



Implementing the SDGs during the first 1000 days

Briefing note on the Latin America and Caribbean regional dialogue

Paula Lucci

Key messages

- There is still a lack of knowledge of the Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) agenda among public officials and civil society in the Latin America and Caribbean region. For the SDGs to be successful, it is essential to raise wider public awareness and engage citizens, for example through school curricula.
- There is a need to focus on generating the right kind of incentives for different actors – governments, civil society and private sector – to engage and take SDG implementation seriously, and to clarify the ways in which they can work better together.
- There is appetite for learning from the experience of early implementers in the region; South-South cooperation could help facilitate this.
- Huge data gaps make it difficult to monitor progress on some of the goals. There is a need to think practically about how big data and unofficial sources could help fill some of these gaps.
- Financing the SDG agenda will require concerted global efforts, particularly in terms of curbing illicit financial flows, lowering remittance transactions costs and accessing climate finance. However, domestic resource mobilisation will have to lead the way.



This briefing note summaries the main outcomes and findings from an event held in Bogotá (June 2016), as part of the series 'Starting Strong: the first 1000 days of the SDGs'. The aim of the event was to gather participants from across Latin America and Caribbean – representing government, civil society, academia and the private sector – to identify key actions toward addressing the unfinished business of the MDGs and how to reach those who are furthest behind in relation to the new SDGs. The series is a collaborative partnership to initiate a wider conversation around priority actions for the first three years of the SDGs – just over 1000 days – with relevant stakeholders with a regional focus.

Introduction

This briefing note is a summary of the main outcomes of the Latin America and Caribbean regional dialogue on implementing the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), with an emphasis on early action for the first 1000 days. The regional dialogue was held in Bogotá, Colombia, on 14-15 June 2016. A group of 60 actors from across the region (including representatives from civil society, national and subnational governments, academia, think-tanks and international and regional bodies) contributed to the discussions on SDG implementation. The exercise included reflection on some of the main barriers and on actions to address the political, social, economic and environmental dimensions of the SDGs.

Unless we start strong, the opportunity the SDGs present is likely to be lost. Focusing on the first 1000 days of the SDGs emphasises the important role of early actions with the potential to have a significant influence beyond the first three years. By bringing together actors from across the region, the dialogue intended to review common regional experiences, opportunities and concerns.

This briefing note highlights five critical next steps for consideration in the first 1000 days of the SDGs in Latin America and the Caribbean, both regionally and nationally. It will be presented at the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in New York in July 2016 to inform the higher-level discussions on achieving the SDGs.

Next steps: early actions to achieve the SDGs

1. There is still a lack of knowledge of the SDG agenda among public officials and civil society. For the SDGs to be successful, it is essential to raise wider public awareness and engage citizens, for example through school curricula.

There was consensus among participants that, beyond a core group of stakeholders who follow the agenda closely, there was still a high level of unawareness of the SDGs in some countries in the region. While this is more acute in the case of the wider public, in some countries it applies to public officials too.

Participants agreed there was a need for strategic communications and PR campaigns during these crucial first days, so that this can become a ‘citizen’s agenda’ – with citizens more engaged with the SDGs. Only then can local civil society and the wider public hold governments to account for implementation and keep the SDGs high on their radars.

It was also suggested that conducting more frequent surveys, for example every three to five years, on public perceptions and priorities for SDG implementation would help raise awareness and track changes in these. Existing mechanisms, such as the MY World survey, could be utilised to this effect. Participants also discussed the possibility of taking the agenda into schools through primary and secondary education curricula. The need to

embed the SDGs in municipalities and think about the role of local government was also stressed.

Finally, some participants emphasised two key characteristics of the SDGs that need communicating: a human rights approach towards their implementation, with government and society making principled commitments; and the need to reach the most vulnerable populations, in line with the ‘Leave no one behind’ principle.

2. There is a need to focus on generating the right kind of incentives for different actors – governments, civil society and private sector – to engage and take SDG implementation seriously, and clarify ways in which they can work better together.

At the global level, the HLPF is the central UN platform to oversee progress on the SDGs. Participants called for the HLPF to foster a sense of healthy competition among countries of similar income groups submitting national progress reports on the SDGs (similar to what other rankings, like the Human Development Index, do). This could help incentivise positive behaviour, provide a platform for sharing success stories and inspire others to act.

In terms of implementation at national level, participants highlighted that neither the best nor the worst of agendas, or the most or the least ambitious, stood a chance of success without political will. Provided there is wider awareness of the agenda among citizens and civil society organisations, their demands and scrutiny will help put pressure on governments and incentivise them to act. In addition, participants raised the need to generate incentives that deliver coherent long-term implementation plans across electoral cycles. Robust planning and monitoring systems, and informed and vigilant civil society organisations that use data and evidence to support advocacy and political activism, will be crucial ingredients.

Participants also stressed the need for real multi-stakeholder approaches, with actors working in a collaborative way. In the case of civil society organisations, many participants mentioned the need for institutional channels for their participation throughout the policy cycle (i.e. from formulation through to monitoring and evaluation), and particularly at early stages of policy formulation, rather than just symbolic engagement. The need to include channels for their participation at regional level (e.g. at the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean Forum for Sustainable Development) and global level (e.g. with the HLPF) was emphasised.

Finally, in the case of the business sector, participants highlighted the need to look at market mechanisms that could create the right kinds of incentives for businesses to align their profit-seeking motives with sustainable practices. The need for strong stable regulatory systems was also emphasised.

3. There is appetite for learning from the experience of early implementers in the region; South-South cooperation could help facilitate this.

Some countries in the region have already started mapping existing policies against the SDGs, assigning responsibilities to different ministries and identifying priorities and gaps in policy and data to track progress. For instance, Colombia has created a specific commission to institutionalise implementation of the SDGs. The government is also looking at sequencing targets, defining priorities from now until 2018, taking the agenda to subnational levels and mapping the activities of different stakeholders to assess where there might be opportunities to collaborate. Costa Rica has established a high-level council and technical council, spanning multiple stakeholders and ministries, and is simultaneously mapping data gaps on indicators. Participants noted the value in sharing these early experiences with other countries that are less advanced in their implementation plans; others raised the need to overcome challenges, such as how to engage ministries that have not been involved to date and embed the SDGs in their plans. The need to clearly identify barriers to achieving different SDGs was also highlighted.

The holistic nature of the agenda and the close interrelationship between different SDGs was also emphasised – meaning that falling behind on some targets could have negative effects on others. In this sense, planning and budgeting are rigid processes that do not facilitate inter-sectoral work; they need to change in this regard.

Further, these processes rarely allow for the integration of different stakeholders. Participatory budgeting was mentioned as an example of a process that is more open to different voices and needs. The creation of fora for dialogue that bring together government, private sector actors and philanthropists was also discussed as a way of better coordinating investments.

4. Huge data gaps make it difficult to monitor progress on some of the goals. There is a need to think practically about how big data and unofficial sources could help fill some of these gaps.

In the framework of global indicators, only 96 out of 230 indicators have been classified as Tier 1, which means they have conceptual clarity and an established methodology. The data community has never before met with a challenge of this scale, particularly given that disaggregated data (e.g. by gender, age, location, ethnicity, etc.) are required to align with the principle to ‘leave no one behind’.

Strengthening statistical systems will therefore be key to effectively monitor progress towards the goals. The need to

improve the exchange and coordination of data generated by different government agencies (e.g. administrative records) was also discussed. In some cases, sharing information is not the problem; rather, statistical offices do not have enough capacity to process it. Concerns about the capacity of subnational governments to measure progress on the SDGs were particularly emphasised.

There are a number of countries undertaking research to reveal national data gaps (e.g. Colombia and Ecuador, among others), which can be learnt from. Once gaps are identified, a strategic plan can be developed that identifies who has the capacity to fill them. There will be a need to innovate in the sources of information tapped, which include private sector and civil society sources. Statistical offices could become hubs to gather, validate and manage information taken from several institutions to ensure quality standards are taken into account. In Colombia, the National Statistical Office has been working on ‘Smart Data’ – an innovation group looking at how to leverage different data sources usefully – for example using satellite data to measure land consumption rates to monitor SDG 11. Such strategies, if successful, could be scaled up or applied to other problem areas.

Finally, one participant emphasised the transformational nature of the agenda, calling for measures that capture broader changes in the ways we work and in citizens’ perceptions of this agenda.

5. Financing the SDG agenda will require concerted global efforts, particularly in terms of curbing illicit financial flows, lowering remittances transactions costs and accessing climate finance. However, domestic resource mobilisation will have to lead the way.

In terms of global efforts, participants emphasised the need to curb the \$150 billion lost in illicit financial flows on average each year,¹ to bring the transaction cost of remittances down (given the important role they play in the region), to think of financial transaction taxes and to harness climate finance. Participants also discussed responsible portfolio investment when it comes to foreign direct investment and bilateral investment treaties and the need for governments to create robust constitutional and legal frameworks with entry and especially exit rules that protect them.

While a large part of the conversation was devoted to global financing, partly because many Latin American countries have fairly good tax systems, the bulk of the resources for the SDGs would be drawn from domestic sources. In relation to the national level, participants highlighted the need to improve debt profiles and tax systems (which in some countries could yield an extra 2% of gross domestic product), including progressive taxation. In the case of public–private partnerships

1 ECLAC (2016) *Horizons 2030. Equality at the centre of sustainable development. Summary*. Santiago de Chile: ECLAC.

(PPP), participants stressed that these were not always benign or cost-efficient, and needed to be treated with caution, particularly with regard to social sectors such as health and education. For PPPs to work, the right foundations, safeguards and prerequisites need to be in place. In terms of loans from multilaterals, countries need to propose innovative, integrated solutions that align with the transformational ethos of the SDGs, rather than reframing ‘business as usual’ with an SDG lens.

In addition, it was suggested that, while there is a great deal of discussion of financing at global and national levels, less attention is paid to the regional and subnational levels. Some SDGs cannot be achieved without regional cooperation, and some ‘shocks’ (such as pandemics) will affect entire regions. Yet many of the SDGs are delivered at the subnational level, so we also need local accountability and proper resourcing.

Finally, and in connection with discussions about what a ‘transformational’ agenda means, participants emphasised that this was not only about having more resources but also about how those resources are deployed and in what ways actors work together to coordinate investments and deliver on the goals.

