

Embassy of Denmark – post-2015 framework meeting  
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Remarks by Natalie Samarasinghe, UNA-UK Executive Director

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Good afternoon, it is a pleasure to be able to share with you today some thoughts on the Post-2015 Framework with representatives from countries that are, in my view, real leaders in international development.

I have been asked to make some general points about the UN Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and post-2015 framework, some comments on the challenges facing the international community in addressing maternal mortality and HIV/AIDS, and the UN's work to take forward this agenda.

Before I start, a few words on the United Nations Association. We are a UK-based charity, founded in the same year as the UN to connect people and organisations in this country with its aims and activities. Today, a large part of our work is focussed on providing independent analysis on UN issues, supporting efforts to make the UN more effective, and working with our members and supporters across the UK to build a critical mass of support for progressive international action. Over the past years, this has included maintaining momentum on the MDGs and encouraging a more inclusive process on the development of the new framework.

Hailed as the UN's most ambitious development initiative, the MDGs represent a milestone in global and national development efforts. They have provided a blueprint for governments and aid agencies, targets that are easy to understand and communicate, and, most significantly, they have delivered real gains for millions of people around the world. In looking at the gaps and challenges that remain, we must not forget this.

In 2011 and 2012, the UN reported that according to the latest data, three of targets – on extreme poverty, access to drinking water and slum dwellers – had been met in 2010, five years ahead of the 2015 deadline. In addition, gender parity in primary school enrolment has been achieved. Child mortality, HIV, malaria and TB infections are declining. Even in the area of maternal mortality, often cited as one target towards which there has been insufficient progress, deaths fell from over half a million a year in 1990, to 287,000 in 2010. With the exception of conflict-affected countries, some progress has been made on most goals in all regions.

But this picture is just one part of the story. The focus on global, regional and country targets has served to mask inequalities that exist between and within them. In certain countries, goals have been met nationally with little or no change for the poorest. In all regions, if you are elderly, disabled, from a rural or minority community, you are much less likely to have benefitted from the Goals. The MDGs themselves have been criticised for being too simplistic and too narrow, for ignoring global trends and local realities, for prioritising numbers over outcomes and for reflecting a top-down, north-south approach to development.

These criticisms are validated if we look at the success stories more closely. For example, we see that if we exclude progress in China, the number of people living in extreme poverty is around 1.8 billion today – the same as it was 30 years ago. Access to safe drinking water may have improved, but well over 700 million people have been left behind. In some areas, higher rates of school enrolment have actually put the quality of education at risk. And many argue that the focus on diseases such as HIV/AIDS – which accounts for nearly a third of all development health spending – has hindered progress on addressing non-communicable diseases, such as heart disease and cancer, which claim more lives in the developing world.

The challenges in tackling HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality are indicative of the some of the issues that will need to inform the next set of goals. Despite the high proportion of funding for HIV/AIDS, organisations like the Global Fund warn that there is still a shortfall that could risk reversing the gains achieved to date. The target of universal access to antiretrovirals is in sight, but momentum needs to be sustained. Access to care and education also need scaling up. For instance, the unmet need for family planning has fallen by just two per cent in sub-Saharan Africa over the past two decades. Knowledge of HIV and how it spreads remains low amongst those aged 15 to 24 in this region.

On maternal mortality, the emphasis needs to be on accelerating progress. Yes, there have been gains – in 2010, there were 210 deaths per 100,000 live births, compared to 400 in 1990 – but Sweden was able to achieve a similar ratio as early 1900 due to skilled care and general improvements in health. If you compare this issue to child mortality, it is clear that a targeted approach isn't enough. It can be argued that some child mortality interventions are simpler – a vaccine is easier to provide than a trained midwife. But even when adjusted for factors relating to general health care quality and availability, it is clear that something more is needed to address maternal mortality. It is not simply a health issue. Progress is required in areas such as education and gender empowerment too.

Both HIV/AIDS and maternal mortality require a rounded approach that takes into account the links between all goals. Both highlight the need for community education and engagement and to improve primary healthcare. And both underscore the necessity of broad-based interventions that boost infrastructure and systems, alongside targeted initiatives on specific issues.

The UN processes currently underway are seeking to address these concerns. Indeed, the processes surrounding the development of the post-2015 agenda represent a significant departure from the drafting of the MDGs, which saw UN staffers tasked with producing measurable targets from the big development reports of the 1990s. This time round, there have been several high-profile conferences, summits and events, with more planned for this and next year. The UN has supported consultations in 88 countries, and 11 on thematic issues. Over a million people, spread across all UN Member States, took part in an online survey.

The High-Level Panel on Post-2015 submitted its report last May, proposing 12 goals with indicators on areas such as sustainability, good governance, human rights, peace and security. The Open Working Group on the Sustainable Development Goals is expected to report later this year, as is the Expert Committee on Financing.

From these processes, it seems as though there is consensus on a unified set of goals, encompassing economic, social and sustainable development. There is also a degree of consensus on the importance of including issues not found in the MDGs, such as governance, peace and rights, which emerged from the consultations as almost on par with issues such as education and access to services. There is consensus that the goals need to be adapted to reflect local realities, and must be 'locally owned', and that indicators need to be disaggregated for more than just gender. And it seems that there is a recognition that, like any initiative, it needs to be backed by a financing plan.

But a huge amount remains to be done. The new framework is being developed in a very different environment to the MDGs. For governments, it has been a challenging period, characterised by the need to respond to immediate challenges as well as the increasing urgency of tackling long-term ones. The Millennium Summit in 2000 and the World Summit in 2005 saw world leaders agree sweeping international agendas and reform programmes. The present political and economic insecurity is, on the face of it, less likely to produce such outcomes.

There is a danger that these various strands will not come together and that important decisions on the detail of the proposals and on financing may be deferred. Next year is already a busy year for states, not just for post-2015 but also in terms of discussions on a global climate agreement, reviewing the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty and progress on gender empowerment 20 years after the Beijing Conference.

Some global challenges, such as demographic changes, will require more attention and seem to be missing from the conversation. There has been a shift in the global economic balance, brought into sharper focus by the financial crisis. One billion people living in extreme poverty reside in middle-income countries.

Aid, though still incredibly important, is just part of the development funding mix. According to the International Monetary Fund, foreign direct investment, remittances, and portfolio equity flows have all overtaken Overseas Development Assistance to developing countries. And the number of development

actors has significantly increased, with new institutions, regional organisations, companies and civil society movements now involved in policy-making, delivery, financing and evaluation.

One area that remains weak, and that UNA-UK is keen to pursue, is accountability. We are currently seeking for funding for a project to look at the extent to which the post-2015 consultations have really had an impact on the outcomes, and what structures are needed to ensure ongoing public engagement in the design, delivery and evaluation of the new goals.

So there is much for your governments to do. There are two things I'd like to highlight. The first is on partnerships and looking at what a new partnership for development really means in terms of programmes, trade, investment and knowledge-sharing. The second is, quite simply, leadership. The past few years have seen multiple crises converge, prompting many governments to turn inwards. There is a sense, especially in European countries, that we must not just do more with less, but in many cases do less altogether.

While there are many other states that are significant development actors, so often the leadership, especially when it comes to promoting global frameworks, and the importance of governance, institutions and rights, comes from Europe, and we at UNA-UK hope you will continue to provide this leadership and to lead by example when it comes to development.