

Grounding post-2015 frameworks in bottom-up action learning

Policy pointers

- ▶ Inattention to the requirements for achieving sustainable development outcomes in different social, economic and political contexts represents a major gap in post-2015 research.
- ▶ A structured process of participatory learning across a range of countries with different development trajectories and contexts could fill this gap and contribute to a more robust and responsive post-2015 framework.
- ▶ Bottom-up participatory learning and analysis can make countries better informed for the post-2015 negotiations and better prepared to meet their post-2015 commitments.
- ▶ IRF is proposing a research agenda to support national and regional stakeholders to contribute effectively to the international post-2015 process and frame domestic strategies to implement the final post-2015 agreement.

The post-2015 development framework's success will ultimately depend on how effectively it can be applied across wide-ranging social, economic and political contexts. Yet the research informing the post-2015 agenda gives little attention to structured 'ground level' processes of learning on how to achieve sustainable development outcomes based on past experience and current contexts and capacities. The Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda (IRF2015) offers a preliminary agenda to fill this research gap. By employing participatory 'action learning' approaches, the proposed research should also help develop effective national and regional strategies aligned to the post-2015 development framework.

The missing ingredient in the post-2015 development process

Reviews and debates in developing countries will foster a more participatory, inclusive and bottom-up reflection than what is currently happening in donor countries, where the discussions are rather academic, technocratic and often far removed from country-level realities.¹

Achieving development progress isn't easy, but over the past few decades, the world has accumulated an enormous stock of information about how development works in different places, at different times and for different people.

That knowledge is in databases, in published and grey literature and in the experiences and minds of millions of people, from poor farmers to community activists, business leaders and senior civil servants. No one would question that the post-2015 goals and framework should be drawing on this huge store of global knowledge.

But is that happening in practice? So far we have seen a largely top-down process of technocratic debates and a seemingly endless round of high-level consultations. If the upcoming negotiation phase is like any other international negotiation, agreement on the placement of a comma will be

hailed as a major achievement. There have been vested interests and ideological bias² aplenty, but little structured space for contributions from people with a real stake in the outcome as well as practical experience in how development progress actually occurs.

Does that really matter? Or is gaining the endorsement of the high-level decision makers the only truly important condition for a successful post-2015 outcome? The IRF2015 believes that failure to strongly link learning from experience and grounded participatory analysis with the high-level intergovernmental negotiating process will lead to an outcome that is neither effective nor widely embraced outside the international community.

This briefing paper lays out a rationale and preliminary framework for undertaking bottom-up analysis and engagement to support an effective outcome for the international process, and strong follow-up at national and regional levels.

Why bottom-up learning is essential

The post-2015 agenda offers perhaps the best opportunity yet to achieve a global commitment to sustainable development, backed by strong actions from local to international levels. But it will only succeed if it offers real opportunities for every country that signs up to it. That result is by no means certain, and there are some clear dangers on the horizon.

There is a danger that the new agenda will be ignored. For the post-2015 framework and goals to be fully embraced by governments and other stakeholders, they will have to be useful in guiding national sustainable development efforts, and be effective in pushing countries to take ambitious action on domestic and global challenges. Yet, as the MDG experience has demonstrated, a process dominated by international agencies and think tanks is likely to produce a 'supply-side' outcome that will be ignored or marginalised by many governments and their civil society and private sector partners. Such an outcome would reinforce the divide that already exists between national and local agendas on the one hand and the agendas and initiatives of international agencies on the other. Considering the vast human and financial resources being devoted to the post-2015 agenda, it would be a tremendous lost opportunity and a major global scandal if its outcome is ignored by national governments and the local institutions that are at the forefront of concrete development action.

There is a danger of a post-2015 framework that is not fit for purpose. If the post-2015 framework is not clearly aligned to 'on the ground' realities, it will prove difficult for countries to develop useful national strategies or gain the support of essential civil society and private sector partners. In a recent IRF2015 blog, Ikuho Miyazawa and Simon Hoiberg Olsen of the Institute for Global Environmental Strategies suggested that the MDGs failed as national planning tools: "Their 'one-size-fits all' targets meant that different countries didn't find detail necessary for informing national policy".³ The post-2015 framework runs the same risk.

The obvious way to avoid these dangers is by giving focused attention to national and local contexts and development experience. The benefits of doing so would include:

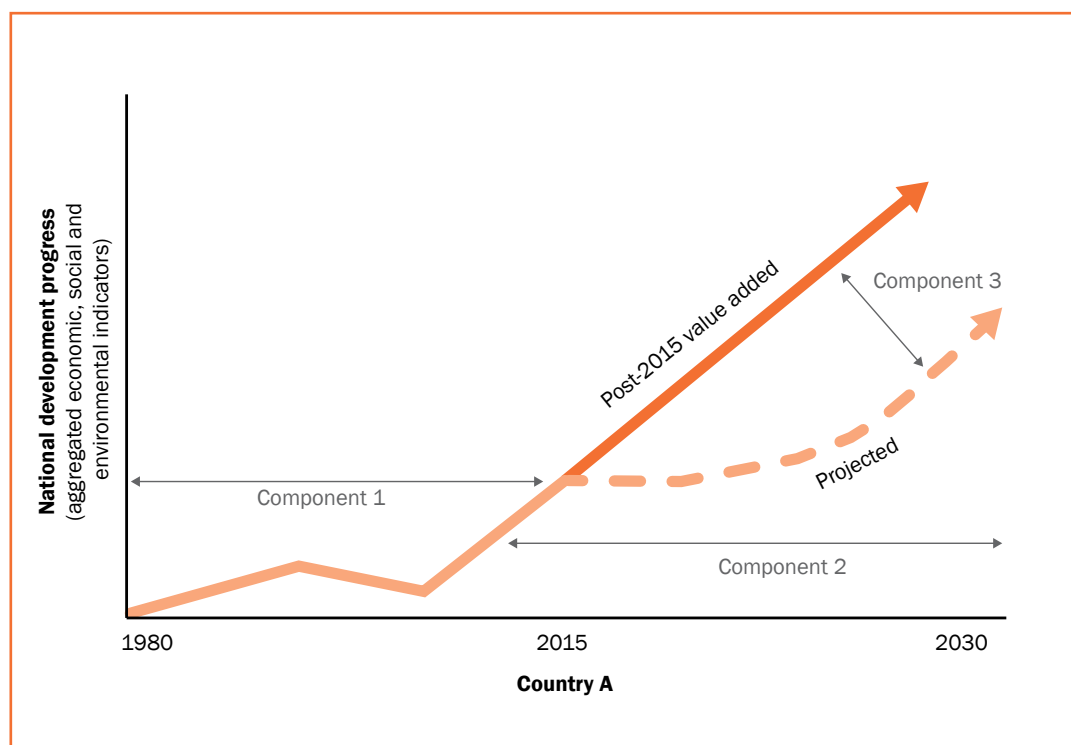
► **A more robust post-2015 framework.**

Through the Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals and other processes, governments are already beginning to stake out their positions on the post-2015 framework. But many of the UN negotiators have only limited knowledge about issues under discussion and little access to information and expertise back home. Structured processes of national learning could help them negotiate a final framework based on sound evidence of what approaches and interventions are likely to produce desired outcomes, from both domestic and global perspectives.

► **An opportunity for practical learning on how to achieve integrated sustainable development outcomes.** The post-2015 sustainable development mandate calls for integrating the social priorities of the MDGs with global economic and environmental priorities that have emerged in the wake of the 'triple crises' of financial market collapse, climate change and threats to food security. The most practical way to address this conceptual challenge is through learning from the many actual experiences of government, private sector and civil society policies and programmes that have attempted to approach development issues in an integrated way.

► **An opportunity to take stock of national policies and capacities for sustainable development.** Experience has proven the inadequacy of generic development models imposed from the outside. The new

Figure 1: Components of the IRF research framework



global framework will need to be adapted to different local contexts and build on systems and institutions already in place. Applied participatory research can help countries, and their regional institutions, assess their assets and capacities relative to their expected post-2015 global commitments, and develop strategies for deploying and enhancing them.

► **More committed, engaged and informed local, national and regional stakeholders.**

Participatory research and analysis builds interest, understanding and ownership, making it a highly effective means of stakeholder engagement that goes well beyond the too frequent ‘box-ticking’ stakeholder consultation approach. It can create a solid foundation for national post-2015 strategies by embedding learning in the institutions and individuals who will be most directly responsible for implementing those strategies.

A bottom-up learning research agenda

The core aim of this ‘bottom-up’ learning is to support individual countries and the international agencies leading the post-2015 process to identify how a global framework and goals can most effectively add value to what countries are doing or planning to do on their own to

achieve sustainable development objectives. The research agenda IRF2015 is proposing involves three inter-related processes of analysis (see Figure 1).

Component 1: Analysing development trajectories in selected countries.

Looking back over a period of about 30 years, this aspect of the research would examine:

- Trajectories of economic, social and environmental progress, and their interaction and impacts on one another
- The drivers of those trajectories, potentially including policy frameworks, governance, political and social forces, internal and external economic forces, demographic trends, environmental vulnerability and risk, innovation, and international and regional cooperation
- The factors, events, choices and incentives that have defined the dynamics of change, with particular attention to patterns of national engagement with MDGs and other global or regional development frameworks and goals.

Component 2: Context analysis. This component looks forward over the next 15 years or so, based on current contexts and trends. Studies will be national or regional in

Box 1 Action learning

Action learning involves structured engagement of stakeholders in real situations that offer opportunities for shared learning and analysis, and application of learning to advocacy processes aimed at changing perspectives, policy, practice and behaviours. Stakeholders are engaged in a cycle of research and action that simultaneously:

- ▶ Assists in practical problem solving and effecting change
- ▶ Expands knowledge and understanding
- ▶ Enhances the competencies of the actors involved.

The cycle of critical reflection includes phases of planning, action, and critical review, leading again to planning. The group of peers works together to address a complex problem by bringing together their diverse experiences, asking reflective and 'out of the box' questions, testing new approaches, reflecting on results and lessons, and developing new questions and approaches, before finally analysing lessons and recommendations. As the group members learn and share with each other and their wider networks, the approach also contributes directly to policy, practice, capacity-building and knowledge exchange.

Source: Caribbean Natural Resources Institute

scope and take an 'action learning' approach, engaging decision makers and change agents in participatory data collection, analysis and in identifying lessons and principles (see Box 1). There may be opportunities for synergies with other post-2015 national level consultative and data collection processes, such as the next phase of stakeholder consultations being organised by the United Nations in selected countries.

Action learning can offer national decision makers and other sustainable development actors a structured space for exploring how their policy frameworks and strategies can be harmonised with global goals and targets, and vice versa. The work will focus particularly on the enabling environment for integrating or 'mainstreaming' action on globally agreed goals across sectors, policy domains and institutions. That sort of integration contrasts with the narrowly sectoral approaches taken for the MDGs, in which for example health ministries alone were responsible for health-related targets, environmental ministries for environment targets and so forth. It is now widely understood that development progress is impeded by such narrowly conceived strategies. Moving to strategies that integrate actions across multiple policy arenas, sectors and social actors is not easy, but there are examples from around the world of it being done at various

scales. These national research processes should offer countries a valuable opportunity for identifying, learning from and building upon such experiences.

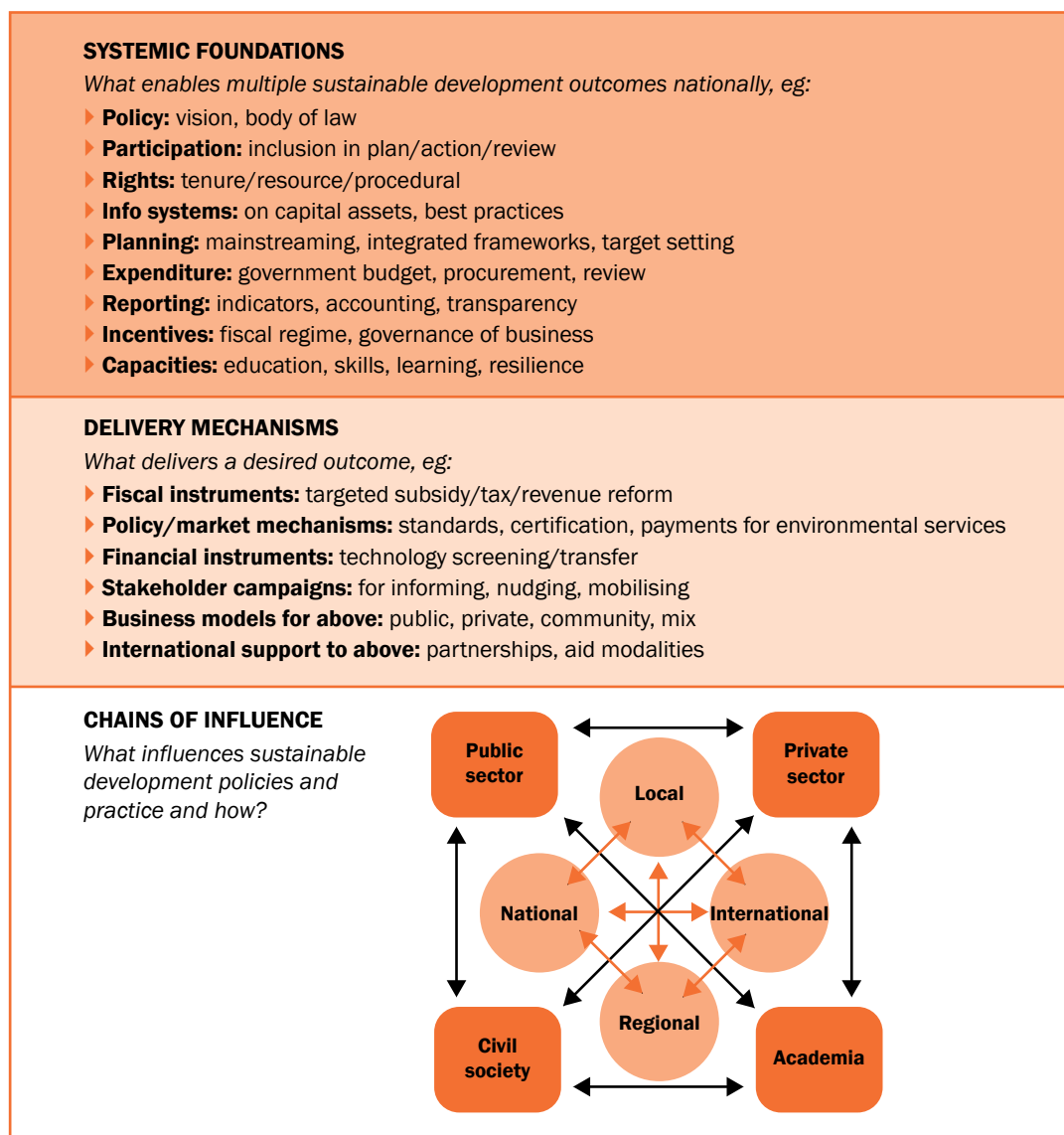
The action learning approach also offers the possibility of breaking down the divides between different sectors of society by bringing government, private sector, civil society and community representatives together to develop common strategies with agreed roles for all.

Figure 2 (overleaf) offers a preliminary framework for these national processes of analysis; this will be developed further as the work progresses.

Component 3: Analysing priorities for the post-2015 global framework. Building on the previous learning and continuing the participatory analysis, this component will look at the policies, institutions, national targets and resources needed for a country to make use of and meet its commitments under the post-2015 goal framework. Questions to guide the research could include these:

- ▶ Based on national contexts and needs, what targets towards global goals are most relevant and useful?
- ▶ What indicators of progress are feasible, and what monitoring systems and capacities are needed to track them?

Figure 2: Preliminary analytic framework



- ▶ Where can international cooperation supplement and add value to national assets and capacities?
- ▶ What national contributions to achieving global goals beyond national boundaries are feasible, given national capacities and resources (for example, contributions to improved management of public goods or development assistance commitments)?

The IRF2015 will explore opportunities to collaborate or share learning with other organisations involved in similar initiatives, such as the Unpacking the Data Revolution at the Country Level⁴ and Sustainable Development Goals for a Small Planet⁵ projects.

Through facilitating such action learning processes with partners in interested countries, the IRF2015 will be able to develop methods, tools and approaches that could have wide application in national or sectoral post-2015 planning processes. These will be documented and made available for public use.

Conclusion

Over the coming months, IRF2015 members plan to work with interested sub-national, national and regional partners on this research agenda. Studies will examine countries at varying development levels and facing diverse development challenges, from small island states to rapidly industrialising and high income countries. The IRF2015 will

IRF2015 members

Caribbean Natural Resources Institute

Trinidad, West Indies
www.canari.org

Centro Latinoamericano para el Desarrollo Rural

Santiago, Chile
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Council for the Development of Social Science Research in Africa

Dakar, Senegal
www.codesria.org

Development Alternatives

New Delhi, India
www.devalt.org

Institute for Global Environmental Strategies

Tokyo, Japan
www.iges.or.jp

International Institute for Environment and Development

London, UK
www.iied.org

Open Society Initiative for Southern Africa

Johannesburg, South Africa
www.osisa.org

Overseas Development Institute

London, UK
www.odi.org.uk

Research Centre for Sustainable Development of the Chinese Academy of Social Sciences

Beijing, China
www.rcsd.org.cn

Stockholm Environment Institute

Stockholm, Sweden
www.sei-international.org

World Resources Institute

Washington DC, USA
www.wri.org

use its international networks and activities to disseminate the learning coming out of this research, to bring the issues emerging from it to the international post-2015 debates, and to advocate for other research institutions to also take up the agenda. In carrying out the research, IRF2015 members will test and refine research methods, tools and approaches that

can be used by others to extend the scope of research more widely. And where there is interest, IRF2015 will continue working with national and regional institutions beyond 2015 to develop implementation frameworks, targets and strategies for achieving national commitments to post-2015 global goals that also contribute to national and local sustainable development.

Notes

- 1 Vandemoortele, J. 2012. Advancing the global development agenda post-2015: Some thoughts, ideas and practical suggestions. Background paper prepared for the UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda. www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/j_vandemoortele.pdf
- 2 See Murombedzi, J. 29 October 2013. The Sustainable Development Goals: Are we asking the right questions? www.irf2015.org/sustainable-development-goals---are-we-asking-right-questions
- 3 Miyazawa, I. and Olsen, S.H. 20 September 2013. Millennium Development Goals: What worked well and what should new Sustainable Development Goals do differently? www.irf2015.org/millennium-development-goals-what-worked-well-and-what-should-new-sustainable-development-goals-do
- 4 Higgins, K. and Bhattacharya, D. 21 January 2014. Unpacking the data revolution at the country level. <http://post2015.org/2014/01/21/unpacking-the-data-revolution-at-the-country-level/>
- 5 Olsen, S.H. 23 December 2013. SDGs for a small planet. www.irf2015.org/sdgs-small-planet

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About IRF2015

The Independent Research Forum (IRF2015) provides an independent source of critical thinking, integrated analysis and awareness raising on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and a post-2015 development agenda. The IRF combines expertise across the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development. We are creating a compelling, practical and solution oriented vision of wellbeing for people and the Earth.