

**Thirteenth session of the UN General Assembly’s (UNGA) Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)**

**14-18 July 2014 | UN Headquarters, New York, United States of America**

<http://www.iisd.ca/sdgs/owg13/>

The thirteenth and final session of the UN General Assembly Open Working Group (OWG) on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) took place from 14-19 July 2014, at UN Headquarters in New York. Macharia Kamau, Permanent Representative of Kenya, and Csaba Kőrösi, Permanent Representative of Hungary, continued in their roles as Co-Chairs of the OWG, which was mandated by the UN General Assembly (UNGA) to develop a proposal for a set of sustainable development goals to present to the UNGA, as called for by the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20).

On 19 July 2014, the OWG completed its mandate following three complete readings of drafts of the proposed SDGs and associated targets. The multiple readings took place during “informal-informal” consultations three days prior to OWG-13, from 9-11 July, and during informal sessions of OWG-13 over the course of the five-day meeting. On Saturday, 19 July 2014, following an all-night session, the final formal session of OWG-13 convened at 10:30 am to adopt the “Proposal of the Open Working Group for Sustainable Development Goals.” At 1:20 pm, after nearly three hours of statements—both in support of and opposed to the final document—the OWG adopted the document by acclamation, with a standing ovation for the Co-Chairs.

While most delegations and observers were not completely satisfied with the final proposal containing 17 goals and 169 targets (including 62 targets on means of implementation), it was generally acknowledged that the proposal represented the best outcome that could be hoped for, based on the Group’s 16 months of work. But even as exhausted delegates and stakeholders left UN Headquarters on Saturday afternoon, many were already looking ahead to the next steps in the process. The OWG’s proposal on SDGs will now be submitted to the UNGA for consideration as part of the broader post-2015 development agenda that is to be adopted in late 2015. Many delegates and the Co-Chairs clearly indicated that there was still another year’s worth of negotiations before the proposed SDGs are adopted by the UNGA along with the rest of the development agenda that will supplant the Millennium Development Goals.

The  Summary of this meeting is now available in PDF format

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**A BRIEF ANALYSIS OF OWG-13**

***THE SDG PUZZLE***

Just over two years ago, the UN Conference on Sustainable Development, which met in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, called for the UN General Assembly to establish an Open Working Group to develop a set of sustainable development goals. These goals were supposed to: be limited in number, aspirational and easy to communicate; address all three dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced way; and be coherent with and integrated into the UN’s post-2015 development agenda. It was never going to be an easy task, to say the least, and the OWG spent 16 months of work over 13 sessions trying to achieve just that.

The OWG’s efforts to piece together the SDGs and targets have resembled putting together a jigsaw puzzle. After OWG-3 in May 2013, the Earth Negotiations Bulletin noted that, while several participants were cautiously optimistic that the process had the potential to finally define and operationalize sustainable development, others warned that success was far from certain, and that participants must continue to examine and organize the puzzle pieces before they can be put together. Now that the work of the OWG is complete and it is has fulfilled its mandate to propose a set of goals and targets to the UN General Assembly, this brief analysis will look back at the process and the OWG’s contributions to solving the SDG puzzle.

***SORTING THE PIECES***

For its first eleven months (March 2013-February 2014), which comprised the OWG’s “stocktaking sessions,” governments (sometimes reluctantly) abided by the Co-Chairs’ advice to avoid negotiation until they had spent time in mutual learning and discussion. It was during this stocktaking phase that governments, in essence, opened the sustainable development puzzle, analyzed its pieces and sorted them into possible SDG categories. At times, governments set various pieces off to the side (such as climate change, as well as peaceful and non-violent societies, rule of law and governance), to determine if they belonged in this puzzle. Other issues related to other autonomous institutions, such as the WTO and its TRIPS agreement or the UNFCCC climate change negotiations, and the OWG had to consider how to handle these overlapping issues. In the end, the eight stocktaking sessions involved formal discussion of over 58 issues, including presentations from 80 experts, and participation of government representatives, members of the UN system, civil society and other stakeholders. The year amounted to an extraordinary collaborative learning experience, leaving participants better informed about the challenges that the SDGs must address and the approaches they might want to take when they turned to constructing a set of goals and targets.

***DISCERNING THE OUTLINE***

OWG-9 in March 2014 marked a turning point, as delegates shifted gears from stocktaking to decision-making mode. At this point, the OWG identified areas of convergence and divergence and debated the “borders” or outline of the SDGs, and the puzzle began to take shape. As they discussed 19 proposed Focus Areas and considered which issues, goals and targets could be included in the final list of SDGs, delegates realized both the possibilities and challenges of the task. Reflecting on this meeting, the Earth Negotiations Bulletin said 80% of the proposals for goals and targets seemed to enjoy broad consensus—especially those related to the unfinished work of the MDGs (the social dimension of sustainable development), but the remaining 20% “represent some of the most challenging issues, including means of implementation and broader financing issues, common but differentiated responsibilities, and universality.”

The outline started to come together at OWG-10, where Co-Chairs Macharia Kamau and Csaba Kőrösi reviewed the scope, purpose and design of the SDGs and targets, stressing that the Group’s outcome should integrate the unfinished business of the MDGs, address the three dimensions of sustainable development as framed by the Rio+20 outcome document, and contribute to the global response to emerging issues related to sustainable development. Co-Chair Kamau challenged delegates to see beyond the usual boundary of the sustainable development dialogue and  prioritize “twenty-first century challenges” such as climate change, cities, ecosystems, governance and inequality, “no matter how politically difficult.”

***PUTTING THE PIECES TOGETHER***

The list of goals and targets came into sharper focus as the 11th, 12th and 13th sessions of the OWG proceeded.  These sessions also represented the closest thing to full intergovernmental negotiations that the Group conducted. Delegates and observers alike questioned the working methods of the Co-Chairs throughout the process. Argentina and other delegations repeatedly asked when they would begin word-by-word negotiations; they expressed frustration that the Co-Chairs continued to issue new versions of the working document, even if they afforded the Group the chance to “ventilate” the text before moving on. However, the Co-Chairs’ long, determined avoidance of word-by-word negotiations had a positive result, in that discussions largely stayed focused on the substance of governments’ differences and the motivations behind them. Discussions on changes to proposed SDGs were strikingly substantive, as delegates explained their positions and sought to persuade others. The careful shepherding of the process by Co-Chairs Kőrösi and Kamau was ultimately applauded on Saturday morning, when Member States expressed their gratitude to the Co-Chairs for ensuring that the OWG fulfilled its mandate.

Nonetheless, delegates faced several hurdles during the final three sessions as they tried to connect all of the pieces. Almost from the beginning, it was possible to identify which sections of the puzzle might be the most difficult to finish, including: climate change and the principle of CBDR; sexual and reproductive health and rights; rule of law and peaceful societies; and means of implementation. On the issue of climate change, many delegates expressed concern about the possibility that the language in the proposed SDGs could prejudge the outcome of the current round of UNFCCC negotiations, especially on the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. Several delegates feared that this might impact the post-2020 climate change framework, which is supposed to be designed for application to all parties. If the SDGs emphasize and pronounce issues of differentiation, one delegate warned that it would be “exactly prejudging” the outcome of COP21 in December 2015.

References to sexual and reproductive health and rights have been a divisive issue throughout the UN system for decades. Many delegates threatened to reject the final text because target 5.6 calls for ensuring “universal access to sexual and reproductive health and reproductive rights,” although qualified by “as agreed in accordance with the Programme of Action of the ICPD and the Beijing Platform for Action and the outcome documents of their review conferences.” Yet proponents were still disappointed, noting this was a weak target, and opponents did not really want to accept the language at all.

Issues on rule of law and governance posed another test. Transparent governance, a fair judiciary, land tenure, and the self-determination of peoples under foreign occupation were all listed as examples of precursors to sustainable development throughout the week, but up to the final day, delegates disagreed on whether to expand the three dimensions of sustainable development to take on a fourth dimension that crosses the boundaries into sensitive political issues. In the end, delegates included language in both the chapeau and Goal 16 on peaceful societies, but only after extensive and protracted debate, and reducing the scope of the references.

Discussions on the means of implementation for the goals also created tension between donor and recipient countries. Countries agreed that means of implementation are crucial for the success of the goals, but disagreed on the balance of responsibility. Developed countries stressed the need to maintain principles of universality and balance across the three pillars of sustainable development while developing countries called for greater financial and technical assistance. Developing countries pushed for MOI targets throughout the goals (rather than only in Goal 17, which the developed countries preferred), citing the failure to sufficiently implement MDG 8 on the global partnership for development. In the end, MOI targets appeared in every goal, but they were more limited than what developing countries initially called for.

***MOVING ONTO THE NEXT PUZZLE: WHAT DOES THIS MEAN FOR THE POST-2015 DEVELOPMENT AGENDA?***

Even as exhausted delegates and other stakeholders left the UN on Saturday afternoon, many were already looking ahead to the next steps in the process. The OWG’s proposal on SDGs will be submitted to the UN General Assembly in September, where the next steps will be determined. Comments during the closing plenary reinforced the fact that the SDGs’ output is only a “proposal” to the UN General Assembly. Many delegates and the Co-Chairs indicated a number of times that there is likely still another year’s worth of deliberations before the SDGs are formally adopted by the UN General Assembly along with other components of the post-2015 development agenda that will succeed the MDGs. Indeed, the SDGs are not the only puzzle in the room.

Numerous other parallel processes are trying to complete their own part of the larger post-2015 development puzzle: the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing (ICESDF), the Financing for Development Conference (FfD), the UNFCCC negotiations, the third UN Conference on Small Island Developing States, and the post-2015 Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction. Collectively, all of these pieces will have to fit together…somehow.

With this in mind, participants wondered throughout the week, both privately and in their interventions, about the ultimate standing of the proposed goals in the broader agenda. Regardless of the answer, most agreed that the OWG process amounted to a discussion that needed to happen: what definition of sustainable development could the international community come together to support, and to what concrete goals could it collectively commit? Of the many accomplishments of the OWG over the past 16 months, perhaps the greatest was that it took the discourse on sustainable development to the next level.

Ultimately, the list of goals and targets may not be as clear, concise or “crispy” as some may have wanted. However, it was developed by an intergovernmental process that was open to input from all stakeholders—a truly open working group. In fact, the cross-disciplinary learning process that the OWG started may just create a new way of approaching sustainable development. The OWG—including the Co-Chairs, Member States, representatives of Major Groups, the UN system and other stakeholders—can all take pride that it has taken the first giant step and completed a set of proposed SDGs and targets. While the puzzle of sustainable development may not be complete, the pieces are in place to make the post-2015 development agenda, a post-2015 sustainable development agenda.

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