



Report

‘Localising’ the Post-2015 agenda: What does it mean in practice?

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Key messages

- Proposals for new goals in the Open Working Group outcome and the politics around it are already fairly complicated. So as a rule of thumb it is advisable to keep any suggestions on how local governments can use the SDGs as simple as possible.
- It is difficult to discuss the role of local government at the level of UN inter-governmental negotiations. However, the role of local governments can be considered in the following ways:
 - The importance of disaggregated data should continue to be emphasised so that inequalities within countries can be monitored.
 - The role of local authorities in the implementation of the SDGs can be acknowledged and emphasised together with the fact that local authorities that have to deliver basic services in areas of high need require adequate capacity and resources to do so.
 - Programmes to strengthen the capacity of local authorities could be part of a new global partnership for implementing, monitoring and financing the goals.
- Ultimately, it is for individual countries to work out what ‘localising’ means when thinking about implementation of a new set of goals, including coordination between different levels of government for the delivery of the goals.

Acknowledgements

This note was prepared for UCLG (United Cities and Local Governments) with support from Development Partners Working Group on Decentralisation and Local Governance (DeLoG).

Introduction

There have been a number of discussions and consultations on the localisation of the Post-2015 agenda (UNDP et al, 2013). As implied by the very concept of ‘localising’, what it means will ultimately depend on the context and the specific characteristics of countries’ decentralisation systems. In this note we discuss two possible meanings of this term and their practical implications.

‘Localising’ the Post-2015 agenda is most commonly understood as the role that regional and local governments play in the implementation of a new set of goals. Sub-national governments¹ have responsibilities (either directly or shared with central government or in partnership with other stakeholders) for service provision in many areas related to the SDGs. In order to deliver services effectively and help achieve the SDGs, they need to have adequate capacity and resources.

In fact, the important role that local government² play in a new development agenda has been recognised in a number of key inputs to the Post-2015 process. The High-Level Panel made this clear in its report to the UN Secretary-General. It stated that “the most pressing issue is not rural versus urban but how to foster a local, geographic approach to the post-2015 agenda. The Panel believes this can be done by disaggregating data by place, and giving local authorities a bigger role in setting priorities, executing plans, monitoring results and engaging with local firms and communities” (High Level Panel, 2013).

A report from the United Nations Sustainable Solutions Network also referred to the fact that the goals “are universal and apply to all countries, national and local governments, businesses and civil society” (Sustainable Development Solutions Network, 2013). Further, the Open Working Group, in the introduction of the outcome document refers to Rio+20 and its commitments to Agenda

21, which recognised the role of local authorities in implementing sustainable development objectives.³ There were also attempts to ‘localise’ the MDGs (UNDP, 2011).

Unpacking the meaning of ‘localising’ the Post-2015 agenda

‘Localising’ as monitoring progress at sub-national level

One possible meaning of localising the Post-2015 agenda could refer to monitoring progress on the goals at sub-national level. This would allow better assessment of inequalities within countries and inform better decision-making and resource allocation at all levels. It would also provide vital information for local communities and civil society organisations to hold their governments to account.⁴

In this spirit, the High-Level Panel report had already made suggestions for geographic disaggregation of data for most outcome-based targets (High Level Panel, 2013). This could include, for example, urban/rural and regional breakdowns and where possible disaggregation for lower geographies, such as local authorities and marginal areas, such as slums (Lucci, 2014).

There have also been suggestions to set targets in a way that makes it easier to track different types of inequalities (Watkins 2013), including spatial ones⁵. Targets could be expressed as ‘reducing the gap between high and low performing geographic areas’ for some outcomes (e.g. mortality rates or school attainment) providing in this way incentives to reduce spatial inequalities.

If ‘localising’ is understood as monitoring inequalities within countries to assess where need is concentrated, this means that all outcome-based targets deserve disaggregation at the sub-national level.

1 Here sub-national refers to states/regions/provinces, metropolitan areas, local authorities, depending on different decentralisation systems.

2 Note that the emphasis of this note is on the implications of ‘localising a Post-2015 agenda’ for local governments, but of course there are other relevant actors involved at the local level (e.g. civil society organisations, local communities, private sector actors).

3 “It also reaffirmed the commitment to fully implement the Rio Declaration, Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21” (Open Working Group Outcome Document, July 2014).

4 Note that this does not necessarily mean that local actors are responsible for collecting this information. In many cases central government administrative systems and national statistical offices collect information disaggregated by location, and local governments can make use of this data. In addition, local governments may produce data themselves, including through their administrative systems. In some cases, including where there is no information or this is contested, civil society organisations also collect information (for example, the enumerations carried out by Slums Dwellers International network).

5 Watkins 2013 puts forward this approach for different types of inequalities (e.g. spatial, gender, ethnicity).

‘Localising’ as the role of local governments in implementing the goals

Another possible meaning of ‘localising’ relates to the role of local government in implementing the goals. In fact, this is how this term is most commonly used. Broadly speaking, local governments have responsibilities for direct service provision or oversight of private provision for water supply, sanitation, drainage and waste management. Decisions over land use also often fall within local government’s remit. And although welfare, health, education, transport are generally decided at national level, local governments can influence the quality and accessibility of some of these services (Satterthwaite et al., 2013).

If ‘localising’ is referred to as the role of local governments in the implementation of the goals, this could mean that local governments could adopt a sub-set of the goals and targets for which they have specific delivery responsibility. This could result in prioritising sub-national planning and resource allocation for local government in specific sectors.

‘Monitoring progress’ on the SDGs and ‘implementing’ the goals: two complementary meanings

The two meanings of ‘localising’ the Post-2015 agenda discussed above are not mutually exclusive. Ideally, provided the final agreed set of goals and targets came to a manageable number, subnational governments that wished to (in line with their own local planning processes) could monitor, data permitting, most outcome-based targets, particularly for vulnerable areas and communities. They could even focus on the gaps in performance – e.g. in slums versus the local average – to clearly identify spatial inequalities and areas of need.

In addition, among this wider group of goals and targets, a sub-set could be identified for which they have a delivery responsibility. This would mean that, for this specific sub-set of goals and targets, they would not only monitor performance but also assume responsibility for their delivery and achievement.

‘Localising’ Post-2015: Some of the challenges

There are a number of challenges that local governments are likely to face in translating this abstract concept into practice, particularly given the complexity of the current proposal for a new set of goals and the political gridlock faced by inter-governmental negotiations. We identified at least 3 challenges: i) the workability of the framework, ii) data availability, and iii) choosing targets and setting target levels at the local level. While the first two apply to both meanings of ‘localising’ discussed above, the third one – choosing relevant targets and setting target levels – is particularly relevant for the role of local governments as implementers of a new development agenda.

Workability

The scope of the current goals and targets proposed by the OWG is notably wide. Proposed targets cover most development challenges and respond to the broad range of issues expressed by major stakeholders. While the MDGs had 8 goals and 21 targets, the current OWG proposal has 17 goals and 169 targets. Even if each target had only one indicator that still implies more than 150 indicators.

The sheer number of targets and the fact that many of them are not easily measurable constrains the development of a manageable system of indicators to monitor progress at different government levels and hold these different tiers of governments to account.

There is also the challenge of ensuring harmonisation with the global framework. How do, for example, cities set quantitative targets and identify indicators that are context specific but which at the same time can be harmonised with aggregate measures of national progress.

Data availability

At the local level, data constraints are more pronounced than at the national level. The evidence base needs to be built up if we are serious about monitoring progress and having a powerful accountability tool at the sub-national level. This has obvious resource and capacity implications in terms of data collection. In fact, it will require strengthening national statistical offices’ capacity and administrative systems in the first place, hence the current emphasis of the debate on the need for a data revolution (IEAG, 2014).

For larger local governments, particularly in metropolitan areas, capacity is less of a concern. Some are already using this type of information in their policy-making, although data often does not cover the most marginal communities (Lucci and Bhatkal, 2014). For these larger authorities, there is no reason why they could not adopt this agenda, with an emphasis on monitoring inequalities in performance, as this is such an important issue for some metropolitan areas. However, in the case of smaller poorly resourced authorities, this could be a huge ask.

Setting target levels for local areas

If sub-national governments were to assume responsibility for the delivery of a sub-set of the targets, there are questions about: i) how to select those targets and ii) at what level to set them.

Ultimately, which targets could be adopted by sub-national governments and their levels will depend on individual countries policies, priorities and decentralisation systems. Ideally the implementation of the goals/targets would be in line with countries’ planning frameworks e.g. national development plans and local development strategies. This would also require coordination between different levels of governments and for those responsible for delivery to have adequate funding and capacity. In

Localising the MDGs: an example from Brazil

The example of how Brazil localized the MDGs is pertinent here. As part of its national agenda for the MDGs, the government supported and encouraged local governments to identify and adopt commitments which would help to achieve the MDGs. Brazil also counts with a portal that provides information on MDG indicators disaggregated for estates and municipalities (<http://www.portalodm.com.br/>).

Further, the General Secretary of the Presidency of Brazil, together with UNDP, grant an MDG Prize, recognising good practice led by municipalities and civil society organizations that are helping improve lives of some of the country's most disadvantaged communities.

Sources: <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/presscenter/articles/2012/06/01/un-development-chief-president-of-brazil-present-mdg-awards/>;

<http://www.regionalcentre.ac-undp.org/images/stories/POVERTY/Bulletin11.pdf>

terms of the levels of targets, it is advisable to keep it simple (e.g. local governments could adopt universal targets as aspirations and/or set their own interim targets in their strategies).⁶

Localising the Post-2015 agenda: Keep it simple

The proposals for new goals in the Open Working Group outcome document (the 'main basis' for intergovernmental negotiations⁷) and the politics around it are already fairly

complicated. So as a rule of thumb it is advisable to keep suggestions to localise the SDGs as simple as possible and in line with different countries' policy-making processes at different government levels.

At the global level, the importance of disaggregated data cannot be emphasised enough and needs to be further supported by proposals to help improve statistical capacity in developing countries (IAEG, 2014), so that inequalities within countries can be monitored. Further, the role of local authorities in the implementation of the SDGs can be acknowledged and emphasised together with broad suggestions on what 'localising' this agenda could mean in practice. For example, this could stress the fact that local authorities that have to deliver basic services in areas of high need require adequate capacity and resources to do so. In addition, it could be suggested that geographical disaggregation of outcome indicators, wherever possible, is matched with information on sub-national budget allocation for those areas, as part of the system of indicators. Finally, programmes to strengthen the capacity of local authorities could be part of a new global partnership for implementing, monitoring and financing the goals.

But ultimately, it is for individual countries to work out what 'localising' means when thinking about implementation plans, including coordination between different levels of government for the delivery of the goals. The Post-2015 agenda cannot solve all problems for all actors, but if aligned with national and local policy processes it could help improve the data available to plan, allocate resources and hold governments at different levels to account.

⁶ At a different scale, this is already proving controversial when it comes to translating global aspirations to country level targets. The MDGs were criticised because targets that were meant to be global were adopted at country level without any consideration for their starting points or the feasibility of achieving those targets for different countries. Although the exact nature of target setting this time round is still unclear, it is expected that targets will be more sensitive to national circumstances (rather than all countries simply adopting the agreed global target as their own national target). Some have proposed to use information on historical performance to set realistic targets for countries (Melamed and Samman, 2014) or for groups of countries with similar starting points (Melamed and Bergh, 2014). A simpler version of this is a proposal for countries to adopt universal targets as aspirations and when it came to comparing progress to group countries with similar starting points.

⁷ UN General Assembly Resolution A/RES/68/309.

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