

The OWG-11 ‘focus areas’ paper: an IRF2015 review

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Introduction

The Independent Research Forum (IRF2015) has developed a framework that is intended to be a practical tool for use in designing and selecting sustainable development goals and targets for the post-2015 development agenda. The framework builds on discussions and insights from a series of three informal member state retreats organised and facilitated by IRF2015,¹ and is structured around the three core concepts of a sustainable development agenda that is *transformative* in nature and *universal* in scope and takes an *integrated* approach to poverty eradication and sustainable development. These guiding principles are consistent with those of the Rio+20 Outcome Document, *The Future We Want*, other key guidance to the Open Working Group (OWG) and the progress report of the OWG.

To test its utility, IRF2015 members applied the framework to the latest version of the OWG Co-Chairs' 'focus areas' paper: the working document for the 11th session of the OWG (5–9 May 2014)². In this paper, we first present overarching comments on the 'focus areas' paper as a whole. We then list a set of guiding questions used to help assess the goals and targets against the three core concepts of transformative, universal and integrated, together with SMART³ criteria for assessing targets. We provide a simple matrix that can be used to apply these questions to draft goals and targets. We then apply the guiding questions and criteria to three focus areas – sustainable agriculture, food security and nutrition; gender equality and women's empowerment; and economic growth, employment and infrastructure – to illustrate their use.

¹ Held between September 2013 and April 2014: see www.irf2015.org.

² <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/3686Workingdoc.pdf>

³ i.e. the extent to which they are Specific, Measurable, Achievable, Relevant and Time-bound: see p. 6

General comments on the OWG-11 ‘focus areas’ paper

IRF2015’s review of the OWG-11 ‘focus areas’ paper revealed an ambitious vision that largely reflects the spirit of *leaving no one behind*. The Co-Chairs have incorporated inputs from OWG members so that many of the necessary elements are present. Our review identified opportunities to build on this solid foundation as the OWG continues its work:

- **The current package of goals and targets does not yet amount to a transformative agenda**
 - An ambitious set of outcomes is not supported by consistent targeting of the systemic drivers of and barriers to poverty eradication and sustainable development;
 - Those key drivers that are included risk being diluted by the large number of targets;
 - Levers of change requiring more attention include redressing power imbalances between the private sector, civil society and the State; strengthening the resilience of households, ecosystems and the global economic and financial system; and using improved measures of growth and prosperity that incorporate environmental degradation and inequalities.
- **Interlinkages have not been systematically addressed**
 - The coherence and effectiveness of the goal framework needs to be enhanced through addressing cross-sectoral, cross-thematic and urban-rural linkages and the inter-relationships between the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development more fully;
 - Identification and categorisation of dependencies between targets could help streamline the framework and enable potential synergies to be promoted and trade-offs to be tackled head-on in both refinement of the targets and their implementation;
 - Coordination at and across different levels (from local to global) and among different actors will also need further consideration in the means of implementation.
- **The differentiated responsibilities within a framework of collective action are not sufficiently explicit**
 - Responsibility for implementation of the MDGs, as an articulation of the donor-recipient development paradigm, was relatively clear; in moving towards a more universal agenda, it cannot be assumed that roles and responsibilities can be left implicit in the SDG goal framework;
 - The targets rarely speak directly to actions by local government and non-state actors, whose involvement in the process is essential for the implementation of the SDGs;
 - The current goals and targets will need to more directly address the changes needed in national agendas and policies and in the strategies and conduct of civil society and market actors if they are to catalyse action towards the goal of every nation and individual rising and remaining out of (multi-dimensional) poverty.
- **Many of the targets, as currently drafted, are not sufficiently SMART**
 - The targets need further crafting, in particular to ensure they are sufficiently specific and measurable (across different scales) in diverse contexts;
 - Getting to zero will require sub-national data and innovative data collection methods, while making the most of current data collection: this will need to be considered more as the targets are refined;
 - Sustainable development requires fundamental behaviour change, and 2030 targets are milestones in some cases: yet the framework is silent about a post-2030 vision.
- **The above analysis suggests a need for the OWG to assess the overall framework for its transformative, integrated and universal nature before moving on to individual focus areas.**

Criteria and questions used to assess the goals and targets

IRF2015 assessed the draft ‘focus areas’ paper to determine to what extent it was transformative, universal and integrated and to what extent the proposed targets were SMART and identified means to improve against each of these criteria. These criteria embody much of the core guidance to the OWG derived from the Rio+20 Outcome Document, other inputs to the OWG and the views of OWG members as captured in the progress report of the OWG. OWG members have thought through and discussed these criteria and associated concepts in a series of retreats facilitated by IRF2015.⁴ Below are presented the various facets of each criterion and associated questions used to apply the criteria to the ‘focus areas’ paper.

Transformative

“The SDGs should contribute to transformative change, in support of a rights-based, equitable and inclusive approach to sustainability at global, regional, national and local levels” (Ban Ki-moon)

“Thus, the advancement and completion of the most off-track MDGs is the starting point, the sine qua non, of the SDGs. But the SDGs will need to be more comprehensive, balanced, ambitious and transformative, also addressing the challenges ahead.” (Progress report of the OWG)

Addressing systemic drivers/barriers

T1: Does the goal or target contribute to the removal of systemic barriers to and leverage of systemic drivers of sustainable development?

Embedding the following three cross-cutting concepts in the set of goals and targets is critical to achieving a transformative agenda for poverty eradication and sustainable development.

Equity

T2: Does the goal or target promote equity at all levels (from household to global), including through participatory, transparent and accountable governance frameworks and through prioritising opportunities and benefits for the most disadvantaged where trade-offs among different interests arise?

Resilience

T3: Does the goal or target contribute to building and mainstreaming economic, social and ecological resilience (including to the long-term risks emerging from climate change) at all levels, from household to global?

Ecosystem services

T4: Does the goal or target contribute to recognition of the value of ecosystem services for human wellbeing?

⁴ See www.irf2015.org for background papers for and summaries of these retreats.

Universal

“We also underscore that sustainable development goals should be ... global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities.” (The Future We Want)

Leave no one behind

U1: Does the goal or target promote the empowerment of every individual to rise and/or remain out of (multi-dimensional) poverty and above a social protection floor?

Policy coherence for sustainable development

U2: Does achievement of the goal or target in one country depend upon policies or actions in other countries? If so, are those dependencies addressed in the framework?

Collective action

U3: Does achievement of the goal or target require collective action among nations? If so, does the goal framework promote the required collective action, with specified responsibilities differentiated in accordance with national circumstances?

U4: Which aspects of the goal require contributions by *all* countries to be achieved? Would the goal be more effectively or efficiently achieved through collective action at international or regional level?

All countries and actors

U5: Is the goal relevant to all countries?

U6: Does the goal address the specific challenges facing particular groups of countries (e.g. African countries, LDCs, LLDC, SIDS, MICs and HICs)?

U7: Is the goal or target relevant and actionable across sectors, including across sub-national governments, civil society and the private sector and both urban and rural dwellers?

Integrated

“The goals should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages.” (The Future We Want)

Integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development

I1: Does the goal or target incorporate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, or does it need to be amended to integrate more of them?

I2: Does the goal or target give consideration to the different timescales over which social, economic and environmental processes occur and must be reconciled?

Interlinkages

I3: Does the goal or target take account of potential synergies and trade-offs with other goals and targets, including interactions across sectors and geographical or administrative scales, and promote coordination in decision-making and action?

SMART targets

Note these criteria and the below questions apply to targets rather than to goals in the context of the ‘focus areas’ paper. The *goals* will be aspirational (as stated in *The Future We Want*), whereas the *targets* should be ambitious yet achievable. The extent to which goals are aspirational and targets are ambitious is addressed under the transformative criterion.

Specific

- a. Do the targets indicate *who* is expected to do *what* and by *when*?
- b. Are targets quantitative, aiming for a specific value?
- c. Do quantitative targets take into account baselines and forecast trends, accounting for different national circumstances?

Measurable

Are proposed targets measurable:

- a. with transparent science-based methodologies (which may include reliable proxies to address data gaps);
- b. with scope for adaptation or aggregation to different scales, from local to global (as appropriate);
- c. with accurate baselines;⁵
- d. with disaggregation by demographic and socioeconomic groups such as gender, urban/rural, age and quintile;
- e. making use of advances in metrics and data collection technologies;
- f. with existing data collection capacities or with specified plans for enhancement of these capacities, particularly at the national level; and
- g. in a cost-effective manner (such that measurement costs do not outweigh benefits)?

Achievable

- a. Do the targets aim towards changes from business as usual without supposing unrealistic progress in the time allotted?

Relevant

- a. Do the targets have clear relationships to the goal(s) to which they contribute?
- b. Can measurements inform policy responses to improve progress towards the target?

Time-bound

- a. Do targets specify the year of attainment (preferably uniform across targets, and with a common baseline year)?
- b. Are medium-term (e.g. 2030) targets complemented by:
 - o milestones (which might often be best set nationally) at approximately five-year intervals to help achieve political accountability; and
 - o a longer-term vision beyond 2030 to encourage more strategic planning and enable long-term sustainability challenges, such as ecosystem degradation and population growth, to be taken into account?

⁵ Note that the lack of current data to form a baseline should not preclude inclusion of a target if a data collection strategy to establish a baseline in the near-term and go on to set national targets and track progress can be formulated and implemented.

A template to guide application of the criteria to the goals and targets

The below matrix is intended to facilitate systematic application of the review criteria. The cells can be used as placeholders for results from thinking through the guiding questions. The same questions should also be asked of the overall set of goals and targets, informed by the more detailed assessment of targets and focus areas. While some of the guiding questions lend themselves to yes/no answers, the aim is to help push the draft set of goals and targets further on each of the criteria. The filled-out matrix is therefore only an intermediate product. (For this reason these are not presented below among the results of the assessment of the three illustrative focus areas.) This is the process that IRF2015 members followed in developing the commentary on the current draft set of goals and targets reported in this document and one which we hope others will replicate to inform their own thinking.

		Proposed Targets				
		Target a:	Target b:	Target c:	Target d:	Target e:
Transformative	Addresses systemic drivers/barriers					
	Equity					
	Resilience					
	Ecosystem services					
Universal	Leave no one behind					
	Policy coherence for sustainable development					
	Collective action					
	All countries and actors					
Integrated	3 Dimensions of sustainable development (Social, Economic, Environmental)					
	Interlinkages					
Targets	SMART					

Application of the IRF2015 review framework to illustrative focus areas

The results of applying the above-listed guiding questions under each of the assessment criteria to three illustrative focus areas, their goals and targets are summarised below to illustrate application of the review framework, without going into a great deal of detail at the level of targets.

Focus area 2: Sustainable agriculture, food security and nutrition

End hunger and improve nutrition for all through sustainable agriculture and improved food systems

Transformative

- The focus area does not yet present a transformative agenda for food and agriculture. While the targets cover a wide range of ambitious outcomes, some key barriers to sustainable food systems and food security and nutrition for all are missing or weakly addressed.
- The focus area could be strengthened through (better) addressing the following (while streamlining other aspects):
 - empowerment of smallholders and marginalised communities, including through their inclusion in decision-making affecting food systems from local to global levels;
 - trade-distorting agricultural subsidies and market access (see target 15c), diversification and stability;
 - adoption of agricultural practices that work with, rather than against, ecosystem services and protect the natural resource base (e.g. through enhancement of target 2c to better support targets under focus area 14; target 6e is useful for water-related ecosystem services);
 - comprehensive attention to strengthening resilience to diverse environmental, social and economic shocks at household, community, value chain, national and global levels;
 - investment in agricultural innovation systems (particularly using local knowledge);
 - local value addition and small enterprise development; and
 - infrastructure for agriculture and rural development.
- Target 2d is an example of a target that addresses a key driver of sustainable development.

Universal

- The proposed targets reflect the ambition to leave no one behind, with target 2a, for example, aiming for universal access to adequate food.
- The ability to achieve this goal, and many of its targets, depends, *inter alia*, upon policies and actions in other countries and of transnational corporations. There is therefore a strong requirement for international policy coherence to ensure an enabling environment for national achievement of the goal and its targets.
 - These dependencies are not indicated under the focus area, and doing so may be helpful for further discussion of the targets and eventually for implementation.

- The means of implementation focus area does include reference to some of the trade aspects of policy coherence, but there is scope for more specificity, including on trade-distorting subsidies and market access.
- The goal and its targets imply a good case for collective action, but targets are not differentiated in accordance with nations' capacities and other circumstances.
 - While differentiation could take place subsequently at the national level, in some cases differentiation could be applied at a more general level to reflect conditions of specific groups of countries.
- The goal and targets are generally of universal relevance, though target 2b is not explicit about addressing obesity, which may be highly relevant to many countries.
- Action required by civil society and the private sector is not well addressed.

Integrated

- The focus area as a whole reflects some level of integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development, but the broader linkages across sectors, themes and scales could be enhanced and made more explicit.
 - For example, achieving nutrition for all requires more than universal access to nutritious food: the linkages between the nutrition-related targets under this focus area with those relating to access to clean water, modern energy, health services and education and non-communicable diseases, among others, could be helpfully made explicit.
 - Other linkages that are either not present or not made explicit include: urban-rural linkages, infrastructure for food and agriculture systems, small agricultural enterprises for poverty reduction and economic development, land tenure (target 1f) and agriculture as a driver of deforestation.
- Target 2f on sustainable land-use policies has potential to promote integrated land-use and natural resource management.
 - However, more could be said on the process (inclusive, participatory, democratic, coordinated across sectors and scales) for developing land-use policies.
 - More generally, this suggested target may benefit from being developed into part of a more integrated means of implementation (e.g. a national process responsible for implementation of SD strategies could provide the means to channel finance and oversee delivery of the SDGs at national scale).

SMART

- All proposed targets under this focus area require further specificity, but much of this may come later in the process, including at the level of indicators. Targets 2a and 2d (which refer to the notion of adequate access) and 2h in particular, whilst being highly relevant, may benefit from redrafting to make them more specific and measurable.
- In some cases the targets could be made more specific and actionable by more directly addressing roles of diverse actors.
- Across the board, it will be important to ensure that it is clear where responsibility for the achievement of targets lies, including contributions from business and civil society.

Focus Area 5: Gender equality and women's empowerment

Attain gender equality and women's empowerment everywhere

Transformative

- The focus area as a whole is a key driver of sustainable development.
- However, while the targets within it address physical autonomy and decision-making autonomy, they do not sufficiently address economic autonomy. Economic autonomy (access to assets, land ownership) is also partly addressed in focus area 1, target (f). Unpaid care work is recognised but not valued; neither does it include other forms of unpaid work (such as collection of firewood).
- The targets should identify key determinants of development progress for women – for example reduced rates of teenage pregnancy.

Universal

- The focus area is of universal applicability.
- It is largely a focus area about equality and empowerment for women, and does not address equality for marginalised or vulnerable men and boys.
- Some aspects require international cooperation and policy coherence (e.g. sex trafficking and forced marriage), though these requirements are not made explicit.

Integrated

- The focus area has linkages with many other focus areas, including interdependencies with targets such as 1e, 1f, 2d, 3a and 4a.
- It does not reflect the environmental dimension of sustainable development enough – e.g. women's role as managers/stewards of natural resources, vulnerability to climate change and household resilience.
- There are some instances of overlap across focus areas (e.g. target 5c and 4a are not identical in scope but have a large overlap). These might benefit from cross-references to a common target, rather than two slightly different targets.

SMART

- Many of the draft targets under this focus area refer to equality in access, whose definition will require further work to facilitate measurability.

Focus Area 8: Economic growth, employment and infrastructure

Promote sustainable, inclusive and sustained economic growth and decent jobs for all

Transformative

- The focus area does not yet present a transformative agenda for economic growth.
 - The opportunities for, and changes required to promote, a shift towards inclusive green economies and generation of decent green jobs are not well addressed.
- The driver of income inequality (between individuals and places within countries as well as between countries) is not addressed.
- Equity is addressed, though not yet adequately
 - Levelling the playing field to catalyse and support enterprise development opportunities for the poor (including in agriculture, fisheries and forestry) rather than providing jobs is not targeted.
 - Target 1a is critical but the wording needs improving to ensure that it promotes reduction of income inequalities (see comment under SMART criterion).
- The focus area does not adequately address economic resilience and financial stability – only partially addressed by focus area 11, target (g), and focus area 15, target (a).
- Resilience of infrastructure and public services is also not yet explicitly included (1g refers to sustainable infrastructure).

Universal

- The focus area is relevant to all countries, with some special attention to LDCs.
- The impacts of global markets and transnational corporations on national sectors and businesses are not addressed.
- Global collective action, except on labour rights, is not promoted.
- Opportunities for enhancing regional cooperation and trade are not addressed.
- Shared risk due to changes in the global economy and financial system is not reflected.
- The targets do not promote action by business, labour organisations, and civil society, which will be required to achieve the objectives.
 - Reference is made to SMEs, though only in general terms of what governments should do to help them.

Integrated

- The focus area does not address the environmental dimension of sustainable development. It overlooks the use of ecosystems for growth and decent jobs.
- There is overlap with focus area 9, where target 8f is covered more fully.
- The interdependencies between economic growth and climate change mitigation (e.g. target 12a) do not seem to be taken into account.
- The interlinkages with targets under focus area 15 would also benefit from further consideration.

SMART

- Target 8a in particular would benefit from improved wording to ensure that the underlying intention is articulated in a logical manner.
- Target 8e, in its reference to an appropriate climate, needs to be more specific and measurable.
- Target 8f is an example where a quantitative target rather than simply an increase would be beneficial.