2030 Development Agenda: What’s next?

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It was a privilege to witness history in making at the United Nations when the co-facilitators of the intergovernmental negotiations gavelled the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development agreed by consensus by 193 countries. The outcome document is expected to be formally adopted by heads of state and government during the UN Summit at the end of September in New York.

The gavel concluded the work of almost 3 years of intense technical discussion and political deliberation over what is now known as the largest, most comprehensive and most inclusive consultation process ever.

Millions of people representing various social groups and interests were involved in national, regional and global consultations. Global opinions were channelled into the diplomatic negotiation process; mixed up with the geopolitics of an emerging global order, collective action of interest groups, technical advice and common sense that helped to generate a comprehensive set of 17 goals and 169 targets that is now called the action plan for humanity and planet for 2030. At the end of this complex process all were convinced that the best possible consensual outcome was reached.

The document also includes provisions related to means of implementation and partnerships, drawing heavily on the results of the Third UN Conference on Financing for Development held in Addis Ababa (July 2015), and suggests ways to monitor the implementation of the agenda at global, regional and national levels. Contrary to the MDGs, the new development agenda is universally applied to all countries.

Every single word in the outcome document reflects a delicate balance and was carefully chosen to appropriately respond to specific constituencies and varying interests. Nothing was given, every single sentence needed to be negotiated, technically justified and defended in a context of competing demands and priorities.
In the efforts to build consistency and coherence among various issues and shape a truly transformative agenda, decent work found its best match – inclusive economic growth. The ILO has been saying for years in the G20 and other fora that growth that is too weak to reduce unemployment and underemployment is not sustainable and decent work must be at the heart of the macroeconomic and developmental policies. This fit perfectly as rationale for Goal 8 “promote inclusive, sustainable and sustained economic growth and full and productive employment and decent work for all”.

In the new agenda member states reaffirmed that growth and jobs should be understood as two sides of the same coin. Certainly not any type of jobs and nor any type of growth, but decent jobs and inclusive growth. They also acknowledged the role of decent work in the transition to more environmentally sustainable growth patterns. The combination of decent work and inclusive and sustainable growth has an enormous transformational potential and is the ILO’s passport for the new development world.

The evidence produced by the ILO demonstrating that development happens through jobs was crucial to sustain the technical argumentation and build the narrative for Goal 8. Likewise, the timely advice provided by ILO colleagues working in technical areas was fundamental in shaping numerous targets and ensured the decent work agenda is reflected virtually in its entirety across the various goals. Field colleagues in direct contact with their national counterparts helped influence the country’s priority setting process and the messages coming from the capitals to guide the negotiations in New York. Social partners acted strategically to promote decent work outcomes both at national level and with the UN negotiators. The establishment of the Group of Friends of Decent Work for Sustainable Development, led by Angola and Belgium, and comprising 36 countries, served as a political platform to translate the technical arguments into political action.

So what’s next?

The process hasn’t finished yet. A limited set of global indicators to monitor the agenda is still to be defined by early next year. Communication strategies will need to be developed to explain and share the global goals beyond the UN corridors. The UN Development System will need to rethink its modus operandi to become fit for purpose to support the delivery of the new agenda, including on global planning and field operations. Partnerships will need to be created or revamped to respond to the emerging challenges. Reporting and monitoring mechanisms will need to be established or adapted to follow up on the developmental commitments. Certainly there still many battles ahead to make sure the ILO leadership and its messages don’t get lost in the translation of the agenda into action.

It is expected that most countries will adapt their national planning strategies and budgets to respond to the global goals. Parliaments will establish sustainable development committees or commissions to monitor and supervise governments. Governments will create inter-ministerial and multi-stakeholder groups to implement the national SDG plans and/or to oversee the implementation. Donors will reshuffle their portfolios according to the SDGs. The UN system, including IFIs, will be requested to support the SDGs’ implementation and to report on what we are doing. The performance will be evaluated by our constituents and donors. An enormous investment will need to be made in data and
statistics to track progress in the implementation. ILO colleagues, no matter where they are working in the world, will be invited to meetings on the SDGs and asked about the ILO contribution.

A well-crafted preparedness plan is definitely part of the solution, but here are some additional insights we’ve learned in this long negotiation process:

First, the international community has no time, no money and no patience for duplications, overlapping, competition and lack of coordination in the UN system. With such a comprehensive and ambitious action plan and so many challenges to face, there is no appetite for inefficiency and the UN needs to learn to work together and deliver in consistent and coherent way.

Second, the SDGs, and in particular Goal 8, are an invitation to get out of our siloes and explore linkages, spill over effects and externalities among various targets and areas. For example, it has become clear that we can’t really be effective in promoting job creation without engaging with the ministries of finance, planning, environment, social development, central banks and others. Here is where the decent work agenda moves beyond traditional counterparts and with their support and engagement reaches new levels.

Third, international labour standards and social dialogue are a core ILO value added in implementing the SDGs. When framing action to achieve the targets, the ILO internationally accepted conventions and recommendations in areas such as child and forced labour, social protection floors, youth employment, gender, labour migration, among others should serve as the basis for guiding the UN action. Additional efforts will need to be put into the development of tools that help bridge the normative and the operational. Likewise, the ILO’s social dialogue tradition is a huge asset not only in building partnerships, but also in designing effective monitoring and follow up systems.

It is widely recognized that the ILO and the decent work agenda are well placed at the core of the sustainable development agenda, but we are just starting the long road towards 2030. Our relevance in the future UN development landscape will depend on the institution’s ability to effectively support the implementation of the new agenda.

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