HIGHLIGHTS OF THE 11TH SESSION OF THE JOINT NGO BRIEFING SERIES

Post-2015 Development Agenda

Alessandra Vellucci, Chief, Press and External Relations Section of the United Nations Information Service in Geneva, chaired the briefing, which was also attended by Monika Linn, Principal Adviser, Office of the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe, Lim Hyeyoung, Human Rights Officer at Millennium Development Goals Section of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, Ricardo Espinosa, Chief of the NGO Liaison Office at UN Office at Geneva, and Hamish Jenkins, Programme Officer at the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service.

United Nations Economic Commission for Europe

MONIKA LINN, Principal Adviser, Office of the Executive Secretary of the UN Economic Commission for Europe (UNECE), spoke about the outcomes of an exercise just finished within the UNECE region, which had had a focus on the pan-European region, and aimed at assessing what the situation was in the region with regard to the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The exercise had also focused on how the region could address its priorities and challenges.

UNECE region was a diverse region, a microcosm of multiple challenges faced by the world at large, and challenges within this region could thus resonate worldwide. Consultations on the subject matter would continue at a meeting in Istanbul on 7-9 November, which would look into lessons learned.

The lessons from the region included four principles: universality; being based on sustainable development; reducing inequalities; and effective implementation.

MDGs had only limited relevance for UNECE region, but nonetheless included reconciling economic development, social progress and the environment, which admittedly represented a challenge for every country. UNECE region had felt serious consequences of the recent global economic crisis and was leaving the largest ecological footprint. The new framework should go beyond being just so-called "MDG plus". Instead, only a truly global framework with true flexibility could respond to the growing challenges.

Conventional growth-centred development approaches had so far not solved today’s challenges, while the integration of the pillars of sustainable development had not taken place. What needed to happen was designing a new development agenda based on sustainable development, making the transformation to a green economy and spreading the awareness in schools and universities.

UNECE region was relatively prosperous, compared to other regions of the world, but national averages were nonetheless masking serious inequalities. Material deprivation and social exclusion were present, especially among marginalized groups. There were rising inequalities also with regard to unemployment, health and education, which was particularly visible in Eastern Europe, Caucasus and Central Asia. What was needed was a renewed emphasis on full employment and decent jobs, greater investment in quality health and education services, stronger social protection and commitment to end gender disbalance.
Effective implementation was the key to addressing the increasingly complex issues. Design and implementation of whole-of-government strategies across Government bodies was critical. Civil society and the private sector needed to be more involved, while sub-regional, regional and global cooperation had to be further developed. Good governance standards, many of which could already be found in a number of countries, would need to be promoted. What was happening on the ground had to be monitored better, which meant that there was a need for improved data collection, accountability and monitoring mechanisms. A report by eminent persons published earlier this year had even called for “data revolution”.

All in all, the entire process was a difficult undertaking, but was at the same time offering great opportunities for development in the decades to come.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights

HYEYOUNG LIM, Human Rights Officer, in the Millennium Development Goals Section of the Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR), presented key points of the publication “Who will be accountable – Human Rights and the post-2015 development agenda”, which was available at the OHCHR website (http://www.ohchr.org/Documents/Publications/WhoWillBeAccountable.pdf).

The strengths of the MDGs were supposed to be simplicity and measurability, which secured them with an unprecedented international consensus. At the same time, the MDGs had been criticized for the way they had been prepared, including lack of ambition, and inadequate participatory process. They had failed to address poverty in rich countries, inequality and the root causes of poverty globally. They had also been criticized for the lack of quantifiable, time-bound targets, as well as the lack of the accountability framework.

When we spoke about accountability, what exactly did it mean? In human rights, it referred to the relationship between duty bearers to rights holders, and the obligation of those in authority to take responsibility for their actions, to answer for them and be subject to enforceable sanction.

Three dimensions of accountability were responsibility, answerability and enforceability. The human rights framework could help understand all three dimensions. Responsibility required having clearly defined duties and performance standards enabling their behaviour to be assessed transparently and objectively; answerability required public officers to provide reasoned justifications, while enforceability meant that appropriate corrective and remedial action would be taken. Being answerable included creating a conducive environment for public participation through protecting process-related rights.

On the question of who was accountable and how, States had the first and primary responsibility to respect, protect and fulfil rights of people on their territories. Ensuring national accountability remained a significant challenge. If there was a weak central oversight, that could encourage corruption and abuse of human rights. Sub-national accountability, i.e. at local level, was also of consequence. At the international level, State actors had a baseline obligation of doing no harm, and also of upholding the principles of human dignity, equality and equity. States also had duties to cooperate with other countries on enhancing human rights across the globe.

Non-State actors, especially the private sector, were getting an ever more prominent role in the promotion of human rights, but could also be responsible for large scale human rights abuses. For example, there had been a number of corporate social responsibility initiatives to hold companies responsible for their conduct; however, they were voluntary in nature and could not be enforced. The UN Guiding Principles on Business and Human
Implementing the UN “Protect, Respect and Remedy” Framework should be implemented in the post-2015 development framework.

States could be held accountable on a number of grounds: for efforts as well as outcomes of processes run under their control; for the full range of human rights; for negative or passive obligations (“do no harm”) as well as for fulfilling their obligations to respect human rights (active); for pace of progress and prioritization – to show that they had applied maximum resources available and under appropriate rules; for meeting certain standards of services, which should be accessible and socially acceptable; of tackling inequality and discrimination, meaning States should work harder in the areas of social and economic rights.

The circle of accountability included four stages: 1) creating national plans of action (which included targets based on a robust situational analysis and best evidence and which should be participatory; 2) tracking budget allegations and expenditures (which helped identify corruption and discriminatory misallocation); 3) monitoring progress and priorities using indicators (while disaggregating data to monitor disparities of outcome); and 4) achieving accountability through access to judicial, administration and political remedies.

Answering the question in which ways the human rights framework was being strengthened, Ms. Lim said that the challenge on how to apply integration of human rights in Member States was well known to OHCHR. Inter-governmental discussions were ongoing at the moment; Member States were being encouraged to see how human rights could be helpful for their development. Statisticians from OHCHR were actively engaged with Member States on integrating those aspects in their respective statistics frameworks. Dealing with inequality and discrimination were priorities for OHCHR.

Another NGO representative asked how the responsibility of private sector for good governance could be strengthened. Ms. Linn said that there were already a lot of consultations in the UNECE region, and good governance and accountability were among the priorities, especially in the region of Eastern Europe, Central Asia and the Caucasus. Because of that, dialogue, as the one in Istanbul the following week, would be of critical importance. An interactive process was of paramount importance, and citizens were encouraged to express themselves in the process by using various modern means of communication. Regarding the private sector, a global compact for dialogue was already in place, and they would be involved more in negotiations. Governments at all levels, civil society consultations, citizens and private sector should all contribute to keeping up the dialogue.

Other speakers

HAMISH JENKINS, Programme Officer at the United Nations Non-governmental Liaison Service, said that he had been following the post-2015 development process in New York, focusing on the civil society track. In this context, he said that ever since the Secretary-General had received a mandate in 2010 to start planning for the post-2015 agenda, that had been a very challenging process. There had been more thematic and national conversations, with the view of spelling out main concerns of citizens, governments and other stakeholders. Many strands were in existence, including the UN Development Group, the Post-2015 High Level Panel, Global Compact, and the UN Sustainable Solutions Network.

Regrettably, there had not been a proper civil society track. With the ever-increasing usage of social media, it was difficult to weigh all incoming inputs and contributions, which was why there was a decision to provide a distinct civil society input to the High Level Panel, for their meetings in Monrovia and Bali including through social media. The
outcomes of that exercise had been presented to the General Assembly on 22 September. The Report had further been presented at a special event on 25 September.

The four main objectives for the post-2015 development agenda emerging from the consultation included: 1) balancing power relations to justice; 2) fulfilling human rights and overcoming exclusion; 3) ensuring equitable distribution and safe use of natural resources; and 4) establishing participatory governance, accountability and transparency. There had been a lot of convergence between inputs from various regions. Many participants had been rather pleased with the civil society involvement in the report, but many had also felt that recommendations were not going far enough.

Among main complaints was that there had been no serious tackling of the macroeconomic framework, which in many aspects was perceived as responsible for the current inequalities. The Africa Report, for example showed that the continent had seen a decade of extremely high growth, which had, regretfully, not generated employment. Poverty in many high-growth countries in the Africa and Arab world had actually increased during that period. MDG monitoring showed that those countries were doing quite well, but were not paying attention to whether their economies were generating enough quality jobs. In Latin America a number of redistributive and innovative policies had addressed structural problems, but some of the successes indicated that those were not sustainable. An idea had emerged to promote more of a "solidarity economy", with the focus on complementarity, local management and redistribution of economic surpluses rather than plain competition.

Many participants had felt that the High Level Panel was placing more emphasis on civil and political rights rather than social, economic and cultural one. There had been some very specific elements in the human rights framework (such as the maximum use of resources) which could render some current economic policies simply illegitimate. Alternatives to austerity policies had also been brought up, such as taxes on financial transactions. The need to have mechanisms which would hold both national governments and international institutions accountable had been heavily emphasized.

Overall, there was a sense in New York that the civil society had been consulted much more now than before, and the time was to move to the phase of political mobilization. One of the challenges was to merge distinct UN processes, such as the Rio Process with the MDG process to develop the post-2015 agenda which should comprise various goals, including poverty eradication but also environmental challenges. A series of primers was being developed to ease the understanding of the ongoing process. Between now and the end of February 2014, there would be a series of different thematic discussions, including poverty, food security and sustainable agriculture, unemployment, decent work, macroeconomic questions and trade policies, means of implementation, sustainable cities, women’s empowerment, etc. In all those, there would be chances for the engagement of civil society. Once those thematic discussions ended, there would be negotiations which should produce a draft by September 2014.

A sign-up sheet was provided for NGO representatives who wanted to receive updates on this consultative process.

An NGO representative asked about the absence of civil society representatives in the membership of the High Level Panel. Mr. Jenkins responded that indeed, there had been complaints that civil society was not included in the Panel, especially on social, economic and cultural rights. It was important to get engaged and contribute, also via Internet, to meetings organized between NGOs and Member States.

Asked about the role of migrants/diaspora in global development and which mechanisms could be put in place in that respect, Ms. Linn said that that was indeed a political problem of great actuality, and migration was receiving ever more prominence at the
level of the European Union as well. Member States would need to make decisions on those matters. On the question of what new outcomes could be expected at the Istanbul meeting, Ms. Linn said that discussions and consultations were taking place in multiple forums, and it was clear that momentum was being built in that respect.

Answering a question how NGOs could practically help the UN to achieve the MDG goals in the remaining two years, and what room was there for the NGOs, Mr. Jenkins stated that many had suggested that the post-2015 agenda should be implemented now instead of waiting until after 2015. Building a meaningful post-2015 agenda should include looking into the successful examples, rather than keeping it at theoretical levels. Cross-country and cross-regional learning on best practices should take place. Global goals were needed, but policies should be more tailored and context-specific.

Ms. Lyn said that the post-2015 human rights agenda had come a long way. There were monthly working group sessions, and in December there would be one dedicated to human rights, where the High Commissioner would develop a key address. In the view of OHCHR, civil society helped put human rights in the outcome document, and remained an indispensable partner.

Ms. Vellucci said that the Department of Public Information was very active in promoting the post-2015 agenda, and the UN would appreciate help and contribution of civil society in awareness raising.

RICARDO ESPINOSA, Chief of the NGO Liaison Office at UN Office at Geneva, informed that, as a result of the 23 September summit meeting in New York, persons with disabilities had now been included in the post-2015 development agenda. It had also been accepted that peace and stability had to be at the heart of any such agenda.

Mr. Espinosa informed that UNECE’s Working Group on Ageing would hold its sixth annual meeting on 25-26 November 2013 in Room V of Palais des Nations. All interested could register through UNECE (ageing@unece.org) or contact the NGO Liaison Office.

An NGO representative stressed the need to have NGO briefings provided with interpretation in English and French, the two working languages of the UN Secretariat.

Ms. Vellucci informed that the next NGO briefing should take place on 11 December (to be confirmed) and would possibly address the issue of indigenous peoples.