



EQUITY, SOCIAL JUSTICE AND THE RULE OF LAW ACROSS THE SDGs From the "what" to the "how": policy choices; measuring impact; tracking progress.

Tuesday, July 7, 2015, 1:15 p.m. - 2:30 p.m.
UN Headquarters, Conference Room 12
New York

The international community's stated ambition in developing a new post-MDGs, post-2015 Development Agenda centered on a comprehensive set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is that the new Agenda should be "universal" in scope and truly "transformational" in its impact on society and on the daily lives of people.

The current inter-governmental negotiations to frame the new Agenda are being characterized by an unprecedented degree of engagement by both governments and civil society across North and South. They have also been remarkable in maintaining a focus on the long-standing objective of poverty eradication and in their determination to be true to the deeper understanding that emerged from the Rio +20 Conference of what makes for the "sustainability" of development. The call for a purposeful integration of economic, social and environmental policies at the core of this understanding acknowledges the imperative of economic growth, but brings to the fore, along with the protection of the planet, objectives of equity and social inclusion - the intent of "leaving no one behind" - as conditions to sustain growth and progress.

Hence, the inclusion in the new Agenda that will be put to the September Summit for adoption of a Goal "to reduce inequality within and among countries", along with a Goal to "promote peaceful and inclusive societies, provide access to justice for all, and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels". By highlighting major trends and current realities that must be affected, and significantly broadening the vision the policies that must be put in place and implemented to bring about and sustain development in the years ahead, these Goals fill important lacunae now apparent in the MDGs.

Also very significant in this perspective is the introduction among the SDGs of Goals and Targets that address key issues not covered in depth by the MDGs such as social protection for all, the promotion of "wellbeing", the empowerment of women and girls, and decent work for all, and highlight commitments to combat discrimination, strengthen support for the poorest and the most vulnerable and safeguard their rights, including in relation to access to resources and social services. Equally important and highly relevant to advancing the cause of "sustainability" is the keen attention being given in the current negotiations to "Means of Implementation" within and across Goals.

OBJECTIVE

Now that a consensus on the "what" - the coverage of the Goals, their interrelations and the means to be deployed in support of their implementation - is within reach, it is time to turn the focus of attention to the "how" - in terms of policy content and policy choices in setting priorities for action and investments, and in relation to the approaches that should guide national and global assessments of impact and progress.

The dialogue will explore policy and measurement issues that the strong emphasis on "equity", which characterizes the new Agenda, poses for governments and the international community. In so doing it will seek to shed light on crosscutting elements of the new development framework that may appear intangible but must be acted on to ensure that the Agenda becomes a transformative force that makes a real difference on the daily lives of people. In this perspective, the discussion will address the "enabling tools" - policies, laws, institutions, partnerships and synergies among them - that can best serve to advance equity and the sustainability of development, and will focus on the "substantive" justice outcomes that the rule of law should be geared to promote.



ISSUES

"Equity" objectives are not only at the core of a significant number of specific Goals and Targets. They are also a strong thread running across the whole of the SDG framework. They are rooted in the basic principle powerfully captured in the UN Charter that all people are of equal worth and endowed with inalienable rights, and in the notion expounded by Amartya Sen, that equal consideration for all demands unequal consideration in favor of the disadvantaged.

Acting on the SDGs in this perspective will require a major effort at innovation at all levels in relation to both policies and instruments to carry them out. It also invokes the need to give a fresh look to long-standing policy questions, such as who benefits from growth, and the balance between state and the market. Finally, it calls into question how we measure progress, going beyond averages: an insight into how people fare at the bottom 40% of the population gives a very different perspective than merely an overview of per capita income.

A reflection on how to bring about development that is sustained because it is people-centered and thus equitable and inclusive cannot prescind from the question of how to deploy and administer the law as an enabler of greater social justice – as a key instrument for promoting equity and protecting citizens and resources. This approach to the rule of law encompasses issues of due process and access to justice, and of the reform and strengthening of relevant institutions, that are specifically addressed in one of the SDGs – Goal 16. But it also speaks more broadly to “outcomes”: to the contribution of the law to further “substantive” justice and advance the equity objectives that run throughout the Agenda. Furthermore it raises a host of policy and methodological issues on how best to assess and sustain progress.

Achieving greater equity as an integral part of the drive to advance and sustain development is perhaps the aim of the new Agenda that best captures its claim of universal applicability and relevance: no society, no country, irrespective of its level of economic development, can claim to have succeeded in ensuring that all have been given equal opportunity to contribute to progress and to benefit from it. The same is true of the effort to gear laws and their administration to fully achieve this fundamental objective.

Universal and equal access to justice and to basic social services is in fact also a basic indicator of the other major aspiration of the new Agenda to have a truly “transformational” impact on society and the daily lives of people.

Universality is ultimately about shared responsibility and commitment to outcomes that serve to advance the “global merit goods” inherent in the SDGs. Solidarity towards a common purpose, within and across societies, is an intangible. But the extent to which it is being achieved will inevitably affect the “quality” and pace of advances in realizing the new Agenda. Ways will therefore have to be found to bring it into the assessment of what makes for progress in achieving the SDGs.

The Roundtable will be organized so as to facilitate an interactive exchange with panelists on a number of questions relevant to the debate that will take place at the July session of the HLPF on: "Strengthening integration, implementation and review – the HLPF after 2015".

Among them:

- *What are the implications of the equity objectives that run through the SDGs framework for the policy choices before governments and the international community in ensuring that the Post-2015 Agenda has the intended “transformational” impact on people and society? How shall we approach in this perspective the measurement of impact and the tracking of progress?*
- *How do we maximize the contribution of the law to advancing these equity objectives? How do we assess the contribution of the rule of law to social justice across Goals, and its impact on the over all sustainability of development?*
- *What are the outcome-oriented “themes” that are most relevant to assessing progress towards the “transformational” ambition of the Post-2015 Development Agenda and its “universality” objectives? How can we best structure the engagement of UN agencies and the whole international system in such thematic reviews?*