

“It Is Not a North-South Agenda Anymore”

Interview with Amina Mohammed, Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning, on the status of the negotiation process of the Post-2015 development agenda, major discussion forums, input of academia, innovative financing instruments, accountability mechanisms and Member States’ ownership of the process.

Ms. Mohammed, you have been named Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning shortly before the Rio+20 Summit in June 2012. What did Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon say to you when he asked you, why he needed an advisor?

Well, he did not exactly say why. First thing he spoke to me about was that he had seen my work on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) in Nigeria. He said: Now that you have seen how it is on the local level, how about the international level? So, I believe appointing someone who comes from the South and who has worked on the MDGs was a good thing. For me it is an incredible privilege to be part of helping shape that agenda. It is an agenda that Member States have decided to take leadership and ownership on and I understand them, because I come from the country level. I struggled with the MDGs when we first got them. We asked: How do we own this? So, it was a good opportunity and an incredible responsibility. It was not an easy decision for me to say “Yes, I will do it.”

We have two discussion processes going on, one on post-2015 MDGs and the other on Sustainable Development Goals, the so-called SDGs, following the Rio+20 Summit.

We only have one process.

It is already merged?

Yes. Post-2015 is recognition of a successor framework for the MDGs. And what was set in motion was not a parallel process. It was thinking through for the next three years. We want to get a set of SDGs that will be a successor. We want to look at the financing framework. We want to look at the technologies issue. There are a number of issues that have to be pulled together to end up with a holistic Post-2015 framework. It has to be seen as actions on the way to Post-2015 and not parallel processes.

Will we then have one set of goals?

One set of goals, a universal framework and it will be using sustainable development to achieve it.

So, it is a method and not a goal as such?

No, sustainable development is a strategy to achieve the eradication of poverty. We will certainly get a set of goals. How we call them, we will find out when we get there. What Member States have done so far is to ask the UN Secretariat to look at a set of SDGs. And then we will put that into the framework at the end.

Are the twelve goals that the High-level Panel of Eminent Persons laid forward a solid structure to build on? Or is it just one of several proposals?

It is probably the most informed set of goals that there is around. If you look at the membership of this panel: it was fairly representative of the existing challenges and new complexities that we have in development. So, I believe it is a very well-informed set of goals. But other issues that have been brought in by different groups have been helpful to it. They are a good set and that is what has helped lay the foundation for many discussions that we are having around responding to sustainable development.

What are the main discussions forums?

The two legitimate main fora in the intergovernmental process are the ›Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals‹ and the ›Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing‹. These are the two bodies of work that we all have to feed into. In September 2014 they will each present their results to the General Assembly and the Assembly will give it to the Secretary-General to put it into one “synthesis” document. The other fora have been what the United Nations themselves have been able to put in place. They have held thematic consultations, the work done by regional commissions, the social media with ›myworld‹ [<http://www.myworld2015.org/>] or the Sustainable Development Solutions Network (SDSN). There are literally tens of hundreds of responses that have come in. What has been useful is that the UN system has set up a ›One Secretariat‹ for that and we also have a technical task team that helps inform the Member States.

Which department is it assigned to?

The ›One Secretariat‹ has been set up under the auspices of the Secretary-General’s Executive office, with support from the UNDG, the UN Development Group, and includes platforms like the UN Global Compact, the SDSN. The secretariat of the High-level Panel also sat within it. The Technical Support Team is co-chaired by DESA and UNDP.

How does the SDSN come into play?

The SDSN itself is an initiative that really tries to put everybody from that community around the table to make sure we get the best science and academic input. They have provided a report for us which contains also a set of goals. So the SDSN is endorsed by the Secretary-General and run by Professor Jeffrey Sachs, anchored in Columbia University.

What about the Scientific Advisory Board of the Secretary-General?

It has just been put in place. We hope that it will begin to give some input into this. I think that we can’t rush them into doing things. A lot of what we have seen in terms of science they have been involved in one way or another anyway because these are eminent persons that are consulted through the whole process. What is going to be important for us is how they advise on the implementation. This is a process that we cannot say we fail at and have no country ownership because it is the Member States that are running the show right now, taking leadership, owning it. Implementation is going to be the big thing. How well are we going to facilitate countries to do that?

How about monitoring the implementation?

There should be an accountability mechanism. Post-2015 is a different agenda that talks about partnership. It does not talk about waving the finger from one place to another. It is not a North-South agenda anymore. Post-2015 is a much more universal take at it. So, it is about facilitating countries. It is about all of us being fit for purpose to implement this agenda. In Europe, for example, if we are really going to invest in economic transformation, are we ready for the trade? Are we ready for technology? Are we ready to invest in the kind of skills that we need to have for our own youth in Europe to engage with a world that is going to be improving and growing with more people having more say in their livelihoods?

Two major criticisms of the MDGs were that they did not include human rights and the other that only developing countries were the addressees. Are these omissions rectified in the new set of goals?

First and foremost: the MDGs did not miss human rights, they were never intended to specifically address them. That we do not have a dedicated human rights goal does not mean that the MDGs do

not speak to human rights. Not at all. They spoke to education, they spoke to health, they spoke to women, they spoke to access to water – these are rights.

They did not use the term but they were ...

They did not use the term. But that does not mean you did not get rights. And we know what it means for a woman to have access to water, or for a girl child to go to school. These are rights that have been achieved. But on the issue of whether the MDGs were just North-South: absolutely. That is what they were intended to be. This was a poverty lens. It was about ODA [Official Development Assistance] and about bringing all those decades of efforts on health and education, for example, that did not work together in one framework, and to say let's have the MDGs and see if we could do the very minimum. So it is easy to do hindsight in 2014. But the intention was never that.

I think it has been rectified because finally it is not the first time we have discussed sustainable development. Two decades later from 1992, we now can talk about sustainable development as the only way to really get everyone to say that you do social inclusion, that economic growth is people-centered, that we do take cognizance of the environment in a real way, not by just saying: Let's have a look at desertification or see whether we can reduce the number of slum dwellers. No. We have to take this seriously. Climate change is real and how do we integrate all of this into a better, more sustainable way of living. How real this is going to be we will see when we get the set of goals and start to implement at the national level. Sustainable development is a massive commitment that is needed by people, that is needed by governments. It is needed throughout all aspects and sectors, and thus the business-as-usual has to change.

And a commitment by the business sector, as well.

Business is going to be a big part of this. How we speak to business and the private sector in the context of development is also new. There are regions in the South that haven't engaged in the development agenda the way in which we practiced it for the past twenty, thirty years.

Have *not* engaged?

Have not. Where did we have Latin America? Where did we have Eastern Europe? Where do we have a lot of South East Asia, the Pacific Islands? How are they included? And when you really look at the Arab world, many of the countries were achieving the MDGs, but their people did not have a political voice and they were and remain instable. So it is a difficult agenda. But it is trying to right the wrongs, to make sure we do not leave anyone behind, falling through the cracks, and that it does represent a better world for everyone: eradicating poverty, sharing prosperity, and dealing with inequalities.

And how will the new agenda be financed?

The means of implementation will have to be broad. The easiest way to answer that is first and foremost: ODA has to be a part of this. Member States have to meet their existing commitments, target ODA better, maybe by focusing on the LDCs [Least Developed Countries], and get a better effectiveness out of it. But ODA is only a slim slice of the pie. This is a big agenda. We need to unlock resources.

So, whether they are sovereign wealth funds or private equity or ›tax havens‹: It is one thing to know where the tax haven is, another thing to get the instruments to get the money back to the country. It is another thing to make sure that a country has a strong tax system, strong governance and institutions to make sure the money does not go out again through the back door. These are elements that need to be put together. Money will come from better use of resources and return of illicit funds. But waiting to unlock such resources should not be interpreted as the barrier to development. If you have a good investment plan for economic transformation, why should it necessarily be put on hold while you are waiting for other such resources? We have to look at what it

will require to make an enabling environment possible for countries to exploit their own wealth for the good of their people.

What is the envisaged period?

15 years: 2030. You cannot make it too short but you cannot make it too long either. So, the 15 years seems to be a general consensus. We have to find an accountability framework now that continues to undertake peer review, to measure, to report, on a regular basis. I think the MDGs were good in the five years junctures we had, but we need an annual reporting system that keeps countries at the local level responsive.

Will it still be voluntary for the countries?

It is still voluntary. The real challenge here is to ensure that the Member States take ownership of this. They have no excuses compelling enough for them not to implement. We could understand the excuse for the kind of ›prescribed‹ MDGs. It was a group of really smart people in New York, who put that all together. It took a while for everybody to understand the MDGs, for the owners at the country level to swallow them and sometimes regurgitate them. But in 2015, we don't have any excuse. And what we [as UN Secretariat] have to make sure is that: Member States ensure the next agenda is informed by business, by civil society, and that Governments represented at the UN in New York speak to their counterparts throughout Government at the country level. In that way, we hope to have an agenda that we can hold people accountable to. The new thing is that we need to go beyond monitoring and evaluation. We are discussing an accountability framework. How do you get people accountable in a non-legally binding agreement? That is a big challenge. But that is work in progress.

If you have crises like Syria and Crimea it seems to be especially difficult to draw the attention of governments and civil society to long-term development issues.

With the development agenda, the chapeau is that we have to get rid of the poverty of a billion people. That's the 15-year-challenge. If we don't do that, migration will continue to be a problem. Instability will continue to be a problem. Youth will have no future. Those are the implications of a development agenda which is not holistic. The new agenda is not about ODA. ODA is important, but this is about really trading better. It's about partnering better. It's about looking in the mirror and seeing what problems of inequality exist in one's own country, or where one has to take tough decisions to make the necessary changes to our unsustainable lifestyles. Otherwise, consumption and production is not going to be an issue that we can ever hope to deal with. If you set the standard of lifestyles at this [unsustainable] level, China's billions, and India and Africa are going to aspire to that and you cannot stop them. And that means that we have a world that will explode.

It is a huge problem, indeed.

It is a problem, but it is also an opportunity. Young people can change it. They can make people matter more than things. Young people can do it. We older peopleneed to step aside and help them do so. That is what I tell my children anyway.

The interview took place on 20 March 2014 in Berlin. The interviewer was Anja Papenfuss, Editor-in-Chief, VEREINTE NATIONEN – German Review on the United Nations, www.dgvn.de/journal-vereinte-nationen/. The German translation was published in VEREINTE NATIONEN, Vol. 62, No. 3, 2014, pp.115–118.