

Making Agreements Work: Lessons for the Post-2015 Agenda Debate

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This week sees a new stage in discussions of what international framework should replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after they come due in 2015. The High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda – chaired by the heads of government of Indonesia, Liberia and the United Kingdom – is meeting for the first time in the margins of the General Assembly. The Panel's secretariat is taking shape. The debate on the post-2015 agenda, which had hardly begun a year ago, is now lively.

Yet there is a risk that the process for defining the post-2015 agenda will become bogged down in procedural and political issues unless it is skillfully handled by governments and UN officials as well as other key stakeholders. In parallel to the High-Level Panel, the General Assembly is setting up an inter-governmental working group to discuss Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) further to this year's Rio +20 conference. While there is a growing consensus that the aim is one set of global goals, it's not clear how this will be achieved. The High-Level Panel (due to report by mid-2013) and the SDG working group will not necessarily mesh together well.

More broadly, there is a risk that these parallel processes will reach technical conclusions about the post-2015 agenda that do not address much broader political questions about development aid. The financial crisis and shifts in economic power away from traditional Western aid donors have raised concerns about the sustainability and relevance of many standard aid practices. International development budgets in the West are under pressure. New economic powers are still working out their potential roles as donors. A post-2015 agenda has to appeal to a broad and evolving set of audiences.

In this context, New York University's Center on International Cooperation (CIC) studied a series of international agreements across three other policy areas – environmental policy, financial regulation and human rights – to identify how successful agreements are designed, negotiated and implemented. The resulting report set out a series of factors that affect the development of international agreements:



- **Clarity over the breadth and depth of an agreement:** negotiators need to have a shared vision over how broad an agreement should be (i.e. how many issue areas it will cover) and how deep it will be (i.e. how detailed and/or binding the commitments involved will be). In some fields, such as human rights, broad but shallow agreements predominate. However, CIC's research suggests that agreements that are narrow but deep – such as the Montreal Protocol on ozone-depleting CFCs – are likeliest to have the greatest long-term impact.
- **Effective format, sequencing and coordination of negotiations:** international agreements can be forged in exclusive inter-governmental clubs (the role the G20 has recently played in financial regulation) or inclusive forums (such as the inter-governmental negotiations on climate change). Small groups can be more efficient but larger ones have more legitimacy. In many cases – as now over the post-2015 agenda – it is best to link together a mix of small-group and large-group discussions. But this requires deft sequencing to ensure that the different elements of negotiations lock together well, and coordination to ensure that the substance of the different discussions converge on a clear set of goals rather than diverge.
- **Political appeal to multiple constituencies:** effective agreements need to motivate at least three constituencies: (i) governments, including domestic bureaucracies rather than just diplomatic negotiators; (ii) international organizations; and (iii) civil society and the private sector. The last group is especially diverse: “civil society” cannot be reduced to a coterie of international NGOs but includes many domestic actors in different countries and cultures.
- **A focus on implementation:** ultimately, successful agreements need to involve (implicitly or explicitly) a clear understanding of how to move from paper commitments to political action. This is particularly hard in cases, such as financial regulation or human rights law, where domestic legislatures, judiciaries and bureaucracies have to deliver on international deals. A realistic assessment of a set of goals' achievability is essential: a broad or deep agreement that has no chance of implementation is less useful than a simpler deal that can be fulfilled.

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CIC's report argues that officials and advocates focusing on the post-2015 agenda should keep these factors in mind as discussions of an agreement advance. In recent years, as in the run-up to the Copenhagen summit on climate change (and even this year's Rio+20 summit) multilateral negotiations have faltered badly

because some of these factors have been paid insufficient attention or entirely overlooked.

While it is still too early to make detailed judgments of progress on the post-2015 agenda relative to these factors, it is possible to make some early observations about the current state-of-play and risks:

- There is still no deep consensus on the **breadth and depth** of any post-2015 agenda, and this may get worse: activists are still undecided over whether to aim for a narrow but deep agreement (potentially aiming to eradicate absolute poverty) or a broader set of goals encompassing issues excluded from the MDGs, such as security. The parallel discussions on SDGs also have the potential to stretch the parameters of negotiations, creating confusion.
- The establishment of the High-Level Panel and preparations of the SDG working group have clarified the initial **format** for discussions – although details of the SDG groups are still being finalized. There is also a potentially effective **sequencing** arrangement, by which the High-Level Panel will set an overarching agenda in 2013 that the SDG working groups can build on, before handing off final negotiations to the General Assembly in 2014 and 2015. But this arrangement will obviously be vulnerable to complications in practice, and it will require intensive coordination work by UN officials and concerned governments to keep it on track.
- There has been progress on broadening the **political appeal** of upcoming discussions. It is important that Indonesia and Liberia have prominent roles in the High-Level Panel – and equally important that they play a proactive part in shaping its work. Public awareness campaigns are underway to raise knowledge of the issue. However, it is crucial that rising economies and aid recipients give their views on the post-2015 framework early and are fully involved in negotiations, and political champions emerge to promote the new agenda.
- There are major questions to be resolved over the **implementation** of whatever is agreed. The implementation of the MDGs took time and was often haphazard. It remains incomplete. The growing complexity of the international development field means that it will be even harder to define concrete implementation plans for the post-2015 agenda. Addressing this problem should be a priority for those focused on the MDGs and SDGs.

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