UNIVERSALITY AND THE 2030 AGENDA FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

FROM A UNDG LENS

– Discussion note –

1. INTRODUCTION

Universality is a defining feature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development – and also one of its more innovative ones. The principle of universality has a long tradition in the UN system and underlies much of its normative work, for instance in the realm of human rights. However, its application has usually been confined to specific normative frameworks, not to an all-encompassing programmatic agenda, such as the 2030 Agenda and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals. This discussion note examines the implications of universality in the 2030 Agenda for the work of the UN Development System in support of its implementation.

The note is organized as follows. It first starts by looking at how universality is defined in the 2030 Agenda, and how the defining traits of universality shape its practical operationalization. It then goes on to examine how universality affects the work of the UNDS in support of the 2030 Agenda, in terms of: (1) the implications of universality for SDG review processes and role of the UNDS in these exercises; (2) the UNDS' programmatic and operational response to universality; and (3) how UNDS organizational arrangements may evolve in response to universality. Finally, in its last section, the note presents a series of issues for consideration and follow up action.

The drafting of this note was informed by a structured discussion organized by the UNDG's Sustainable Development Working Group (SD-WG) on the topic of universality and by three background notes that were discussed at a workshop organized by the SD-WG in September 2015. The results of this workshop were captured in a first draft of this note, which was shared and discussed at the UNDG ASG Advisory Group and Co-chairs meeting of January 12th 2016. The current version of the discussion note incorporates feedback and comments received at that meeting.

2. DEFINING FEATURES OF UNIVERSALITY

A defining feature of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development is its universal nature.[1] Unlike the Millennium Development Goals, which were conceived mainly as an agenda for development centered on attaining a set of basic, minimum living standards in developing countries, the 2030 Agenda is universal in scope. It commits all countries to contribute towards a comprehensive effort for global sustainability in all its dimensions – social, economic and environmental – while ensuring equity, peace and security.

The concept of universality underlying the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development builds on four main principles.[2] These provide the basis for how universality should be applied in practice:

1. The 2030 Agenda rests on a set of universal principles, values and standards, such as human rights, that are applicable in all countries, in all contexts and circumstances and at all times. The conceptualization of sustainable development underlying the 2030 Agenda is, in this sense, universal. This can be understood as universality of principles.

2. The 2030 Agenda is for all people, as captured by the call to '*leave no one behind*' that inspired its formulation, and which constitutes a central pledge by Member States. This can be understood as universality of reach.

3. Sustainable development, understood as a set of interlinked trajectories of social, economic and environmental evolution, concerns all countries, regardless of income levels. From this perspective, (sustainable) development can no longer be considered as a process circumscribed to developing countries only, as has traditionally been portrayed, but one in which all countries, rich and poor, are part of and are involved.

4. The 2030 Agenda is all-encompassing and interconnected in all its dimensions and at all levels: between goals, between countries, and between global, regional and national levels. It therefore implicates all countries and all people in an

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[1] See Long, G. (2015) 'The Idea of Universality in the Sustainable Development Goals', Ethics & International Affairs, Vol. 29:2, for an in-depth discussion of the defining features of universality in the 2030 Agenda.

[2] See UNEP and OHCHR (2015) 'Universality in the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda', UNEP Post 2015 Note #9, for a similar taxonomy of the concept of universality.

inclusive and collective effort for sustainable development. This underscores the idea of the 2030 Agenda as a global partnership for sustainable development.

3. UNIVERSAL REVIEW OF THE 2030 AGENDA AND ITS IMPLICATIONS FOR THE UN

As a global initiative of universal application, progress in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda will need to be monitored in all countries, regardless of incomes per capita, and at all levels, and in a way that captures progress in all its dimensions in an interconnected way. General Assembly Resolution No. 70/1, of September 25th 2015, by which UN Member States unanimously adopted the 2030 Agenda, establishes that Member States have the primary responsibility for SDG review and follow-up, and that this is to be based on voluntary, country-led processes. However, the United Nations System is expected to provide active support to these exercises. SDG review and follow up poses a number of opportunities and challenges for Member States and also for the UNDG in supporting these review processes:

- Ensuring that overall global progress towards the 2030 Agenda can be measured, by promoting consistency in monitoring approaches at all levels – national, regional and global – and in all settings (LDCs, HICs, fragile states, etc.), while simultaneously recognizing the need for context-specific approaches. Member States may wish to build on the experience of 15 years of MDG progress monitoring, which has seen the production of more than 500 MDG regional and national progress reports in high, middle and low income countries, often with UN support, to address some of these issues.

- Optimizing the role of the UNDG and UNDG members in SDG monitoring in high income and upper middle income countries. These are countries where the UNDS' presence is limited and which in the past might have not taken part in similar global review exercises, as has been the case of developing countries with the MDGs, which has enabled this latter group of countries to develop well-tested monitoring mechanisms and practices.

- Helping capture progress towards achieving the SDGs in countries and contexts (fragile, crisis and post-crisis) in which data and statistical capacities are weak or lacking and where there might not be an enabling environment for SDG monitoring. Addressing these gaps might call for the use of new 'data revolution' methods and tools for statistical development (e.g. satellite based technologies for remote data collection).

- Devising effective mechanisms for mutual accountability for results in attaining the SDGs at the global, regional, national and sub-national levels, and encouraging strong cooperation and assistance between Member States to make this possible. The means of implementation targets found in SDG17 and those built into each of the other 16 SDGs provide a way of achieving this at the country level. However, sustainable development dynamics often transcend national borders. These might require of appropriate mutual accountability mechanisms to address these supranational concerns.

- Facilitating the adoption of all relevant SDG indicators at the country level and working with national counterparts to ensure full data coverage for all people that is necessary for universal coverage, cross country comparability and the monitoring and mutual accountability for global sustainable development. For the UN development system this is a reach, voice and commitment that matters for all and engages all. It is therefore beyond the function and mandate of any one development entity, and is something that needs to be address beyond the role of the UNDS.

4. STRENGHTENING POLICY, PROGRAMMATIC, OPERATIONAL AND NORMATIVE LINKAGES FOR UNIVERSALITY

The 2030 Agenda builds on a set of existing universal normative frameworks and well-established review, follow-up and normative support mechanisms. These include, among others, the various human right mechanisms, including treaty bodies, the Universal Periodic Review and Special Procedures. They provide the basis for the UN's support to the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. Operationalizing these frameworks in support of the 2030 Agenda will require of dedicated policy, programmatic and operational support to Member States.

Much of the UN's work is already geared towards this type of support, especially at the country level. However, it will be necessary to approach this work in a way that effectively support an agenda that is not only universal based on its normative underpinnings, but is also interconnected across goals, and is extensive in reach. For instance:

1. In order to effectively serve the needs of a universal and integrated agenda the UNDS needs achieve greater integration of its operational activities for development, so as to meet the growing demand for integrated, multi-sectoral and issue-based policy solutions in support of the SDGs. Such integrated action requires a shared understanding of goals and

their interlinkages, built on a collective recognition of the normative frameworks that underpin the 2030 Agenda, with interventions that are based on a shared vision, strategy and plans to create synergies and address trade-offs, towards ensuring a whole that is bigger than the sum of its parts. While there is consensus on the necessity to proceed in this direction, the institutional changes this could imply to move to more joined-up capacities and teams to make this happen is still in the making.

2. Greater integration is also necessary across different parts of the UN, and beyond the UN development system. The UN therefore needs to explore ways and identify specific measures that help it approach its development, humanitarian and peace operations in a more integrated way and work across the human rights, peace and security and development pillars in support of an agenda for sustainable development which is defined as indivisible and integrated.

3. Leaving no one behind – reaching those furthest behind first: The 2030 Agenda has as a core commitment to leave no one behind, and reaching those furthest behind first. Overall, there is broad understanding of who is at risk of being left behind and of the type of interventions that might help these people. However, much of this knowledge and gains are from the MDG era, when development efforts could largely rely on 'low hanging fruit'; i.e. gains in incomes and living standards based on an overall favorable global political and economic environment. These conditions are not what we have today and the 2030 Agenda may face an external environment that is not as favorable in the future. Moreover, addressing marginalization, discrimination and chronic deprivation is likely to require more than a general improvement in external economic conditions. Reaching the last mile will therefore require a more precise understanding of the structural drivers of deprivation and the root causes of exclusion and discrimination, and hence a more complex set of policy and programme interventions that can effectively address these constraints.

4. The 2030 Agenda, which reaches across the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainability, is one that will largely be driven by people, having to make the right policy, leadership and resource choices for their countries, and together, for the world. The UN and other international partners will play a crucial and facilitating role. For the UN, this calls for greater partnering; more public engagement, knowledge sharing and data transparency; more institutional openness and innovations. These factors will test if we are fit for a universal agenda.

5. UNIVERSALITY AND ORGANIZATIONAL ARRANGEMENTS OF THE UNDS

The Universal nature of the 2030 Agenda makes it necessary to consider a broader range of organizational options for the UN Development System at country, regional and global levels and in different settings: high income economies, developing countries, crisis and post-crisis countries and fragile states. This could involve differentiated forms of support, with and without physical country presence, as well common approaches to the UN's work in support of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The current configuration of the UNDS, heavily centered on country-level support, is well suited to address the first two aspects of universality identified in Section 2 for the case of developing countries, since for the most part they have a national dimension. However, the remaining dimensions refer to the intrinsically all-encompassing and interconnected nature of the 2030 Agenda. They therefore require of a response by the UNDS/UNDG that is supranational and, in some instances, global, as well as an approach to the work of the UN that addresses sustainable development interconnections (between dimensions, goals and geographical levels) in an integrated way.

Universality, in its various dimensions, poses a number of challenges in how the UNDS responds and organizes itself in support of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, while also presenting opportunities to experiment with different forms of engagement:

- Given resource constraints and lack of capacity to fully expand coverage in all countries, the UN development system needs to find ways to best deploy its normative and operational capacities to engage differently in different country settings. This specifically raises the question of what type of functions and capacities are required to work in high income country settings.

- This may require a system-wide rethink of the different roles the UNDS plays (capacity building, technical assistance, partnership development, etc.) and exploring country-tailored modalities that take a more system-wide approach.

- The UNDS will need to develop differentiated modes of engagement to respond to the increasingly complex and individualized needs of Member States, so as to identify, mobilize and deploy its assistance in different country settings, particularly in countries where there is limited or no UN presence, including MICs and HICs.

- This presents an opportunity to explore joint, integrated organizational and business operations modalities that go beyond individual agency interventions, where cost-efficient and cost-effective.

The UNDS' engagement with High Income Countries (HICs)

A particularly pressing issue when considering organizational arrangements is how the UN should organize its engagement in high income countries in response to the 2030 Agenda's universal mandate.

Many members of the UNDS have a clear rationale for engaging with some, many or all HICs. This is most straightforward for agencies with a global normative mandate. Some countries that have newly transitioned to HIC status request ongoing technical support from some UN partners, until their development gains are consolidated. There may be a role for SDG related advocacy and partnership work in many or all HICs. As noted above, the specific role of UNDS agencies in SDG-related monitoring in HICs also needs to be clarified. Nevertheless, while some agencies have a clear universal mandate, others are explicitly focused only on developing countries, which means that the UNDS as a whole will look very different in HICs than in LICs and MICs.

While there will likely be an increased level of engagement in HICs by UNDS agencies in the SDG era, this does not necessarily mean that there will be an increased presence. Much of this engagement is likely to come from multi-country programmes and from new types of partnerships, including with affiliated national committees, as per current practice of UNICEF and UNESCO in some countries. In some cases, HICs might actually be willing to finance UN presence or engagement, which could help ease financial constraints considerations. It is also important to consider the resource mobilization and partnership potential derived from having an active presence in high income countries, potential that can be leveraged to raise funding in support of the UNDS work in low income economies.

Increasing the presence of UNDS agencies in some high income countries also raises a number of operational concerns, including obtaining diplomatic accreditation for UN representatives in these countries. Over the years, some agencies have seen their representatives accredited in HICs, but diplomatic accreditation has not been consistently applied to all UN agencies in these countries. Given what will likely be a broad variation in individual agency's levels of engagement and models of presence in HICS, the organization and coordination of the UNDS as a whole in HICs will be particularly challenging. It does not seem likely that it will be appropriate to replicate the UN Resident Coordinator and Country Team model in these countries.

The review of the UN's presence and engagement with high income countries presents opportunities to test new models of inter-agency collaboration and coordination. For instance, agencies seeking to be present in these countries could utilize, when cost-effective, the infrastructure, networks and partnerships of agencies that already have a presence. In such cases, such an entity may have no staff or Resident Coordinator in a country, but may however still be able to play an active and influential role. They could also explore staff secondment options. Similarly, representation could be delegated to agencies with full accreditation in these countries. The approach taken by normative agencies, such as the Civil Aviation Authority, could also help inform UN thinking on HIC presence and engagement.

In any case, it is important to recognize that the UNDS can and should engage to some degree in HICs, while avoiding a capacity or resource draw down from lower income countries in order to do so. In reflecting on these issues, the UNDS needs to be strategic and leverage its convening role to facilitate greater Triangular, South-South, North-South and South North cooperation and dialogue. It also needs to ensure that the engagement with HIC does not, in any way, erode its normative role and standing.

6.   GOING FORWARD: ISSUES FOR FURTHER CONSIDERATION

The discussions coming out of this debate on universality point to a number of issues that require further consideration and follow up by relevant UN/DG Working Groups:

1. Universality calls for integrated approaches across the UN's development, humanitarian, peace and security and human rights contributions. The UN/DS should explore practical and effective ways in which this can be achieved in crisis, post conflict and transition contexts, without creating burdensome and duplicative systems and processes. This should include a rethink of the definitions and scope of 'operational activities for development' and the related

concept of 'graduation' out of crisis, post conflict and transition contexts. **[different aspects to be taken up by TRANSITIONS GROUP; PROGRAMME WG; LEADERSHIP WG]**

2. Further analysis is needed on the UNDS' role on cross-border, transnational and global issues and their implications for flexible adaption of reach and organizational arrangements of the UNDS, particularly to support UN voice, policy, norms and standard setting functions. **[PROGRAMME WORKING GROUP]**

3. The UNDS must contribute towards the proposed universal SDG review framework and ensure consistency of principles and standards across the review exercises at all levels: national, regional and global. **[SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WORKING GROUP] - ONGOING**

4. The discussion on organizational arrangements needs to be informed by a full mapping of different country presence and engagement models that helps identify options for UN representation and engagement at the country level, including in high income countries. Special attention needs to be drawn to the design of optimal inter-agency partnerships, and leadership collaborative approaches that maximize UN effectiveness and engagement within country and multi-country contexts. **[DOCO on mapping of presence and representation; LEADERSHIP WG on leadership and collaboration approaches]**

5. Universal reach, with or without universal presence, carries a cost. The UNDG should explore options for further clustering and sharing of business services and operations at the country, regional and global levels, based on demonstrated contributions to cost-savings, programme delivery, and results. **[BUSINESS OPS WORKING GROUP]**

It is not expected that all these action items have to be taken up at once. These elements would require sequencing of work over 2016-2017, based also on QCPR outcomes, and with support from DOCO for their completion. In addition, in some cases, they will need to be done in coordination with the HLCM and the HLCP.

Finally, the UNDG should consider if further analysis is needed on the implications of 'leave no one behind' and 'reaching the furthest behind, first' for the UNDS with other parts of the UN system and with non UN partners, in terms its policy advisory, advocacy, programmatic and operational work in support of the SDGs.