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Brief 10: How the United Nations Should Promote the Post-2015 Development Agenda

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How the United Nations Should Promote the Post-2015 Development Agenda

by Kara S. Alaimo

This issue brief examines how the United Nations can most effectively communicate the post-2015 development agenda in order to catalyze the global movements necessary for its achievement. The author, a former U.N. communications professional, argues that the U.N. should carefully calibrate expectations in advance, be transparent about the state of negotiations, retain top communications professionals to craft the name and narrative of the agenda, use clear language in the agenda, communicate in "human terms," make the agenda globally accessible and relevant, and promote shared ownership of the agenda.

United Nations Member States will soon negotiate the world's next agenda to eradicate global poverty and achieve sustainable development. This agenda will succeed the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) after the 2015 deadline for their achievement. The success of this agenda will depend upon whether it garners global support. Ultimately, poverty will not be eradicated in the course of negotiations within the U.N. If the world's next development agenda is to be achieved, it will happen in the national and sub-national halls of power where governance decisions are made – and in cities, towns, and villages around the world where people rally to hold their leaders accountable and to take action themselves. To build the global support required to achieve this agenda, the U.N. must therefore craft and present its new plan with unprecedented levels of strategy, innovation, and persuasiveness.

This issue brief provides recommendations for how Member States, the U.N. Secretariat, and U.N. agencies can most effectively communicate the post-2015 development agenda. It is informed by my experiences in my former roles as Global Media Coordinator for the U.N. Millennium Campaign, which advocates for the achievement of the MDGs, and as Head of Communications for the Secretariat of the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda – a group of eminent thinkers from around the world convened by the Secretary-General in 2012 to advise him on the next development agenda. I argue that the inclusive process of consultation on civil society priorities which is currently underway is a positive development, but the U.N. must carefully calibrate expectations in advance of the release of the final agenda. The General Assembly should issue periodic updates about the status of negotiations once they are underway, in order to remain in control of the message and reduce the ability of others to do so through erroneous leaks and speculation.

It is unfortunate that, in the year 2014, the world's foremost communicators are harnessed to peddle soft drinks, but not solutions to the world's most pressing problems. This must change.

Additionally, the U.N. should secure global marketing experts to help develop a name and narrative that will inspire people around the globe to champion the agenda. It is unfortunate that, in the year 2014, the world's foremost communicators are harnessed to peddle soft drinks, but not solutions to the world's most pressing problems. This must change.

It will also be critical for Member States to use clear and direct language in the text of the agenda, and to avoid the temptation to gloss over their differences by obscuring the meaning of their words. The post-2015 development agenda should convey a sense of urgency about the scope of the problems the world faces and the critical need for action, while preserving optimism that these challenges can be met. Subjects of the report should be presented as people, not statistics. The overarching goals set out in the agenda should be relevant to audiences in rich, poor, and middle-income countries alike. The report should convey a sense of shared responsibility and entitlements – imbuing a sense of ownership in people around the world, and giving citizens a clear understanding of what they, as individuals, can do to make a difference.

By stepping up its communication efforts now, the U.N. can position its final agenda to catalyze the global movements necessary for its implementation.

The following recommendations can help the U.N. build awareness and support for the post-2015 development agenda.

Be Inclusive, But Calibrate Expectations

The MDGs were widely perceived to have been negotiated without sufficient input from civil society. This time around, the U.N. is doing things differently.

In crafting its report, the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda interacted with more than 5,000 civil society organizations from 121 nations (High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda 2013). Through the My World Survey at www.vote.myworld2015.org, the U.N. is asking citizens around the globe to register their priorities for the next development agenda – and canvassing communities that lack Internet access (United Nations 2014). The www.worldwe-want2015.org website reports that U.N. country teams have so far conducted national consultations in eighty-eight countries, as well as thematic consultations on the issues of inequalities; health; food security and nutrition; energy; governance; education; conflict and fragility; water; growth and employment; environmental sustainability; and population dynamics (World We Want 2014).

The final agenda will benefit from this unprecedented level of global consultation. In a way, the global conversation that is now underway begins to approach the kind of decision-making process that many philosophers have championed as ideal. For example, Jürgen Habermas's concept of "rational discourse" requires that all interested parties come together in the public sphere to discuss contested norms without coercion, and agree upon a consensual outcome in which the better argument prevails (1996). All participants must have an equal voice in this conversation. Amartya Sen has similarly extended John Rawls' (1997) conception of "public reason" at the national level to international society. Under Sen's concept of global "public reasoning," "the status of … ethical claims must be dependent ultimately on their survivability in unobstructed discussion." (2004, 348-349). Of course, in this case, civil society groups are sharing their views with U.N. representatives and not necessarily interacting directly with representatives of the Member States who will write the final document, so it is unclear how their inputs will be reflected in the agenda. Nor are all stakeholders engaging in a discussion *with one another* in order to arrive at an agreed agenda, per the stipulations of the philosophers – a prescription that appears impossible in a world of seven billion people. Nevertheless, the fact that the views of such a diverse range of individuals and groups are being proactively sought in order to inform the outcome represents a major step forward.

An agenda created through broad consultation is likely to be more inclusive and just than one shaped from the top down.

The author handled communications for the U.N. Secretary-General's High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. UN Photo/Eskinder Debebe.

From a pragmatic perspective, people who feel included in the process, and who see their views as being represented in the outcome, are more likely to champion the resulting agenda. However, it is still far from guaranteed that civil society will be satisfied with the final product. For example, as I witnessed at the High Level Panel, many groups will draft language which they wish to see inserted, verbatim, into the final text.

To be sure, the advocacy of civil society is critical in order to ensure a representative process. Member States should pay particular attention to groups representing the needs and voices of the world's most excluded and vulnerable people. Many of their claims are pressing; I was constantly moved and inspired by the civil society activists whom I had the privilege of meeting at the High Level Panel's events. At the same time, it is not realistic to expect that Member States can or will simply cobble together this (sometimes contradictory) civil society language into a final agenda. Such a document would lack the coherent vision and narrative that is needed in a global agenda. Furthermore, the final agenda is unlikely to contain all of the specific provisions for which civil society groups are currently advocating, in part because it will need to allow space for different approaches to be taken in different national contexts.

This process of consultation has so raised the hopes and expectations of people of every stripe that their ideas and demands will be reflected in the final agenda that there is now a risk that the U.N. is creating expectations that it will be unable to fulfill. To avoid this, Member States should craft an agenda that is responsive to the needs, ideas, hopes, dreams, demands, exhortations, and expectations of people around the world, who are insisting that their leaders finally end poverty and chart a sustainable future. But, once negotiations are underway, it would also be a good idea for representatives of Member States to have some frank conversations with civil society organizations

about how the agenda is beginning to take shape. It is essential that such discussions begin sooner rather than later, so that the final document does not come as a shock.

Civil society should continue to keep the pressure on. However, if people are persuaded that the objectives they are championing – from empowering women to protecting people with disabilities – are reflected in the final report, even if specific provisions are decided at a local level, the U.N. is likely to end up with more allies, and fewer adversaries.

Be Transparent About The State of Negotiations

With so much hope pinned on the outcome document, people and groups around the world will be clamoring for word of how the agenda is shaping up and for copies of early drafts, long before Member States have begun to agree amongst themselves on its most basic parameters. Early drafts will inevitably leak. Further negotiations will make these leaked documents obsolete, but not before they have provoked dissent and harshly worded rebukes.

In order to mitigate these types of reactions, the U.N. should get out ahead of this process by selectively releasing information about how the agenda is coming together. For example, at the High Level Panel, we released communiqués by the three heads of state who chaired the Panel following each plenary meeting. The communiqués conveyed developing priorities in the broadest of strokes (such as, for example, the need for new global partnerships and sustainable production and consumption). I know from experience that it is painstakingly difficult to write and negotiate consensus on even such broad and seemingly innocuous statements. However, if Member States do not come together to try to control the emerging narrative and project a sense of unity and progress, they will cede control of the message to others.

Although developing these communiqués may appear at the time to be a painful and time-consuming distraction, agreeing on such statements could also be a helpful way of beginning to arrive at consensus on key points in the final agenda. Such statements would also be an important opportunity to begin calibrating expectations in advance of the final document.

Harness the Best Expertise to Advance the Agenda

Nearly eight decades ago, in the United States, the Brownlow Committee was tasked with surveying the outmoded White House staff responsible for running a government that had been dramatically expanded in response to the Great Depression. The Committee famously concluded that "the President needs help." (1937, 5). Today, it is clear that the U.N. needs help.

Specifically, the U.N. needs help crafting a compelling name and narrative for this agenda. *New York Times* columnist Nicholas Kristof has observed that "any consumer-products compa-

The author suggests using the acronym GPS in the title of the post-2015 development agenda. Photo credit: daveynin on flickr. Photo modified.

ny rolling out a brand of toilet paper will agonize over marketing. The messaging will be carefully devised, tested with focus groups, revised based on polling, tested in a particular market, tweaked, and tested again. And that's for a product whose launch makes no difference for humanity." (2009). Yet no comparable mechanisms exist for strategically developing, testing, and refining the messaging around the world's most pressing problems.

The need for more strategic and effective messaging was particularly evident in the case of the MDGs. Communications professionals at the U.N. have struggled mightily to communicate the nine-syllable name of this agenda. At the global level, at least in part for this reason, the MDGs simply never achieved household-name status. The World Values Survey reported that nearly 80 percent of the people canvassed in 46 countries in 2005-2008 had never even heard of them (2014). If the majority of people do not know what the MDGs are, the U.N. cannot hope to engage them to take action and to demand that their leaders keep their promises to achieve these goals.

In light of the lessons learned from the MDGs, this time, the U.N. should work with a world-class global communications and marketing firm in order to develop and test a name and messaging for its agenda. The name of the post-2015 agenda must be easier to explain and understand, and must resonate with people around the globe.

At the Millennium Summit in September 2000, world leaders pledged to achieve the Millennium Development Goals by 2015. UN Photo/Terry Deglau.

By way of example, one idea that I floated at the High Level Panel, which we never tested, was the acronym GPS. I liked the symbolism of a tool which encompasses the whole earth but can be customized based upon wherever one is in the world. The imagery felt appropriate because a GPS helps a person to get where he or she wants to go, once it calculates his or her present location and the individual determines his or her destination. Yet, while a GPS provides help, users are ultimately responsible for getting themselves to where they need to be. Similarly, the High Level Panel report attempted to provide a universal roadmap for the world, but with different countries starting at different levels of development, deciding upon different destinations based upon their national priorities, and, ultimately, responsible for reaching those destinations. The symbolism of a GPS also conveys momentum and reflects the need for the world's next development agenda to be data-driven and to appeal to global youth, who are heavy technology users.

This is just one idea, but it illustrates that the name of the agenda should be a core part of the process, and not an afterthought. The global community's discussions now center around the concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A better name is needed. While the concept of sustainable development may be somewhat better understood – overcoming a particular barrier that the MDGs faced upon adoption – a shorter, catchier name conveying greater symbolism of local-global connections, optimism, achievability, momentum, and progress would be more effective. Many colleagues have endeavored to convince me that discussions of SDGs have progressed so far that it is futile, at this point, to attempt to convince the global community to change it. Furthermore, like all other elements of

the agenda, names and titles will ultimately be subject to political negotiation and compromise.

Still, it is troubling that, in the year 2014, it is considered idealistic to advance the idea that the U.N. should communicate in terms that ordinary people will understand. This is a concept understood by nearly every businessperson, politician, and issue entrepreneur in the world today. It is particularly strange that the U.N. prides itself on harnessing the very best science available on how to eradicate disease or combat climate change, but then ignores the wide body of evidence available on how the agenda can be communicated in ways that would build the requisite support to achieve it.

Today, for example, nearly a third of the adults on the planet smoke cigarettes (World Health Organization 2013). If marketers can convince a billion people to inhale deadly toxins, I am certain that they could convince an equal number to support an agenda that seeks to improve the lives of everyone on the planet. (Yes, cigarettes are physically addictive, but the world's next development agenda will focus on issues such as hunger and healthcare which are just as viscerally compelling.) This is why their help is needed.

The U.N. should urgently procure the services of a world-class communications and marketing firm. (Such work should ideally be done pro bono – a proposition which does not seem unrealistic given the high-profile nature of the assignment and the status that would accrue to a firm that successfully executed such a strategy.) This firm should work with Member States on a highly confidential basis. The firm should start with the substance of the emerging agenda, and craft compelling messag-

ing presenting it as a package that people around the world will both want and work to achieve.

The firm should have a global footprint, so that it can tailor its messaging to different countries and cultures; as James Grunig, Lauri Grunig, Dejan Vercic, and Robert Wakefield have argued, the most effective international public relations campaigns have central global messages which are adapted to reflect local contexts (Wakefield 2008, 145-146). It will be important to ensure that the U.N. is the genesis of the substance of the messaging, and the communications firm is only responsible for packaging it cleverly, so that its content is not perceived as strictly Western. It will also be especially important for the messaging to connect with global youth, who account for a quarter of the world's population and will therefore be critical to the success of this agenda (High Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda 2013, 18).

The agenda should be positioned as cutting-edge. People who are involved should be portrayed as global citizens. They are part of something bigger than themselves. They are on the vanguard of a movement which is about to change the way the whole world works. All of these things are true. Furthermore, the desire to belong to a group larger than oneself is a fundamental human need that researchers have documented across cultures (Baumeister and Leary 1995). The concept should not be so difficult to sell.

Marketers convince people around the globe every day that having the right labels on the backsides of their pants will change their lives. With the post-2015 development agenda, no such alchemy is required. The U.N. will simply be asking for people's support for an agenda that will actually, materially improve their lives. Given what modern communications professionals are capable of, this is not such a formidable task. The U.N. just needs to involve them in this process.

Do Not Obfuscate the Language of the Agenda

"In our time," George Orwell famously explained in *Politics and the English Language*, "it is broadly true that political writing is bad writing. Where it is not true, it will generally be found that the writer is some kind of rebel, expressing his private opinions and not a 'party line.'" (2009, 280). At the High Level Panel, I discovered why this is so. Arriving at consensus is so difficult, contentious, and painful, that it is tempting to obfuscate the language of an agenda in places where agreement has not been reached. Member States must avoid this. If they cannot agree upon the agenda amongst themselves, how can they possibly convince the world's seven billion people to champion it?

I do not wish to minimize the sheer difficulty of getting 193 Member States to agree on when to break for lunch – let alone how they will tackle and apportion responsibility for many of the most contentious issues of the twenty-first century, all in a

single document. But, with 1.22 billion people still living on less than $1.25 per day, Permanent Representatives have a moral obligation to bridge their differences (World Bank 2014).

Research confirms that people perceive easily understood language to be both more likeable and more credible (Reber, Schwarz, and Winkielman 2004; Winkielman and Cacioppo 2001; Oppenheimer 2006). The language of this agenda must be written in lucid and powerful prose. It must be presented in no uncertain terms. It must be clear. It must be compelling. This is the only way to get people around the world to support it.

Communicate in Human Terms

In his "advice for saving the world," Kristof expressed his frustration that he could not get his readers worked up about what he had witnessed in Darfur. He had "interviewed people who had seen men pulled off buses and killed because of their tribe and skin color, and … spoke to teenage girls who had been taunted with racial epithets against blacks while being gang-raped by the Sudanese-sponsored Arab militia, the janjaweed." Meanwhile, Kristof explained,

> Manhattan erupted in a controversy showing that even cynical New Yorkers can brim with empathy for a hawk. A red-tailed hawk dubbed Pale Male, one of the best-known residents of the Central Park area, had become embroiled in a housing dispute with the Upper East Side co-op on which he had a nest. The co-op removed Pale Male's nest, outraging New Yorkers and generating considerable news coverage. Now, don't get me wrong: I was on Pale Male's side, but I also dreamed that the plight of people driven from their villages in Darfur or Congo could get the same sympathy as a homeless bird. Clearly, something was wrong with the way I and other humanitarians were approaching Darfur (2009).

What was the secret to Pale Male's positive publicity? In part, it was that New Yorkers felt that he could be saved. By contrast, people are less likely to intervene when they feel that a situation is hopeless and they cannot make an appreciable difference (Slovic 2010; Fetherstonhaugh, Slovic, Johnson, and Friedrich 1997.) This means that the U.N. must convince people that the world's problems are not intractable, and that individual actions can have a real impact. The language of the agenda and the publicity that surrounds it will need to strike a careful balance, in order to convey that the world's problems are severe enough to require urgent action, but not so hopeless that they cannot be solved.

The tale of Pale Male also evinces how human beings are drawn to and moved by stories of individual members of humanity – and inured against faceless statistics. The psychologist Paul Slovic has called this phenomenon "psychophysical numbing." Slovic has argued that the human brain may be designed

to detect small changes in the environment, making it difficult for people to conceptualize large-scale problems. He explained that this principle accounts for why human beings will go to extraordinary lengths to save a single human life, but stand by while millions of others are killed. As a result, "all too often the numbers represent dry statistics, 'human beings with the tears dried off,' that lack feeling and fail to motivate action." (2010, 47).

This means that the next development agenda must be presented in human terms. Part of this will require telling the stories of real people around the world. The U.N. will need to share statistics that dramatize the scale and scope of the world's challenges, while at the same time discussing them in language that makes clear that they are talking about individual human lives.

Be Globally Accessible and Relevant

When I worked for the Millennium Campaign, I particularly struggled to attract the interest of the United States press in covering the MDGs. One of the key problems was that global poverty was not an issue that was largely perceived as impacting the daily lives of Americans. It was therefore a challenge to convey why the MDGs should matter to them. (Of course, America faces serious poverty problems of its own. However, poverty in the U.S. is of a different order than the poverty in developing nations. The MDGs target individuals living on less than $1.25 per day). To be sure, Americans stood to be greatly impacted by the MDGs – from the goal of achieving environmental sustainability to the goal of eradicating diseases which know no national boundaries. However, all of this was not obvious at first blush.

This is why it is so encouraging that the debate about the post-2015 agenda is now centered firmly on both people and the planet. The High Level Panel report, for example, set out to achieve the twin objectives of eradicating extreme poverty and ensuring sustainable development (2013). As appreciation of the threats posed by climate change grows, people in developed countries are more likely to be able to identify the latter goal as central to their lives. Of course, the post-2015 agenda can only be achieved through the partnership of rich, poor, and middle-income countries. Presenting the agenda as one of not just eradicating poverty but also achieving sustainable development around the world should make it easier for all people to recognize its relevance to their own communities, which can help to win their support and participation.

Promote Shared Ownership

One of the rules of the Millennium Campaign is to never refer to the MDGs as the "U.N. Millennium Development Goals." The campaign's philosophy is that the MDGs belong not to the organization but to the people, in whose names world leaders promised to eradicate global poverty.

The U.N. should similarly take itself out of the title of the new agenda. Instead, it should promote ownership of the post-2015 development agenda among citizens and civil society organizations around the globe. The U.N.'s messaging should carefully reflect the fact that responsibility for implementing this agenda will rest not just with the U.N., but with all people – since the combined forces of individuals, governments, civil society, and the business community will all be necessary to achieve it. Representing this agenda as a dual responsibility and entitlement of people across the planet will encourage citizens to contribute to implementing the agenda and, of equal importance, to hold other actors accountable for doing the same.

I have met many people around the globe who have been eager to get involved to support the achievement of the MDGs, but have felt overwhelmed and unsure about how they could make a difference. As public relations professionals know, a call to action is critical. It would therefore be helpful if the post-2015 agenda could give individuals specific ideas about how they can contribute. The more explicit the agenda can be about this, the better.

Ultimately, achieving the post-2015 agenda will take many, many villages.

Conclusion

The lessons of the MDGs make clear that the U.N. needs to step up its public relations efforts in order to mobilize global support for the post-2015 development agenda. As Member States begin negotiating this agenda, they should be transparent about their progress in order to remain in control of the message and to set reasonable expectations about their final product. They should harness global experts to craft a compelling name and narrative for the agenda in order to inspire people to join the movement.

Member states must also draft an agenda that is clear in its meaning. The agenda must simultaneously convey the scale of the world's problems and the possibility of surmounting them. It must present its subjects as the human beings who they are. It must strike people of all nations as relevant. It must promote a sense of shared responsibility and entitlement. And it must be specific about how individuals can help to achieve it.

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