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## Towards a *Transformative* Post-2015 Development Agenda

Informal Member State Retreat #2  
Tarrytown, New York, 9-10 February 2014

### Summary

On 9-10 February 2014, the Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda (IRF2015) – a collaboration of leading sustainable development research institutes from across the globe – hosted the second in a series of informal retreats on the theme “Towards a *Transformative* Post-2015 Development Agenda.” The purpose of the retreats is to provide an informal setting for open and substantive exchange of views on issues critical to framing the global debate on the post-2015 development agenda. The retreats progressively look at a range of issues at the intersection of poverty eradication and sustainable development.

This second retreat included participants from 33 member states, UN and World Bank representatives, and members of IRF2015. The governments of Norway, Peru, Switzerland and Tanzania supported the organization of the retreat.<sup>1</sup> The meeting was held under Chatham House Rule.

In the first retreat, participants focused on some of the core principles that should underpin the post-2015 agenda, including: the need to address the unfinished business of the MDGs while shifting to a more transformative ‘SDG’ agenda; a more integrated approach to defining global goals and targets that gives balanced treatment to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of poverty eradication and sustainable development; and the need to build a post-2015 agenda based on the complementary principles of ‘universality’ and ‘differentiation.’ Building on this foundation, the second retreat addressed the theme of *A Universal Goal Framework in Practice*. Through presentations, plenary discussion and small group exercises, participants focused on three inter-related topics:

- 1) What are the key dimensions of *universality* and *differentiation* in the context of the post-2015 development agenda, and how can these principles be applied to example goal topic areas?
- 2) How to identify and prioritize targets within a *universal* goal framework, taking into account the principle of *differentiation*?
- 3) How can a *universal* goal framework effectively address key cross-cutting issues such as sustainable consumption and production and climate change?

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<sup>1</sup> Financial support was provided by the governments of Denmark, France, Norway and Switzerland.

The following summary highlights key messages that emerged over the two days of discussion.

## Key Messages

*Participants saw universality and differentiation as tightly linked concepts, and broadly recognized their critical role in underpinning a successful post-2015 development agenda.* Participants largely agreed on the need for universality to form a core part of the post-2015 development agenda. Many noted that universality does not mean uniform. For a universal agenda to be relevant, participants emphasized that differentiation would be essential in order to take into account diverse national contexts. There is a need to further unpack these concepts in the context of the post-2015 agenda, including how other similar principles relate, in particular *common but differentiated responsibilities* (CBDR).

*Participants broadly supported an expanded view of universality that would require actions by all countries to address common challenges, and would build on global solidarity rooted in the MDGs.* The MDGs helped to establish norms of a shared responsibility amongst all nations to dramatically reduce poverty and improve well-being. Participants expressed commitment to this expression of universality – one based on shared humanity and calling for direct support from developed to developing countries – in order to finish the job of the MDGs. Participants also supported a universal agenda that calls for action by and within all countries, recognizing that increasing interconnectedness means fewer areas where lasting progress can be realized through one country's domestic actions alone. A variety of views were shared on how this might apply within the agenda, and highlighting this as an area for continued discussion.

*It is important that targets be well-written and be both broadly relevant for global application and sufficiently specific to drive local action.* Participants engaged in an exercise to identify, refine and prioritize sample targets within a post-2015 development framework. In order to address the many potential issues and to make targets broadly applicable, participants noted a temptation to bundle multiple issues into a single target. However, this approach sacrificed important elements of what makes a target effective in spurring action – being specific, measurable and time-bound, among other key attributes. At the same time, targets that focused too narrowly (e.g., on a challenge facing only a modest subset of countries) could be similarly ineffective and would not be universal. Balancing these two countervailing tendencies was seen as critical in crafting the agenda.

*The importance of selecting a focused and coherent set of targets emerged as a theme, with participants identifying several different ways to prioritize.* With many more proposed targets than can be included in the post-2015 agenda, participants searched for ways to be selective. They cited a number of important factors in their decision-making: whether the target itself was well-crafted; whether it encompassed multiple dimensions of sustainability; the potential for unintended consequences; the degree to which it appeared attainable; whether it was likely to drive action; and whether a target might be catalytic or transformative. Several participants noted the limitations of their own subject-matter knowledge and a need for additional expertise. It was further discussed that when assembled, a set of targets should be logically coherent and balanced to address critical issues within a topic (goal) area, while taking into account linkages to other priority areas.

Cross-cutting issues can be meaningfully addressed through complementary sets of targets and can constitute overarching themes for the development agenda. Taking the example of sustainable consumption and production (SCP), participants identified ways in which targets addressing SCP could be included under multiple goal areas, and thereby adding up to a comprehensive approach while allowing for a manageable number of goals and targets. The connections between SCP and inequalities emerged, as overconsumption by some and underconsumption by others is inherent to global inequality and both need to be addressed in a cross-cutting way. SCP, inequalities and other cross-cutting issues were also identified as natural areas for universal commitments but where implementation (and relevant indicators) might vary greatly based on the national context.

While there was broad agreement on the need for a *transformative* development agenda, participants sought to better understand how to define and evaluate the term. Throughout the retreat, attendees affirmed the notion that the post-2015 agenda should be “transformative.” However, it was noted that this concept had not yet been well-defined. Potential elements of a transformation could include the level of change on the ground (e.g. getting to zero), the extent to which the agenda leads to an integrated approach to sustainability, how the agenda changes the composition and operations of a global partnership for development, or how stakeholders at all levels could engage in implementation and in holding the global community accountable. These questions are a potential topic for future discussions.

There was broad recognition that the design of a universal and integrated goal framework was technically feasible though politically uncertain. Many participants saw how a development agenda might be constructed in such a way as to be globally applicable while integrating all three elements of sustainability. However, it was noted that the political nature of agreeing to a post-2015 development agenda presented a potential barrier. While participants were largely optimistic that agreement was possible, several noted that many governments would have difficulty agreeing to assume new obligations, including policy changes and financial commitments. These were areas where the need for continued dialogue was considered particularly important.

### Looking Ahead

Participants strongly agreed that the retreat provided a useful venue for open, collaborative discussion in support of the official intergovernmental process on SDGs and the post-2015 agenda. Feedback called for additional retreats, noting that the dialogue and format of the meetings allowed for the discussion of more divisive and contentious issues. A third retreat could focus on unpacking the key dimensions of and criteria for a ‘transformative’ global goal framework. The second retreat’s unpacking of universality and differentiation led to the conclusion that without also clarifying what exactly is a transformative post-2015 agenda, it may be difficult to delve into more sensitive issues relating to means of implementation across an integrated goal framework.

## Retreat Background Papers

### Session 1: Applying a 'Universality' Lens to Goals and Targets

Background Paper #1: *From Solidarity to Universality – How global interdependence impacts the post-2015 development agenda* (Kitty van der Heijden, WRI, Simon Høiberg Olsen, IGES and Andrew Scott, ODI)

### Session 2: Setting Priorities for Universal Goals and Targets

Background Paper #2: *Goals, Targets and Indicators – Definitions and key concepts for the Post-2015 development agenda* (Sonya Suter, WRI)

Background Paper #3: *Defining and Prioritizing Targets: Potential criteria for targets in the Post-2015 development agenda* (Sonya Suter, WRI)

### Session 3: Addressing Cross-Cutting Issues and Linkages

Background Paper 4: *Approaching Interaction in the SDGs: A Nexus Approach* (Nina Weitz, Annette Huber-Lee, Måns Nilsson, Marion Davis and Holger Hoff, SEI)

Background Paper 5: *Addressing Sustainable Consumption and Production in the Post-2015 Development Agenda* (Leo Horn-Phathanthai with Adam Fishman, WRI)

Background Paper 6: *Addressing Climate Change in the Post-2015 Development Agenda* (David Waskow and Leo Horn-Phathanthai, WRI)

\* Background materials and presentations are available at [www.irf2015.org](http://www.irf2015.org)

Independent Research Forum on a Post-2015 Sustainable Development Agenda

IRF2015 is a collaboration of leading sustainable development research institutes from across the globe that brings together a rich diversity of analytical skills and perspectives, engagement methodologies and networks. IRF2015 responds to the need for independent, rigorous and timely analysis to inform the evolution of the post-2015 development agenda and the concurrent intergovernmental process on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) agreed to at Rio+20. IRF2015 partners envision a post-2015 development agenda that is universal in scope, takes an integrated approach to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of global development challenges, and can lead to more sustainable and equitable development outcomes for all.

**Caribbean Natural Resources Institute  
(CANARI)**

Trinidad, West Indies  
[www.canari.org](http://www.canari.org)

**Open Society Initiative for Southern  
Africa (OSISA)**

Johannesburg, South Africa  
[www.osisa.org](http://www.osisa.org)

**Centro Latinoamericano para el  
Desarrollo Rural (RIMISP)**

Santiago, Chile  
[www.rimisp.org](http://www.rimisp.org)

**Overseas Development Institute  
(ODI)**

London, UK  
[www.odi.org.uk](http://www.odi.org.uk)

**Council for the Development of Social  
Science Research in Africa (CODESRIA)**

Dakar, Senegal  
[www.codesria.org](http://www.codesria.org)

**Research Centre for Sustainable  
Development (RCSD)**

Beijing, China  
[www.rcsd.org.cn](http://www.rcsd.org.cn)

**Development Alternatives (DA)**

New Delhi, India  
[www.devalt.org](http://www.devalt.org)

**Stockholm Environment Institute  
(SEI)**

Stockholm, Sweden  
[www.sei-international.org](http://www.sei-international.org)

**Institute for Global Environmental  
Strategies (IGES)**

Hayama, Japan  
[www.iges.or.jp](http://www.iges.or.jp)

**World Resources Institute (WRI)**

Washington DC, USA  
[www.wri.org](http://www.wri.org)

**International Institute for Environment  
and Development (IIED)**

London, UK  
[www.iied.org](http://www.iied.org)