

Questionnaire on an accountability framework for the post-2015 agenda: A synthesis of replies

As a substantive basis for the discussions at the Regional Ministerial Consultation on Monitoring and Accountability for the Post-2015 Development Agenda, the ECE secretariat and the regional UN Development Group have been seeking the views of different stakeholders on regional accountability for the post-2015 agenda through a brief questionnaire (see annex 1).

This document presents a synthesis of the 45 replies received by 5 September (see list in annex 2). The synthesis attempts to provide an overview of the issues addressed and to identify the main converging points as well as a few where views may differ. A number of specific ideas and suggestions is also reflected.

Not all member States agreed that their detailed responses be made available on the ECE website, informing that the views expressed were only preliminary and not yet reflecting an official position. The responses of those who did agree can be found at <http://www.unece.org/post-2015/regionalministerialconsultation2014.html>.

1. What should an overall accountability mechanism look like?

All responses recognize that a comprehensive, multi-layered and multi-stakeholder accountability framework is crucial for the success of the post-2015 framework and the achievement of the sustainable development goals (SDGs) contained therein.

Several of them underlined that accountability for progress towards sustainable development goes beyond the mere review of results, since it implies that all stakeholders, according to their respective responsibilities, have to account for the achievement of the post-2015 agenda. The roles and responsibilities of stakeholders should therefore be clearly articulated for each sustainable development goal (SDG) and associated target. Furthermore, the accountability mechanism should take into account the complexities and inter-linkages between the different goals and targets.

Objectives

The objectives of an effective accountability framework put forward in the responses can be summarized as follows:

- Incentivize governments to accelerate national transitions to sustainable development through the effective implementation of relevant national programmes and policies;
- Actively engage other stakeholders in this process, thereby increasing both its effectiveness and its legitimacy;
- At the global level, ensure that commitments made in terms of partnerships for sustainable development are effectively fulfilled.

General characteristics

The responses highlighted the following characteristics of an overall accountability framework:

- **Build upon existing mechanisms:** The new framework should take into account information, results and lessons learned from existing monitoring and accountability mechanisms at all levels and in all areas related to sustainable development. A heavy reporting burden could be avoided by aiming for national reports which could also be used at the regional and global levels.
- **Advance integration and coherence:** An overall accountability mechanism should ensure linkages between levels (national, regional, global), actors (state and non-state actors) and sectors.
- **Bottom-up approach:** National mechanisms should be the key pillar/ foundation of the overall accountability system. The regional and global levels would build upon these national processes, allowing for the exchange of best practices while introducing the transboundary and global dimensions of accountability.
- **Participatory and inclusive process:** Accountability should be based on an interactive dialogue with the full involvement of the country concerned, civil society, the private sector, statisticians and other relevant stakeholders and provide for adequate levels of information and transparency. Particularly at the local and national levels, people should be enabled to directly share findings with duty bearers and to demand action and change.
- **Incentive-based:** The focus should lie on cooperative support between countries with an emphasis on learning. The mechanism should give guidance and recommendations for the implementation of sustainable development commitments of the reviewed country by promoting the exchange of best practise and experiences, identify gaps as well as necessary means and measures to address them.
- **Country Ownership:** Reviews should be state-driven, involving ministerial and other relevant high-level participants.
- **Central role for UN:** The UN should play a key role to ensure legitimacy and coherence. UN country teams should support national accountability, the regional commissions provide a platform for exchanging experiences and addressing transboundary issues; the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development should play an important role in the coherence of the overall accountability framework and bring together the main findings and messages on the implementation of the post-2015 development agenda.

Some responses noted the need for further analysis and discussion with regard to the roles and functions to be assumed at each level.

2. What are the major lessons from CSD progress reviews and MDG accountability that can inform and help improve the post-2015 accountability framework?

All responses recognized the need to critically appraise the CSD and MDG progress reviews in order to draw lessons for shaping the future accountability framework.

Many responses characterized the CSD progress reviews and MDG accountability as too weak, mainly because they were not comprehensive and detailed enough, and too much confined to monitoring of progress. One response refers to the various reports which underline the need for strengthening accountability (the UN SG Report on lessons learned from the CSD 2013; UN Task Team Report on a renewed global partnership 2013; UN OHCHR Report “Who will be accountable?”; DESA, ECOSOC AMR Expert Workshop Report 2013).

CSD Reviews

On the positive side, it was noted that the multi-annual work programme of the CSD helped focus resources and political attention, and that this approach might also be considered for the HLPF.

The responses highlighted the following shortcomings:

- no real accountability mechanism that could motivate countries to regularly report on implementation of their sustainability policies (no mandatory reviews and the Guidelines for national voluntary reporting have been rather loose and therefore reporting was uneven);
- insufficient implementation at national and local levels of the decisions taken at the CSD meetings;
- the absence of mechanisms needed for appropriate technical/financial support and capacity building;
- the absence of an MDG-like monitoring framework, with quantified goals, targets, and indicators;
- the weak participation of ministries other than those responsible for the environment and foreign affairs;
- the weak link between the CSD and the operational entities of the UN system;
- the insufficient space at the CSD meetings for a systematic review of national implementation efforts and for reflecting on gaps in implementation and on barriers to progress;
- the rather weak impact at the global level of the regional preparatory review meetings of the UN regional commissions.

MDG Accountability

On the positive side, the following points were made concerning MDG accountability:

- Commitment of countries to MDG reporting exists and could be built on.
- The UN has been an important convener and funder of the reporting. The convener role helped the UN bring in and enable the participation of civil-society actors in the monitoring and evaluation of MDGs. This role should be maintained.
- The national and global colour-based overview of each goal in the MDG accountability mechanism has been very helpful in communicating the status of the MDG achievement in the run up to the deadline year.

On the negative side, it was noted that:

- The MDG review mechanism has been limited to monitoring of progress (“the end result”) and has left limited room for participatory review as well as for national, regional or international dialogue on lessons learned and mutual learning on policies and actions that would accelerate progress (“the how”).
- The monitoring system did not include a well-defined, standardized, codified review mechanism, with specified *ex ante* roles for governments, the UN system and civil society.
- The MDG review suffered from an absence of recommendations that could be monitored and followed up combined with an adequate system of incentives and means to address gaps in implementation.
- A number of member States had the perception that the MDGs were imposed on them by the UN system, without due process and adequate consultation.
- Progress was measured in an overly narrow manner; by focusing on national averages, it perpetuated the masking of unmet needs for the most vulnerable and hardest to reach.
- Such statistical overview did not allow any connection to be made to the originating actions and actors that have been ‘squeezed’ into aggregate numbers.
- At the national level, MDG-reporting did not sufficiently take into account the extent to which MDGs were incorporated into national strategies and policies;
- The monitoring process was technocratic, lacking legitimacy: parliamentarians, civil societies, the private sector, relevant national institutions and platforms, minorities, marginalized communities have not been actively involved.
- At the global level, only a few Voluntary National Presentations (NVPs) were made at the ECOSOC AMR. Perceived reasons for this are: lack of time and incentives for presentation; absence of recommendations and follow-up; limited scope for the participation of the concerned stakeholders; reviews not resulting in concrete actions; no adequate framework for holding countries to account with regard to commitments to the global partnership for development.

Lessons learned – what are the implications for the post-2015 accountability framework?

Based on this assessment of the CSD and MDG reviews, the respondents made the following recommendations for a review mechanism for the post-2015 agenda:

- There needs to be much more balanced participation of high-level officials and stakeholders from all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social, environment) in any major review at the regional and global levels.
- The interaction between the national and international (regional and global) levels needs to be significantly strengthened. Closer linkages of the regional processes with the national and global processes are important in this respect.
- The reviews should be linked with the operational activities of the UN system.
- Data and statistics needed as a basis for analysis and policy development should be significantly improved (see Section 6 below).

One NGO elaborated that the post-2015 agenda should clearly try to shift attention away from retrospective accounting to more real time, real context, and real actor engagement. It also stated that a more agent or actor-centric monitoring and accountability system is needed to depart from the purely national statistics driven monitoring that has been the norm. This would ensure a recognition that ‘practices’ of actors are what finally counts and it would be a commitment to an on-going process of monitoring and accountability that veers away from relying only on the static aggregate summaries that provide no links to actors, and their operational behaviour.

Some responses, both from countries and NGOs, suggested that more space should be given to an interactive dialogue between governments and non- governmental actors for the discussion on progress made and the sharing of lessons learned.

3. Who and what should be reviewed?

All responses underlined that the reviews should cover all SDGs and their associated targets. One response noted that the levels and methodology of the reviews will differ according to the type of SDGs and commitments: sectoral/ cross-sectoral; national/regional/global dimensions.

Furthermore, several responses from NGOs specified that areas such as governance and means of implementation should be assessed for each SDG.

There was a consensus that all countries need to be reviewed. Some responses stated that the reviews should be mandatory while a few others were in favour of voluntary reviews. Without referring to the mandatory/voluntary issue, a number of responses mentioned that reviews should take place on a regular basis within an agreed timeframe.

Reviews should cover public entities and other stakeholders that have responsibilities for achieving the SDGs. All responses highlighted the need for an active involvement of the following actors:

- states, as the primary duty-bearers and the signatories to the framework, are the key actors to be held accountable. They are also the entities which sign up to all the international agreements and conventions which the post-2015 framework must reflect and respect in order to make progress on their provisions;
- national Parliaments as well as other public entities such as the National Councils for Sustainable Development and national audit agencies;
- the private sector is an important player both in terms of realising the goals and targets through their direct contribution to sustainable development and as the subject of some of the targets or indicators, such as tighter regulation on corporate activities, or requiring greater compliance with human rights and environmental standards;
- representatives of civil society and of all segments of the population, including in particular youth, the poor and marginalized groups;
- large donors like foundations and other non-state actors in view of their involvement in such sectors as health, education, climate change, and other environmental and social issues;
- the development banks, DAC/OECD and other entities involved in various forms of partnership for development;
- UN entities which have an important role, both in terms of managing the post-2015 development agenda and providing support to the implementation of the SDGs at all levels, in particular through the UN country teams, the regional commissions, the specialised agencies and the HLPF and the ECOSOC;
- regional entities as important players in the regional institutional architecture; e.g. the European Union.

4. What should be done at national, regional and global levels?

The responses show that at all levels, the reviews should:

- monitor the progress made;
- promote the exchange of best practices;
- discuss progress made (or lack thereof) with the stakeholders involved in implementation; and
- make recommendations in areas where progress appears to be insufficient, with incentives and tailored support measures.

Three types of reviews should be combined at all levels of accountability:

- 1) Reports which would monitor SDG performance by highlighting where progress is and is not on track, on the basis of the data collected for each SDG. As far as possible, they could also collect and present policy initiatives and best practices, thereby suggesting solutions to address major obstacles and pointing to technical needs as well as needs for strengthening institutional and financial capacities;

- 2) Large consultation processes which would take place prior to the review meetings and include all segments of society;
- 3) Review meetings which would be State-led with the participation of a wide spectrum of actors (see part 4 above); they would exchange experiences, discuss the successes and gaps in achieving the SDGs¹ and make recommendations on this basis to accelerate progress. These review meetings would take the form of stakeholder forums and/or peer reviews.

National level

Several responses from governments as well as from UN agencies and NGOs emphasized that the national sustainable development strategy and its implementation should be the basis, or at least a key element of the review.

Concerning the sources of information, a number of responses from NGOs underlined that although information from governments and other public entities would constitute the bulk of inputs for the review, information from civil society organizations should also be included. Such civil society reports would be key to ensure a balanced and comprehensive view, especially with regard to specific parts of the population such as women, children and the most marginalized and disadvantaged.

A large number of responses from governments highlighted the role of the UN country teams and specialized agencies in assisting member States in their reviews by:

- providing reports and sectoral and cross-sectoral analysis within the framework of the national sustainable development plans and strategies;
- helping countries to identify barriers and impediments to the implementation of the SDGs;
- supporting the preparation and organization of the review meetings.

Regional level

A large number of responses from governments, IGOs and NGOs underlined the important role of the regional level in a multi-layered accountability mechanism as a connector between the national and global levels.

They stated that all countries should be included in some form of regional periodic review for the following reasons:

- there are significant similarities in the way neighbouring countries encounter and can address challenges connected to sustainable development; and
- transboundary issues related to sustainable development call for a regional mechanism of accountability since policies, legal agreements and action plans need to be formulated at this level.

¹One response specified that such discussion should consider the wider context, including risks and opportunities as well as changes in global or national circumstances.

Regional processes should also serve to:

- promote shared learning among stakeholders from the region;
- set targets on issues that require regional solutions, such as transboundary cooperation on water management and other cross-border issues;
- bring peer pressure but also foster cooperation and provide guidance for the effective implementation of regional targets;
- support collection of data, through harmonisation, validation and capacity building activities directed to the National Statistical Office (NSO); and
- collate and aggregate national information, analyses and lessons learned for regional review meetings and feed the results into global meetings convened by the HLPF, and ECOSOC.

Several responses referred to the need to build on existing regional processes such as the ECE Environmental Performance Reviews (EPRs), the reporting obligations under the ECE Environmental Conventions and the ECE system on monitoring and evaluation related to the state of forests.

Concerning the sources of information for the reviews, responses mentioned the analyses provided by the Regional Commissions, the Regional Offices of the UN Funds, Programmes and Specialised Agencies, the regional networks of NGOs, as well as the non-UN regional entities and organizations (notably the EU and the OECD, OSCE, Council of Europe).

One response expressed the view that the consultations at the regional level should be led by the regional commissions while coherence of involvement of UN agencies should be ensured by the regional UNDG. Along the same lines, it was suggested that the regional commissions should convene Regional Forums on Sustainable Development prior to the sessions of the HLPF.

Global level

A large number of responses referred to the HLPF as the UN body which should have the authority for overseeing the overall accountability framework and, together with ECOSOC, organise events and activities related to the global level of accountability.

The role of the HLPF and ECOSOC in providing a platform for both assessing global partnerships for development and initiating new ones was emphasised in a large number of responses. Compared to the MDG reviews, more inter-regional exchange of experiences should be organised at the global level, the HLPF being the place where the outcome of the regional dialogues could be brought together and discussed.

Concerning the sources of information for the global review, several responses referred to existing regional and global reports² by UN entities and other international organizations.

² The UN-DESA, UNDP and UNEP global reports were notably mentioned in this respect.

Alternative reports from the NGO community as well as reports of global think tanks and foundations were also mentioned.

The Global Sustainable Development Report should gather the experiences and lessons learned at the national and regional levels. One response suggested that the Report be focused on a given number of SDGs every year, while also giving a brief overview of overall progress towards the achievement of all SDGs.

In order to keep the global review manageable, task managers/coordinators could be appointed as was the case for the OWG on SDGs.

How should the reviews at national, regional and global levels be linked?

As mentioned above, several responses emphasised the need to reinforce the linkages between the three levels of accountability. National reviews of accountability should provide the main data, analyses and lessons learned for further regional and global review of the implementation of SDGs. Regional reports, to be elaborated by the UN entities in their respective fields of expertise, should be based on the syntheses of national reports. These regional reports should in turn feed the global reports to be submitted to the High-level Political Forum.

More specifically, one response noted the need to streamline the linkages between the regional and the global level through better timing, coordination and cooperation, both in terms of reports and meetings.

One response identified four key elements for ensuring linkages and keeping the reporting burden low:

- 1) **alignment in time:** regional and global reviews should take place in due time to feed into the global review process by the HLPF;
- 2) **alignment in substance:** data and the format of data collected at all levels should be coherent. To avoid duplication, existing information and reports should be integrated;
- 3) **window for regional inputs at global level:** inter-regional dialogues should be organized similar to those in the CSD;
- 4) **integration of existing sectoral accountability mechanisms:** the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) was mentioned as a model that provides for a high-level overall policy review and does not duplicate the detailed work undertaken by the different issue-specific treaty-monitoring bodies. Similarly, information from existing sectoral accountability mechanisms should flow into the SDG reviews (linkages and cross-referencing), thereby avoiding duplication of reviews in certain areas.

Frequency and coverage

One response noticed that if the breadth of the current structure of the SDGs (as proposed by the Open Working Group—with 17 goals and 169 targets) remained, it was obvious that such a structure could not, realistically, be monitored on an annual basis for all member states.

Several responses noted that the reviews would therefore need to take place in a cycle to be determined. One of them expressed the view that the most logical process would be to organise regular (annual) monitoring and evaluation at a national level which would feed into less frequent processes at the regional and global levels. Thus the regional and global accountability frameworks would be anchored in a national accountability framework and maintain a continuum of accountability.

5. Regional peer reviews

A significant number of responses considered peer reviews as a powerful way to improve transparency and dialogue, to strengthen the accountability process, and therefore to accelerate action towards the implementation of the SDGs. Such peer reviews needed to go beyond the exchange of best practices by identifying the areas of underperformance, analysing the underlying causes, identifying the actors involved and proposing means of improvement.

Some responses mentioned the interest of conducting peer reviews at the global level in order to share lessons learned worldwide. Several others expressed the view that peer reviews would best be placed at the regional level: they would be more useful since countries in the same region usually have more comparable development situations, and are confronted with the same transboundary issues and challenges.

Concerning the mandatory or voluntary nature of the peer reviews, the views expressed were mixed, with a majority of responses in favour of mandatory reviews.

Existing peer review mechanisms should be used as models, or their results should be integrated in the overall review mechanism.

The ECE Environmental Performance Reviews, the OECD/DAC peer reviews and the UPR were quoted in this respect. A few responses also referred to the ECOSOC's Annual Ministerial Review as a starting point although one response mentioned that it should be overhauled in view of its shortcomings.

The Development Cooperation Forum was also quoted, highlighting its efforts to work more closely with the Busan Global Partnerships for Effective Development Cooperation. Through its monitoring process, the latter could provide significant elements of accountability and

valuable input for the development of measurable targets and monitoring mechanisms at country and global levels.

A large number of responses referred mainly to the UPR as a model for peer reviews of SDG implementation for the following reasons:

- its universal character;
- the fact that, through political pressure, it creates an incentive for States to report and to show improvements in implementation over a given period of time;
- it generates actionable recommendations for the countries under review; and
- it draws on the work of other human rights monitoring bodies and of NGOs as an essential part of the assessment.

Several responses mentioned that the peer reviews should be conducted within the framework of the regional economic commissions which would provide the intergovernmental platform for discussing findings and recommendations. The implementation of mutually agreed recommendations would then be assessed at a subsequent review.

6. Data

All responses mentioned the availability of reliable data as key for the accountability framework. The main points emerging in this respect are as follows:

- Progress reports should be based on open, unbiased, reliable and timely data, gathered at the national level. To ensure comparability among countries and over time, a core set of data related to the target indicators should be established on a global level and implemented at the country level – through universal, but decentralised accountability systems.
- Equally important, States should routinely collect data disaggregated by income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, disability, geographic location and other characteristics relevant in national contexts.
- States should also collect data on the rate of implementation of decisions and recommendations resulting from peer review meetings and disseminate these data as part of their monitoring and evaluation commitments.
- In terms of dissemination, States should consistently provide these data to bodies formally charged with overseeing and assessing progress on implementing the Post-2015 Agenda and the commitments it reflects. For the core indicators, a system of on-line data could be set up which would be used, *inter alia*, for regional and global reports in the form of a statistical appendix.
- Data should be made available widely in an easily understandable format so that people of all ages have meaningful access.

Several responses stated that the data collection for the monitoring of the SDGs should build upon the system established within the MDG framework, particularly the work of the

Interagency Expert Group (IAEG) on MDG Indicators and the statistical systems of other organizations such as the World Bank, OECD, and EUROSTAT for the EU countries.

The need to strengthen the capacities of National Statistical Offices (NSOs) to collect, analyse and disseminate data was underlined. Respective measures should improve the reliability of existing data and ensure that more data are collected, capitalising on new technologies and software. In this respect, it was noted that mechanisms and strategic plans to strengthen statistical capacities exist already, such as OECD Paris 21, the Busan Action Plan for Statistics as well as the National Strategies for the Development of Statistics (NSDS). They should be the starting point for further action.

A response from an NGO referred to ‘social accountability’, creating real-time feedback loops between citizens and their governments and involving various local actors including service providers, local governments, community members, traditional and faith leaders, and in some instances engaging members of parliament. Another response suggested exploring the use of novel sources of data such as public perceptions and big data, in cooperation with NSOs or at least keeping them informed.

Several responses highlighted that in addition to quantitative data, policy measures and good governance should be assessed through qualitative data based on stakeholder consultations.