An Overview of the Agenda 2030 and its SDGs: What is the status of implementation?

Remarks to the NANHRI 11th Biennial Conference, November 2017

Allison Corkery, Center for Economic and Social Rights

Many thanks for the opportunity to be here today. The Center for Economic and Social Rights is an organization that has worked closely with national human rights institutions for close to a decade. We've also engaged extensively in the debates and negotiations leading up to and following on from the adoption of Agenda 2030 in 2015. The opportunity to speak to how these two dimension of our work intersects is very welcome.

I've been tasked with a 'scene setting' role. In other words, to give an overview of Agenda 2030 and take stock of where we're at in its implementation. But, I want to do more than that in my remarks; I want to be a little provocative, as well, in order to encourage rich debate and discussion over the next two days. Because, in many ways, we're not where we should be two years in to this agenda and there are real challenges in ensuring its transformative potential.

The SDGs explicitly aim at 'Transforming Our World' (indeed that's the title of the whole Agenda). It envisages a world of "universal respect for human rights and human dignity, the rule of law, justice, equality and non-discrimination."

Some of the significant qualities of the SDGs include that they:

- Are universal, in that they apply to all countries – a critical shift from the MDGs in terms of the expectations the SDGs place on lower income <u>and</u> higher income countries.

- Focus on inequality and leaving no one behind – acknowledging that overall progress is not enough. (Over the MDG era, inequalities worsened in most countries.

- Are rights-based, to an extent (more so than the MDGs, certainly)

- Bring together the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development under a huge umbrella of 17 Goals; 169 targets; and 232 indicators.

The primary mechanisms for implementing the SDGs include:

- National development plans – in many countries these have been updated, to varying degrees, to take into account the SDGs.

- Institutional arrangements – some countries have established inter-ministerial committees; in others leadership comes from the executive office; some have assigned different goals to different ministries; in others, the planning ministry has responsibility for all of them.

- Financing – overseas development assistance still to play a role, but increasing emphasis on domestic resource mobilization; taxation – including cracking down on tax evasion and avoidance; and 'innovative financing'.

However, for all the talk of transformation, we are seeing a lot of business-as-usual:

First, the SDGs do not yet appear to have had a great deal of influence in meaningfully shaping – or reshaping – national development plans or overseas development assistance strategies. Instead, existing activities – many of them left over from MDG era – simply get re-branded as SDG activities.

As a result, there is still a striking lack of "policy coherence", to use the SDG jargon. This means that the SDGs are being pursued through small-scale, targeted development policies and programs, but there is no holistic reform of the broader policy ecosystem. So, we are not really seeing governments rethinking macroeconomic, trade, or land policies in light of the SDGs, for example. Many decisions about these kinds of policies are not moving in the direction of the SDGs. In fact, they are often undermining them.

What are some examples of this?

- Financing for Development: This week, the Paradise Papers are making front page news for uncovering – in even more detail – how the rich and powerful hide their wealth in tax havens. Combatting illicit financial flows – which by some estimates rob as much as USD 50 billion from African countries every year – is a target under Goal 16. But, political will to reform the global financial system remains weak.

- Austerity: In a context of limited government revenue, many countries are planning significant cuts to social spending and public sector wage bills. Many are also increasing taxes such VAT, which are regressive because they affect poor people more than wealth ones. According to one authoritative study, Africa will be one of the hardest hit regions in this regard. These policies – which are often championed by international financial institutions who are hard to ignore – are incompatible with SDG promises such as implementing universal social protection floors, or making health coverage universally accessible.

- Excessive corporate influence in SDG implementation: Obviously, the private sector has a key role to play in sustainable development, not least in creating decent jobs. But in many instances large-scale public-private-partnerships are being rolled out – some even involve outsourcing public services – without transparency, adequate safeguards, impact assessments or consultation, which is very concerning from a rights-perspective and could undermine SDG achievement overall.

- Crackdowns on civil society: Goal 16 promises to protect fundamental freedoms and make decision-making more participatory. And yet as you know, in many countries governments are imposing draconian restrictions on civil society, impeding their ability to operate and to organize freely. This doesn't only threaten Goal 16, but the whole agenda – civil society and social movements are key partners and implementers.

Another huge challenge is the weak accountability in place for the SDGs. The Agenda doesn't provide concrete guidance about accountability. There has been mixed progress at national level, but at international level the High-Level Political Forum and the 'Voluntary National Reviews' have so far not offered an opportunity for meaningful monitoring and review.

The accountability conversation is often limited to data, with the 'data revolution' getting a lot of airtime. More and better data is of course crucial, but it will not automatically lead to accountability without the right incentives, systems and processes.

This not to say that the SDGs cannot be achieved. They can. But, not through business-as-usual development policies.

So, what does this mean for NHRIs? What role can you play in ensuring that 2030 truly is a transformative agenda?

There is no doubt that a human rights approach is absolutely crucial to effective and inclusive implementation. A human rights approach is the antithesis of 'business-as-usual' because it insists that people are agents not objects of development; that direct <u>and</u> indirect discrimination and substantive equality be a central focus; and that existing power hierarchies be meaningfully addressed.

As independent accountability mechanisms tasked with ensuring human rights commitments are upheld, NHRIs have a unique and potentially powerful role to play in amplifying the case for human rights-centered implementation and providing concrete ideas for how to do so. In particular, NHRIs can and should be part of the push to fill the accountability gaps in the 2030 Agenda, including through human rights-centered monitoring of implementation. This might be through advising the government on its official data collection and monitoring efforts, or complementing them through independent monitoring.

Importantly, rights-centered monitoring needs to go beyond Goal 16, which is commonly labelled the 'human rights goal', given its focus on peace, good governance, access to justice etc. It's a fundamentally important goal, of course. But human rights – particularly economic, social and cultural rights – underpin the rest of the agenda too. Historically, these rights have tended to receive less attention or been dedicated fewer resources.

That said, because they encompass such a broad range of topics, it's easy to 'work on the SDGs'. But, over the next few days, we need critical reflection on what NHRIs should prioritize and how they can be strategic in leveraging the SDGs to advance human rights

Questions that might shape the conversations over coming days about engaging strategically with the SDGs include:

- Where is NHRI expertise most needed and most likely to be influential?
- In what ways can the SDGs support NHRIs in addressing existing priorities? In what ways should they shift priorities?
- How can NHRIs identify the most promising accountability channels at national, regional and international levels?
- What support do NHRIs need to build up their expertise and influence on the SDGs, for example to more effectively monitor development and socio-economic policies from a human rights perspective?

These are all questions that there is a wealth of expertise on here and I look forward to continuing to explore them with you over the remainder of the conference.