of integration as being evolutionary instead of being immediately prescribed.

Conclusion:

This has been a very challenging questionnaire and it is hoped the responses provided will enable a fuller and more meaningful discussion of how to generate the practices for the new knowledge space foreshadowed by the UN initiative. The RSNZ welcomes any further information on the this process.
