



Implementing the SDGs during the first 1000 days

Briefing note on the Asia Regional Dialogue

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Key messages

- Countries must identify how to implement the SDG agenda coherently, bringing together all sectors and multiple political levels, with buy-in from finance ministries.
- Governments will need to mobilise resources by widening their tax base and through innovative financing mechanisms. The international community must go beyond traditional development assistance, cooperating with developing countries to enable them to raise resources.
- Global and regional co-operation are important, in particular for technology transfer and South-South co-operation. Their institutional architecture must be negotiated on fair terms to meet the needs of developing countries.
- The SDG agenda should leave no one behind, which requires disaggregated data, evidence-based policy-making and accountability. Universal policies, which could include affirmative action, may have a greater chance of reaching excluded groups than targeted policies.
- The focus on ‘review and follow-up’ – instead of ‘monitoring and accountability’ – risks letting governments off the hook. National and regional efforts, including those of civil society, can and should hold government accountable.



This briefing note summarizes the main outcomes and findings from an event held in Sri Lanka (May 2016), as part of the series ‘Starting Strong: the first 1000 days of the SDGs’. The aim of the event was to gather participants from across Asia and the Pacific – representing government, civil society, academia and the private sector – to identify key actions toward addressing the unfinished business of the MDGs and how to reach those who are furthest behind in relation to the new SDGs. The series is a collaborative partnership to initiate a wider conversation around priority actions for the first three years of the SDGs – just over 1000 days – with relevant stakeholders with a regional focus.

Introduction

This briefing note is a summary of the main outcomes of the Asia regional dialogue on achieving the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), held in Marawila, Sri Lanka, 18-19 May 2016, with an emphasis on early action for the first 1000 days. A group of around 60 actors from across Asia (including representatives from regional bodies, national and sub-national governments, civil society, and research institutions) contributed to the discussions on integrated approaches to SDG implementation, resource mobilisation, global and regional cooperation, inclusion, and reviewing the SDGs.

Focusing on the first 1000 days emphasises the important role that early actions could play in building the foundations of SDG implementation and influencing action beyond the first three years. By bringing together actors from across Asia, the dialogue intended to review the experiences of countries in the region in implementing an integrated agenda. This briefing note highlights five critical next steps for consideration in the SDG agenda in the first 1000 days in Asia. It will be presented at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York in July 2016 to inform the higher-level discussions on achieving the SDGs.

Next steps: early actions to achieve the SDGs

1. Countries must identify how to coherently implement the SDG agenda, bringing together all sectors and multiple political levels, with buy-in from finance ministries.

The SDG agenda is an integrated agenda: it recognises that the economy, society and environment cannot operate in isolation. It was noted that the concept of sustainable development, previously positioned as an environmental agenda, had failed to achieve its ambition; the SDGs have now aligned environmental sustainability with the socio-economic agenda. This challenges countries to act differently, but ways of implementing an integrated agenda remain elusive.

Integration requires further research, collaboration and a willingness to accept innovative approaches. Some participants believed governments must prioritise some areas. Others argued that this could lead to the favouring of projects with high political visibility over other goals, especially the environmental ones. The simulation exercises where participants advocated for and negotiated between different priorities highlighted the need for more comprehensive work to elaborate and illustrate inter-connections, synergies and trade-offs.

Integration is required not only across the three pillars of the SDGs but also with national policies. The goals were adopted at the global level, but they need to be owned and implemented by countries. This is already happening. For instance, Bangladesh's current five-year plan incorporates 14 of the 17 goals, making the SDGs part of the national policy priorities. Participants identified the critical need for finance

ministries' ownership of the agenda; without this, there is the risk that policies may be repackaged without substantial changes and budget allocations.

Participants also argued that systems need to be established to facilitate inter-departmental coordination. Nodal agencies such as the Planning Commission or Ministry will play a key facilitative role. For instance, Sri Lanka has created a Ministry of Sustainable Development and Wildlife to set the framework and coordinate implementation.

Equally, state or provincial governments are responsible for much of SDG implementation. This makes vertical coordination between tiers of government important, and central governments should ensure there is buy-in, capacity and accountability among local governments. Michael Provideo, from the National Economic Development Authority (NEDA) in the Philippines, stated that the Philippines plans to incorporate the SDGs in planning and budgeting processes, with a focus in the short term on policy coherence between the national and local governments. Rehana Memon, from the Government of Sindh, pointed out that Pakistan has begun the process of integrating the SDGs with stakeholders at the national and district level.

In terms of timing, participants highlighted the benefits of coordinating SDG implementation with the political cycle, which is typically five years. Monirul Islam, from the SDG desk in the Bangladesh Planning Commission, mentioned that the SDGs are timed with Bangladesh's five-year plans, which has enabled alignment. Shrikant Baldi from the Government of Himachal Pradesh argued that it is key that the SDGs are incorporated and monitored annually to follow governments' planning and funding cycles.

2. Governments will need to mobilise resources by widening their tax base and through innovative financing mechanisms. The international community must go beyond traditional development assistance, cooperating with developing countries to enable them to raise resources.

The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) suffered from a lack of international finance, with MDG 8 to develop a global partnership for development described as the 'fifth leg of the donkey'. Participants focused on how countries could generate domestic resources, as developing countries largely funded the MDGs themselves. Saman Kelegama, from the Institute of Policy Studies, identified raising tax revenue as a key challenge. Asian countries need to widen their tax base and increase the contribution of direct taxes; for instance, in Sri Lanka less than 5% of people pay income tax. Participants suggested that governments should rationalise tax exemptions, and introduce harsher penalties for tax evasion. Tax reform by sub-national governments is also needed, including the introduction of progressive taxes, for instance on property. Finally, countries need to instil greater confidence among citizens and business about the value of paying taxes, to build up a 'tax culture'.

Beyond tax revenue, countries need to find innovative sources of funding. It was proposed that, in the short term, acceleration frameworks working with earmarked funds could prove useful (for example, an education tax on income in India helping to finance education programmes). Governments could use diaspora bonds (such as in Georgia) or infrastructure bonds, but must develop regulations to make them more transparent. Similarly, public-private partnerships (PPPs) have the scope to enable investments, but here too legal and regulatory structures are needed so that the government absorbs all the risk while the private sector benefits.

The global system must enable developing countries to raise resources. For example, remittances have played a key role in the Asian growth, yet transaction costs associated with remittances remain high. Participants argued it was essential these costs be reduced to 3%, in line with the Addis Action Plan. Developed countries also have a responsibility to help developing countries curb illicit financial flows, a challenge especially for India and China; however, discussions around exchange of tax information and curbing illicit financial flows stalled at the Financing for Development conference in Addis Ababa. In the meantime, the UN Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific's (ESCAP) new regional tax platform could play an important role.

The development-finance landscape has evolved, although official development assistance has been stagnant, falling short of commitments of most developed countries. Regional leadership from China and the emergence of the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank and the New Development Bank suggests that emerging sources of funding and South-South transfers may be more important. These new institutions represent developing countries better, which could result in resource allocation based on the needs of countries rather than donors' priorities. Finally, it was proposed that these emerging mechanisms could help create a soft fund for South-South cooperation.

3. Global and regional cooperation are important, in particular for technology transfer and South-South cooperation. Their institutional architecture must be negotiated on fair terms to meet the needs of developing countries.

The importance of regional and international cooperation, both North-South and South-South, was a major theme. R.M.D.B. Meegasmulla, Secretary of the Ministry of Sustainable Development and Wildlife in Sri Lanka noted: 'The SDGs are a global effort and no individual nation will deliver them alone.' The lack of a regional dimension was identified as a missing link in the implementation of the MDGs. Participants highlighted the need to bring regional processes together through the South Asian Association for Regional Cooperation (SAARC), the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN) and ESCAP to benefit countries in the region.

Participants felt that the SDGs should be aligned with other international discussions, such as those on technology transfer, climate funds, financing for development, and trade, where Asian developing countries contended the position of Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries. It was agreed that advocacy on these issues should be continued.

Technology is a major issue. Elenita Dano, from Action Group On Erosion, Technology and Concentration, argued that the wide inequalities in access to technology must be addressed and viewed as an issue of technology justice. Interventions should consider their future impacts, as past efforts have sometimes intensified challenges (for example the Green Revolution).

Another challenge in access is linked to cost: North-South transfers often involve technology where intellectual property rights impose unfair terms on developing countries. Participants remarked that the UN, World Trade Organization (WTO) and other fora have failed to resolve these issues. Some innovative solutions were suggested; for instance, a country could buy a technology and make it open access within its territory. The principles that govern transfers between countries should be institutionalised to address the rights of investors and social obligations. Green climate funds were identified as a priority area, with a call for global efforts to clarify what counts as environmentally sound technology, more information so developing countries can access funds, and better balance towards adaptation.

While global discussions on technology transfer focus on North-South transfers, there are significant South-South transfers (for example, Indian and Chinese companies have democratised solar technology). In this regard, training for research and development in developing countries is key. Furthermore, South-South cooperation is not only about capital; it should be based on the idea of solidarity and sharing experiences, people, and, resources. It was mentioned that funding is rarely the sole cause of failure – resource constraints always exist, and governments find ways to overcome them and implement projects. For instance, in Himachal Pradesh community-led total sanitation helped make the state free of open-defecation. Participants noted that an elaboration of the 'means of implementation' was missing from the SDGs, and called for further global and regional direction.

4. The SDG agenda should leave no one behind, which requires disaggregated data, evidence-based policy-making and accountability. Universal policies, which could include affirmative action, may have a greater chance of reaching excluded groups than targeted policies.

Social identities are a major cause of some groups being 'left behind' and countries need to understand why social exclusion persists. For example, Dalits in India and Nepal have historically been marginalised and continue to face structural exclusion. The argument that economic growth

and poverty reduction will address inequity has not held. However, another view asserted that marginalisation is dynamic, making it important to look at economic as well as social categories. Vagisha Gunasekera, from the Centre for Policy Analysis, suggested using labour as a frame to understand how marginalisation is class-based, gendered and racialised, and said that policy must account for the power dynamics that create these vulnerabilities.

Yet, policies and budget allocations are often exclusion-blind. There was little support among participants for targeted policies, which were perceived to be inadequate to 'leave no one behind'. Instead, participants supported universal policies such as universal health coverage. It was argued however that universal policies could include affirmative action and special measures to reach disadvantaged groups (for example India's National Rural Health Mission allocated greater resources to districts with higher child mortality). There was a call for greater global dialogue on the means of implementation for the 'leave no one behind' agenda.

Answering the call to leave no one behind requires disaggregated data to understand the multiple disadvantages faced by certain groups. For instance, women are not a homogenous group, and even among the sub-group of tribal or Dalit women, different intersectionalities exist. There are considerable gaps in data; for instance, Sangh Mitra Acharya, from the Institute for Dalit Studies, noted that there is no data beyond micro-studies for some scheduled tribes in India. Participants stressed the need to advocate for an improvement in administrative data and its use in informing policy. They also highlighted the importance of capacity at the sub-regional level. In this regard, dialogue through SAARC, ASEAN and UNESCAP can help build the capacity of national statistical offices.

Shekhar Shah, from the National Council of Applied Economic Research in India, noted: 'The SDGs were formulated with a remarkable process of inclusion and engagement, but this does not imply that implementation automatically be inclusive too.' It is important then that civil society organisations (CSOs) participate in implementation of the SDGs, with concerted efforts to ensure their inclusion. Indonesia has led by example with commitment from the government to establish partnerships with civil society. Similarly, the government of Sri Lanka has set up a Stakeholder Forum that will hold civil society consultations. Such initiatives and their lessons should inform SDG implementation in other countries in the region.

5. The focus on 'review and follow-up' – instead of 'monitoring and accountability' – risks letting governments off the hook. National and regional efforts, including those of civil society, can and should hold government accountable.

Globally, the SDGs include 'review and follow-up' instead of 'monitoring and accountability'. Participants noted that most of their governments didn't want global or regional accountability beyond voluntary reviews. Zhang Chun, from the Shanghai Institute for International Studies, advocated for a comprehensive review from global to regional to cross-regional levels, and identified the need to strengthen the weak cross-regional processes. As the SDG review architecture will be negotiated at the HLPF and subsequently the UN General Assembly, participants highlighted the need for comprehensive and robust review systems. However, they felt that regional mechanisms had the potential to be more transformative than global ones, in terms of information-sharing, co-ordination, pressure groups, accountability tools, and tracking commitments, notwithstanding that regional organisations are presently quite weak.

While the SDGs have excluded an accountability framework, Lee Ai Schuen, from International Women's Rights Action Watch Asia Pacific, argued that global treaty bodies – to which countries are legally bound – could be used to enhance the 'leave no one behind' dimension of the SDGs. For instance, future reviews of the Convention on the Elimination of all forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW) will discuss SDG actions on gender. It was proposed that similar mechanisms could be established for other treaty bodies such as the Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights. In this regard, the Human Rights Commissions can play a key role in ensuring no one is left behind.

Nationally, political pressures hold government to account, but must be supplemented with mechanisms to monitor progress and provision for politically marginalised groups. Both national and sub-national governments must be held to account, and lines of accountability for each SDG area must be clear: 'If it is the responsibility of all, it is responsibility of none.'

Finally, some participants advocated for a CSO-led regional and national 'watch platform', in particular because there were concerns that civil society is being squeezed out of the global monitoring process, which may weaken its engagement with the SDGs. The dialogue pointed out that the voices of those being left behind should be incorporated in tracking progress.

