

Follow-up and review for the Sustainable Development Goals and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific – a background note

Expert dialogue on effective follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in Asia and the Pacific

1-2 December 2016, United Nations Conference Centre, Bangkok.

Context

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development devotes 18 paragraphs on the importance of a systematic follow-up and review¹ of the implementation of the Agenda, its roles, objectives, and guiding principles. This extensive elaboration of follow-up and review is exceptional considering the absence of such framework in the MDGs.

Effective follow-up and review is considered critical for effective implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. Experience from the first year of review however suggests that more effort is needed to foster a common understanding of what follow-up and review for the 2030 Agenda means and how to operationalize it.

Initial guidance provided by the United Nations secretariat² provides a useful foundation for further dialogue on how to ensure that follow-up and review efforts strengthen implementation, not just add additional reporting requirements, and to consistent adherence to the principles of follow-up and review as stipulated in the Agenda—both in terms of how it is carried out (country-driven, inclusive, participatory, transparent, gender-sensitive, respects human rights) and in terms of its focus (the poorest, most vulnerable and those furthest behind).

Regional support to follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda is one of the agreed functions of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development (APFSD), an inter-governmental mechanism convened by ESCAP on an annual basis. In 2016, ESCAP member States agreed that “detailed implementation arrangements will be decided after agreement in the General Assembly and will be further discussed.”³ The General Assembly resolution on follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the global level (70/299) was adopted in July 2016, and will support further discussion and decision-making at the regional level.

¹ Originally referred to in the early stages of negotiation on the post-2015 development agenda as “monitoring and accountability”.

² See A/70/684 - Critical milestones towards coherent, efficient and inclusive follow-up and review at the global level.

³ Report of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development at its third session, paragraph 15 (iii). Available at https://www.unescap.org/sites/default/files/pre-ods/APFSD_2016_Report_English.pdf.

The expert dialogue on *Effective follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda in Asia and the Pacific* therefore aims to engage diverse stakeholders in formulating recommendations for regional follow-up and review to support national and global implementation and developing guidance for strengthening follow-up and review at all levels.

Architecture

The 2030 Agenda provides for a three-tiered follow-up and review architecture at the national, regional, and global levels: (1) at the national level, Member States are encouraged to conduct regular and inclusive reviews of progress (para 79); (2) Follow-up and review at regional and sub-regional levels⁴ is also recognized to provide useful opportunities for peer learning (para 80); and (3) the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), under the auspices of the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council, will have a central role in overseeing a network of follow-up and review at the global level (para 82).

The annual sessions of the HLPF will focus its attention on pre-determined themes every year. They will also focus on a pre-determined cluster of SDGs, with a view to completing a review of all 17 SDGs every four years. SDG 17 on the means of implementation will be reviewed every year at the HLPF. The Voluntary National Reviews (VNRs) are the main instruments for national reporting at the HLPF. The first batch of such reports was presented at the HLPF meeting in July 2016. It is envisaged that regional and sub-regional level follow-up and review should draw on national-level reviews and contribute to follow-up and review at the global level, including at the HLPF.

Functions

Follow-up and review is both a management process as well as an accountability exercise. It ensures that implementation efforts are effective – that they are well founded, that strategies are appropriate and tackle the right issues, that the right institutions and stakeholders are involved and take action, and that appropriate resources are provided for this effort.

For practical purposes, follow-up and review can be operationalized as a continuum of three closely inter-connected activities: monitoring, review, and follow-up. While monitoring provides the evidence, review provides the assessment and “diagnosis” of progress, and follow-up ensures that action is taken in response.

(1) Monitoring includes defining the indicator framework, methodologies and benchmarks; identifying sources of data; putting in place institutional arrangements for data collection, and presenting these data in a format understandable by policymakers and other stakeholders. Monitoring produces usable and accessible information to feed into the review process.

⁴ Pacific Island countries have initiated the development of an integrated roadmap for regional reporting and implementation of the SDGs, SAMOA Pathway, and the Framework for Pacific Regionalism including an indicator framework. Approval is scheduled for September 2017.

At the global level, the Inter-Agency and Expert Group on Sustainable Development Goals (IAEG-SDGs) is vested with the responsibility of defining the framework of indicators and data. Many countries in the region have already started identifying priority indicators, sources of data and gaps, and capacity building gaps in data collection and analysis.

At the regional level, ESCAP has aligned its annual Statistical Yearbook and associated data products, including a regional database of indicators to support progress tracking for the 17 SDGs and their targets, including those related to the means of implementation. Aside from the global SDG indicators, the regional database contains additional indicators on economic, social and environmental development in Asia and the Pacific. ESCAP also plans to prepare an annual regional SDG progress report, providing a snapshot of the major achievements and gaps in achieving the SDGs and targets at the regional and sub-regional levels. In addition, ESCAP's knowledge partnership with ADB and UNDP will produce annual thematic reports for the Asia-Pacific that aligns with the annual theme of the HLPF. The ASEAN and Pacific Islands Forum are also planning how to align the monitoring of their visions and strategies with the monitoring of the 2030 Agenda.

The effectiveness of the monitoring process depends on a number of issues and raises relevant questions. To what extent does the monitoring framework, including indicator set, adequately capture the policy and programme priorities to achieve the SDGs, including outcomes, processes as well as inputs? Who were involved in developing and deciding on the indicator framework? Are the right stakeholders involved in assessing progress? In the context of assessing progress, are we reaching those who are most in danger of being left behind? To what extent is there sufficient data, both in terms of availability and quality? To what extent is the plan for strengthen data and statistics funded and supported by key stakeholders? Can technological innovations in monitoring be deployed to improve the process? What institutional innovations (for example engaging municipal governments) can support data collection efforts? Are the results of the monitoring effort being presented in a way that allows for sufficient review and dialogue? How can regional and global cooperation support national monitoring efforts?

ESCAP's assessment shows that of the 230 indicators in the global SDG monitoring framework, some data is available for slightly fewer than 100 indicators. But due to limited country coverage and limited availability of data over time, regional trend can be estimated for only 60 of the indicators. This means that monitoring at the regional level will be quite limited. Member states have underlined the need to avoid the creation of new reporting responsibilities, in the context of the Asia-Pacific Forum on Sustainable Development.⁵ The 2030 Agenda however provides for the development of regional and subregional indicators. The Pacific island states have taken the initiative to develop subregional indicators for the Sustainable Development Goals.

(2) Review is a process in which the stakeholders are engaged to consider the findings of the monitoring effort and to discuss questions such as (a) does the picture of progress presented represent reality? (c) What are the underlying reasons for the picture of progress presented; (d) What are some of the most urgent needs and opportunities for boosting progress or taking remedial action? (e) What are the emerging issues?

⁵ See the report of the APFSD at its third session.

The review process is often inadequately addressed, but is critical to ensuring that the findings of monitoring are correctly interpreted; that the underlying forces and drivers of the trends are understood; and that stakeholders can contribute to a fuller understanding of the results of the monitoring effort, and their implications. The review process provides inputs to follow-up process as a precursor for government and stakeholder action, such as with respect to identifying adjustments and/or corrections in implementation and resource allocation strategies, as well as mobilization of the means of implementation.

The effectiveness of the review process depends on a number of issues and raises relevant questions. What is the responsibility of governments for review – which national institution(s) should lead review and endorse the results of the monitoring effort, and on what basis? Who should be involved? How can the independence and integrity of the review effort be assured? Can the requirement for review be legislated – and should it be? Which stakeholders should be involved in review, and how should the results of review be presented? How often should review take place? How can regional and global cooperation support national review efforts? – and several others.

While explicit arrangements for follow-up and review were absent in the Millennium Development Goal framework, there are many examples of global follow-up in other policy arenas, such as the UN Human Rights Council Universal Periodic Review, Development Assistance Committee of the OECD Peer Review; WTO-Trade Policy and Review Mechanism; and the African Peer Review Mechanism. The link between these global review processes and national, regional and global follow-up action varies with the mechanism involved, and could benefit from further examination, so that good practices can be adopted in the SDG-related processes.

(3) Follow-up ensures that there is a response to the recommendations of the monitoring and review processes, and is at the heart of effective follow-up and review. It provides for action to accelerate progress. This component includes formulation of response to the findings of the monitoring and review process, including allocation of resources and identification of investment needs, adjustments in implementation plans, or change in the course of implementation. Follow-up may involve defining new indicators that should be tracked through monitoring efforts.

In Japan, for example, the law requires the national government to submit an annual report on the State of Environment to the parliament and the policies and measures that it will implement during the following year to address the findings of the Report.⁶ This is an example of an institutionalized mechanism for follow-up - responding to the findings of preceding monitoring and review.

The effectiveness of the follow-up and review depends on a number of issues and raises relevant questions.. How should the results of the review effort be communicated for follow-up action? Which national institutions should be responsible for follow-up? How should the response to the monitoring and review effort be documented? Is it feasible to mainstream follow-up on the SDGs in national development processes? Who should be involved in defining follow-up action

⁶ UNEP (2013, unpublished report). “A regional overview of environmental monitoring and reporting (M&R) in Asia Pacific.”

– what are the benefits of engaging stakeholders, and is it possible to engage too widely? Should accountability for follow-up be legislated? How can regional and global cooperation support national follow-up?

Many countries have existing institutional arrangements for monitoring the implementation of their development plans which provide an important opportunity for mainstreaming the implementation of the 2030 Agenda at the national level. These experiences constitute a good foundation for follow-up and review but may need to be strengthened in terms of their linkages to better account for the comprehensive and multi-disciplinary nature of the Sustainable Development Goals and the means of implementation.

The value-added of regional follow-up and review lies in the possibility to support peer learning – where governments collectively learn from each other’s experiences and also work together to collectively define responses that can address challenges that can benefit from regional action. Regional and sub-regional follow and review should support national follow-up and review, as well as contribute to global follow-up and review.

Inclusion and stakeholder engagement is a key principle of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and is required at all stages of follow-up and review. Consistent policy and institutional arrangements for stakeholder engagement are therefore critical, and the capacity of governments and all institutions involved in follow-up and review to engage stakeholders should be strengthened.

Finally, follow-up and review on SDG 17 poses particular challenges as they provide for “public goods” which form the core of the implementation effort, but which involve a wide range of stakeholders at the global, regional and national levels. In a context where the effectiveness of the 2030 Agenda will rely on a strengthened delivery of public goods, it is important that monitoring, review and follow-up processes retain the possibility for wider dialogue on issues of social contract, governance, inclusion and access to information among other issues.