FROM WORDS TO ACTION:

USAID's Integration of the Sustainable Development Goals

Save the Children

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

President Barack Obama's September 2015 speech to the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) was the capstone of his Administration's efforts to shape the U.N.'s 2030 Agenda or Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). "Today, we commit ourselves to new Sustainable Development Goals, including our goal of ending extreme poverty in our world," the President said.[1]

For years prior to the United Nations (U.N.) approval of the SDGs in September, The White House, the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) and officials from other U.S. foreign assistance agencies touted the importance of the SDGs. President Obama discussed eradicating extreme poverty – one of the central SDGs – during three State of the Union addresses.[2] The U.S. Government (USG), led by the U.S. Department of State and USAID, also made important contributions to the development of the SDGs through its engagement with the U.N. process over the past three years.

UN Sustainable Development Summit.

But now the United States – and the world – confronts the more difficult task of integrating the ambitious SDGs into the daily programming, policy and practice of foreign assistance and national development. This policy brief provides an analysis of the Administration's early thinking on how it will integrate the transformative agenda of the SDGs into its work. We focus primarily on USAID, although our analysis includes other U.S. foreign policy agencies, such as the State Department.

In addition to this analysis, we provide recommendations as to how USAID can expeditiously begin to concretize the SDGs through its overseas development work. Integrating the lofty SDGs into the workaday U.S. foreign policy and programming process will be challenging. Our analysis, based on a review of relevant documents and interviews with key USAID and State Department officials, has led us to the following two broad conclusions:

- USAID has only begun to conceptualize how the Sustainable Development Goals will be integrated into its global work. USAID's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) is leading the internal and interagency planning process.[3] One respondent indicated that, "It will take a while to figure it out."

- There is neither clear commitment nor plan in place for USAID to measure alignment of its policies and practices with the SDGs. Respondents indicated that they do not yet know how USAID or other U.S. agencies will assess their progress in integrating the SDGs. One respondent said, "We are still in a dynamic environment about what it means for the U.S. to integrate the SDGs."

RECOMMENDATIONS

Save the Children recommends that the following principles guide USAID's efforts to integrate the SDGs into its strategies and agenda. The recommendations are divided into categories of 1) how USAID operations should adapt; 2) how USAID can support country-led implementation; and 3) how USAID can provide leadership in shaping U.N. process:

USAID Operational Adaptation to the SDGs

1. Deliver concrete results in the first year

It will be essential for U.S. leadership and for the credibility of the 2030 Agenda to make early commitments and show progress in meeting them. The U.S. Government should take advantage of key global moments in 2016 – such as the World Humanitarian Summit in Istanbul, Turkey and the Summer Olympic Games in Rio, Brazil – to announce commitments on the SDGs. To accomplish this, USAID should support the appointment of a U.S. Government SDG point of contact to monitor progress of SDG action plans across U.S. agencies. While the USG has announced several new partnerships to support the SDGs, it will be important to be explicit on the outcomes and progress they seek in each. In the short-term, it will be vital for USAID to develop objectives and metrics for SDG implementation. As part of this process, USAID should set clear priorities and benchmarks on implementation for the remainder of the Obama Administration. This includes defining where and how it will prioritize funds in areas that fit within USAID's comparative advantage and propose a path forward to further concretize SDG implementation metrics for the next president who will take office in 2017.

2. Become a vanguard country on "leave no one behind"

To realize its recently released "Vision for Ending Extreme Poverty,"[4] USAID must prioritize the needs of the world's poorest and most marginalized people in its programming. Because these are the most difficult populations to reach, often living in the most challenging contexts, this effort

must also mobilize new leadership, resources and tools. USAID should encourage the use of "stepping stone" equity targets in the SDG plans of partner countries. These "stepping stone" equity targets should be developed to ensure that the poorest and most disadvantaged groups are making sufficient rates of progress to achieve the SDGs and that gaps between the advantaged and disadvantaged groups are closing. In essence, these targets should concretely measure decreases in inequality across relevant SDG indicators.

Countries can set these targets by first identifying the most disadvantaged social and economic groups; and second, by calculating the rate of improvement required for each group to achieve the SDG targets and identifying where each group will need to be in 2022. Additionally, USAID should disaggregate its data and provide resources, training and tools to build in-country capacity to do the same. Data should be disaggregated by a number of variables – such as income, gender, age, race, ethnicity, migration status, disability and geographic location – to give a more accurate picture of who is faring poorly and to guide efforts to get them back on track. Finally, USAID must be ready to act to address barriers and social exclusion occurring at the national level. Evidence shows that giving marginalized groups, including women and girls, a stronger role in designing and driving development initiatives leads to the best development outcomes.

3. Provide technical assistance to conflict-affected and fragile states (CAFS)

Given that the majority of the world's extremely poor live in fragile and conflict-affected states, significant USAID resources and attention should continue to be directed to these countries in the coming years. USAID has been working with its partners to adopt a more iterative and adaptive planning and implementation process in the field. This "adaptive management" conversation could be a vehicle for allowing more flexibility in shifting approaches as needed in conflict-affected and fragile states. Development and humanitarian funding steams should work together and be mutually reinforcing.

RECOMMENDATIONS

USAID's adaptive management approach will be critical to success in conflict-affected and fragile states (CAFS). A recent Save the Children study of 55 CAF countries and their record on the U.N. Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) found that CAFS lack data on even the most basic human development indicators. With a much larger agenda represented by the SDGs, establishing the basic benchmarks of social and economic progress should be a high priority. USAID should do more to help CAFS with their data needs, establishing a minimum level of data – a data floor – that every country, regardless of its circumstances, will gather on human development and building the capacity of national statistical offices to track indicators as well as deliver results.

4. Ensure integrated approaches to achieving outcomes

The U.S. Government has strongly supported a multi-dimensional, holistic approach to the design of the SDGs and USAID should avoid creating siloes by single-sector planning in implementation. While inter-agency thematic working groups may create action plans associated with each goal, important interrelated goals such as ending extreme poverty (goal 1), gender equality (goal 5), reducing inequalities (goal 10) and peace, justice and strong institutions (goal 16), should be delivered across the entire framework.

Achieving the 2030 Agenda will not be possible using a siloed, goal-by-goal approach. For example, progress in combatting maternal and infant deaths is dependent upon progress on clean water, roads and electricity. With a deeply interrelated agenda, USAID can ensure linkages are made across goals throughout implementation. This is consistent with USAID's new mission statement and "Vision for Ending Extreme Poverty." While USAID will seek to take a comprehensive approach to the SDGs and may not seek to measure success against specific SDGs, it will be important for USAID to set out benchmarks and concrete measures of success within this integrated approach. Furthermore, USAID should be proponents of reporting on goals 1, 5, 10 and 16 across all other goals, at the U.N. High Level Political Forums.

USAID's Support of Country-Led Implementation

5. Institutionalize a country-owned approach

Countries need the flexibility to direct resources where they are needed most to achieve the SDGs. In each country where it works, USAID should focus on the priorities identified by partner country governments and local governments, civil society institutions and citizens and build capacity so that partner countries can address those priorities in a sustainable way. We know that USAID Country Development Cooperation Strategies are being developed in collaboration with country partners and are designed to align with country priorities. USAID should double down on its current efforts to integrate its plans with partner country national development and SDG strategies and provide assistance to increase domestic resource mobilization and institution building. Adherence to country ownership and local participation should be measured systematically with standardized metrics to gauge progress and provide a foundation for comparison across projects and countries. Country-led development that is transparent and accountable to all stakeholders must be at the center of USAID's strategy to eliminate extreme poverty and meet the other goals in the 2030 Agenda.

6. Support citizen reporting and accountability mechanisms at the country level

The U.S. Government should support a strong global accountability mechanism to track progress against the goals, including clear avenues for civil society reporting and participation. For its part, USAID should support robust national accountability mechanisms in each country, as well as transparent information sharing, strengthening the citizen-state compact so that people are able to hold their governments to account and demand the services they require to realize their full potential. Specifically, USAID should promote clear avenues for civil society participation in the national reviews and independent civil society reporting on government process during the High Level Political Forums.

USAID Leadership in U.N. Processes

7. Reject the "pick and choose" approach to SDG implementation

While particular goals may align more easily with USAID priorities, the U.S. Government should embrace the full SDG agenda, implementing all 17 goals and relevant 169 targets. Some goals and targets will not apply to every country; land-locked countries such as Mali need not report on the oceans goal, for example. Furthermore, both donor countries and developing countries should have the flexibility to prioritize areas of the SDG agenda for which they are positioned to make a particularly valuable contribution. USAID should deliver strong public statements on the U.S. commitment to the entire set of SDGs. USAID should also make concrete contributions to building technical capacities and financing to allow countries to report on the whole agenda. Finally, USAID should reinforce with country partners the importance of reporting on all goals as they are helping countries to develop their SDG action plans. No country should strategically opt out of goals that they may have objected to during the negotiations, such as gender equality (goal 5) or peace, justice and strong institutions (goal 16). Nor should any country be allowed to ignore certain goals entirely, even as they focus on some more than others.

Ignoring difficult goals degrades and diminishes the value of the whole. Through an ambitious U.S. implementation effort spanning all 17 goals, the USG would send a strong signal to the international community regarding the value of the entire SDG agenda.

8. Prioritize policy coherence in addition to program interventions

As the largest bilateral donor, the United States makes a sizeable contribution to achieving the SDGs through its programmatic interventions. At the same time, efforts to achieve policy reform are equally important and can be transformative. USAID's influential role at the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development – Development Assistance Committee (OECD-DAC), for example, could be used to support efforts, such as stemming illicit financial flows, reducing transaction costs for remittances, ending fossil fuel subsidies and achieving non-discriminatory trade rules. In addition to reforming global rules, USAID should continue to play a supportive role in reforming ineffective U.S. aid policies, including tied aid, earmarks and presidential initiatives that restrict needed flexibility in prioritization and program design. USAID should also pursue increased flexibility in using government-to-government assistance where appropriate.

Children listen to a radio programme (designed and made by children) in Hodeida, Yemen. The radio series is part of Save the Children's GLOBAL TO LOCAL – EVERY ONE campaign, which enables children – especially those displaced by conflict – to share their experiences and express their feelings about the situation in their country.

PHOTO: ALI ASHWAL/SAVE THE CHILDREN

ANALYTICAL APPROACH

In determining USAID's readiness to implement the SDGs into its programming, policy and practices, this policy brief organizes the analysis of documents and interviews according to five primary themes:

- **Leadership:** Including specific leadership positions dedicated to ensuring that USAID policies, priorities and programs are aligned with SDG priorities;

- **Mandate:** Including publicly stated, well-defined commitments by USAID and other agencies to adapt their work to align with the SDG framework;

- **Capacity:** Including designating staff to ensure that USAID priorities are aligned with the SDGs, particularly at the mission level and in the field;

- **Resources:** Including specific lines in the budget and resources dedicated to the integration of the SDGs into USAID's work;

- **Accountability:** Including how USAID will measure its own success in aligning its work with the SDGs.

The next section of the policy brief will provide history and context for USAID and other USG agencies' stance on integrating the SDGs into their work through a review of relevant documents. This section includes a brief historical review of USG positions on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), with a particular focus on the George W. Bush Administration. Our core analysis based on the five variables discussed above will follow.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

Save the Children's Youth Delegation at the United Nations General Assembly. Sep. 2015.

U.S. ENGAGEMENT IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE SDGS

At the SDG Summit during the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA) last fall, President Obama announced a U.S. commitment to "achieving the SDGs while I'm president and long after." The Administration has expressed a deep commitment to the post-2015 process for several years, referencing this commitment publicly more often and more positively than the Bush Administration discussed the MDGs[5] President Obama's speech at UNGA, stating his commitment to implement the SDGs in the United States, as they are consistent with American values and aspirations, was a promising sign in the final year of the administration.

While the Obama Administration and U.S. development agencies also rhetorically embraced the forerunner to the SDGs – the MDGs – analysts have noted that, "American programs still have tended to retain their individual identities and targets, rather than being specifically keyed to the MDGs."[6] That said, significant work on the MDGs occurred in the final five years with initiatives such as "A Call to Action" and "A Promise Renewed" aiming to meet MDG targets 4 and 5 on reducing preventable maternal and child deaths.

The goal of this policy brief is to ascertain how the U.S. Government and USAID in particular, will do things differently to integrate the SDGs more fully into planning, policy and programs than was the case with the MDGs.

The SDGS in the Inter-agency Process

Most public discussion of the MDGs and SDGs has come from USAID, but discussion of how the SDGs might shape U.S. foreign assistance policy can also be found in other U.S. Government foreign policy documents, including those that articulate the inter-agency process.

The 90-page 2015 Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR) mentions the post-2015 process just once, stating that the SDGs:

> *"Represent an important platform…to galvanize global action to meet President Obama's challenge to end extreme poverty, to promote opportunities for transformative changes and to advance inclusive economic development, transparent and accountable governance, the empowerment of women and girls and environmental sustainability."*[7]

President Barack Obama meets with John Podesta, Counselor to the President, in the Oval Office, Jan. 29, 2015.

The QDDR describes the SDGs as "a clear vision" to "rally around". To play a leading role in shaping the SDGs, President Obama appointed John Podesta, co-chair of his transition team and former President Bill Clinton's Chief of Staff, to represent the United States on the U.N. Secretary General's High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. The USG set up several inter-agency thematic working groups to provide input, which was conveyed through the U.S. mission to the U.N. in New York.[8] The White House took an active role in coordinating this inter-agency process. Broad themes championed by the USG included the need for measurable, clear targets and a focus on maternal and child health and survival as well as broad health issues.[9] The USG also emphasized: empowering women and girls; peace, good governance and strong institutions; inclusive economic growth and eradicating extreme poverty; and integrating sustainability into the development agenda; among other issues.

USAID's Integration of the Post-2015 Process into its Planning and Policy

As the U.S. Government's largest foreign assistance agency, USAID is crucial to any USG commitment to integrate the SDGs into U.S. foreign assistance. This review indicates that USAID under the Obama Administration communicated positively about its role in achieving global agreement on the SDGs.

Former USAID Administrator Rajiv Shah emphasized that 2015 was a "critically important year" for development,

referencing important U.N. processes like the July 2015 Financing for Development conference, in addition to the global agreement on the SDGs in the fall.[10] Alex Thier, former head the agency's Bureau for Policy, Planning and Learning, stated that the SDGs, "are likely to redefine USAID's target of ending extreme poverty."[11]

USAID released its vision to end extreme poverty in New York in September during the SDG Summit. Other USAID publications state that the SDGs will "drive the agenda" going forward.[12] This discourse is positive, but lacks specific policies or tools to integrate the goals into foreign assistance programs and plans on the ground.[13]

A Focus on Global Health, Particularly Maternal and Child Health and Survival

Our review of public documents and our work on global health show a particular focus among U.S. international development agencies on aligning the global health sector with SDG goals. These documents seem to indicate that the role of the SDGs is most discussed by USAID officials around issues such as maternal and child health, data for health, sexual and reproductive health and eliminating global diseases such as malaria.

Deputy Administrator Alfonso Lenhardt has defined the transition from the MDGs to the SDGs as an opportunity for progress on global health, specifically on global health data.[14] USAID staff have also spoken of their family planning work as, "a critical link for post-2015 success", even positioning USAID's family planning work within

Tony Pipa at the first drafting session of the outcome document of the third International Conference on Financing for Development, Jan. 30, 2014.

Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon (center) greets Ethiopian Prime Minister Hailemariam Desalegn at the opening of the FFD3 conference in Addis Ababa, Jul. 13, 2015.

specific SDG goals.[15] Like the MDG framework, it appears that the post-2015 framework could influence U.S. foreign assistance policy most in terms of global health.[16]

One USAID respondent said that the MDGs were "indispensable…in shining a spotlight on blind spots or areas of flagging progress. When the U.S. saw that the child and maternal health goals were not being met, [it] rallied countries together to launch the Child Survival Call to Action." The respondent continued: "As a result, the health sector in particular has recognized the value of the MDGs and trumpeted the SDGs as well. We hope that with focused attention and data, we can use the SDGs to assist in other areas that we find are lagging as well."

Former Post-2015 Special Coordinator Tony Pipa emphasized the importance of the SDGs to "finish the unfinished business of the MDGs: ending chronic hunger and preventable maternal and child deaths."[17] USAID has also publicly discussed its work in ending preventable maternal and child deaths in the context of the SDGs and related U.N.-sponsored discussions of development finance.[18] Non-governmental development policy analysts have noted that the MDG goals were most useful to the United States in terms of increasing investments in its pre-existing work on child survival, maternal health and infectious diseases.[19]

Other Thematic Focuses

While our review of public documents indicates that USAID and other agencies have cited the role of the SDGs most in terms of U.S. foreign assistance work on health, there are other areas where USAID and other agencies have emphasized the role of the SDGs in shaping U.S. foreign assistance. This was echoed by respondents during interviews. For example, former U.S. Representative to the U.N. Economic and Social Council Elizabeth Cousens emphasized the importance of eradicating extreme poverty as a part of the SDGs,[20] and USAID officials have underscored governance, economic growth and gender as key parts of the SDG agenda.[21]

SDG Goal 16 – Peace, Justice and Strong Institutions (governance, broadly speaking) – was also mentioned often as a key USG priority among respondents. President Obama also cited it during UNGA and National Security Advisor Susan Rice identified it as a key SDG goal.[22] During UNGA, the U.S. Government co-hosted an event on Goal 16, during which Samantha Power, U.S. Ambassador to the U.N., announced a U.S. domestic initiative on access to justice. Interview respondents saw a future role for USAID in developing metrics for Goal 16, while acknowledging that this goal would be particularly difficult to measure. In the words of one USAID respondent, "Inclusive growth is the key, underpinned by good governance." Although mentioned much less often in USAID's public documents, education is also noted as an area where the agency has contributed to the development of the SDGs.[23]

The 17 Sustainable Development Goals

1 NO POVERTY
End poverty in all its forms everywhere

2 ZERO HUNGER
End hunger, achieve food security and improved nutrition and promote sustainable agriculture

3 GOOD HEALTH AND WELL-BEING
Ensure healthy lives and promote well-being for all at all ages

4 QUALITY EDUCATION
Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

5 GENDER EQUALITY
Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

6 CLEAN WATER AND SANITATION
Ensure availability and sustainable management of water and sanitation for all

7 AFFORDABLE AND CLEAN ENERGY
Ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all

8 DECENT WORK AND ECONOMIC GROWTH
Promote sustained, inclusive and sustainable economic growth, full and productive employment and decent work for all

9 INDUSTRY, INNOVATION AND INFRASTRUCTURE
Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialisation and foster innovation

10 REDUCED INEQUALITIES
Reduce inequality within and among countries

11 SUSTAINABLE CITIES AND COMMUNITIES
Make cities and human settlements inclusive, safe, resilient and sustainable

12 RESPONSIBLE CONSUMPTION AND PRODUCTION
Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

13 CLIMATE ACTION
Take urgent action to combat climate change and its impacts

14 LIFE BELOW WATER
Conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources for sustainable development

15 LIFE ON LAND
Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss

16 PEACE AND JUSTICE STRONG INSTITUTIONS
Promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels

17 PARTNERSHIPS FOR THE GOALS
Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalise the global partnership for sustainable development

SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Source: http://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/news/communications-material

Role of the SDGs in Multi-Stakeholder Partnerships

In addition to linking its thematic programs to the SDGs, USAID has recently launched new initiatives for the explicit purpose of helping achieve the goals. One of the most important is the Addis Tax Initiative launched at the U.N. Financing for Development conference in Addis Ababa, Ethiopia in July 2015. In its public documents on the Initiative, USAID called it a way for countries, "to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals."[24]

Other U.S. initiatives announced at the Addis conference – The Global Financing Facility in Support of Every Woman Every Child, the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development Data and additional support to Power Africa – have been linked to the SDG process or, more specifically, discussed as part of the parallel U.N. financing for development discussions.[25] The Obama Administration has also been notably vocal about the importance of the MDGs and the SDGs and President Obama has mentioned development goals that are central to the SDGs during his State of the Union Address.[26]

USAID and other U.S. foreign assistance agencies consistently mention the SDGs positively in public documents. Indicating a U.S. foreign assistance culture attuned to the SDGs, a variety of USAID's development themes – especially health and ending extreme poverty – have been articulated in the context of the SDGs, with linkages made between USAID's work and realizing the SDGs' ambitious goals.

However, what's missing is a concrete connection between the SDGs and the everyday work of USAID on-the-ground in missions around the world. Our document reviews and interviews have indicated that most discussion of how U.S. foreign assistance will be guided by the SDGs is happening in Washington and New York, with much less evidence that the SDGs are guiding the nuts-and-bolts work of how USAID operates around the world.

Samantha Power during the 65th Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference.

THE STATE OF USAID'S INTEGRATION OF THE SDGS

Leadership

The SDGs are so broad and ambitious that without dedicated leadership they will be difficult for USAID and other agencies to successfully integrate into policies and practices. While the process for leading this integration appears to be an open question, there was a multi-year, robust inter-agency process that led up to the approval of the SDGs. This included high-level participation from the State Department, USAID and the White House.

U.S. Government input into the SDG development process at the United Nations was led by the State Department, but respondents were clear that USAID played a critical role. In the words of one respondent, "We were the evidence base and the expertise that helped the U.S. [government] define its positions," adding that "an extremely robust inter-agency effort led by the State Department and USAID shaped the USG input…We had upwards of 13 working groups." This inter-agency effort also included input from domestic agencies such as the Departments of Education and Labor.

Thus far, the same basic structure appears to be in place for the next phase of USG input: developing indicators for the SDGs. As mentioned above, this also includes an opportunity for U.S. domestic agencies to feed into the process. Respondents have been clear that the SDGs are viewed in concert with President Obama's focus on inequality in the United States. The White House is leading a discussion of the implications of the SDGs for anti-poverty work within the United States through the Domestic Policy Council. The Domestic Policy Council plans to convene civil society institutions in the United States to discuss domestic implementation.

In terms of international implementation, the Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) Bureau has been leading the analysis and planning process for incorporating the SDGs into U.S. foreign policy at USAID. Respondents were somewhat uncertain about the specifics regarding how the process to integrate the SDGs into foreign policy will be led in the future. "We are still in a dynamic environment about what it means for the U.S. to integrate the SDGs, including on the domestic side," one respondent said. Other respondents expressed expectations for continued leadership of PPL, but specifically how that will happen has not been defined, although one respondent called it a, "top priority". With staff transitions during late 2015 within PPL, there has been some uncertainty about USAID's future leadership and what is realistic to achieve in 2016.

A key question is whether USAID and others will treat the SDGs as a "menu," choosing particular goals, or whether the entire range of 17 goals will be integrated into U.S. development strategy. Interviews with respondents indicated that USAID and other U.S. agencies will select particular priorities for engagement and leadership from among the broad array of SDG goals and targets. "Not all of SDGs will be relevant," one respondent said. "We will focus on certain goals that align with USAID priorities." As discussed in the policy recommendations, while each U.S. agency should determine its unique contribution to the SDGs – and it is normal that countries and agencies will focus on their particular strengths – we believe that the USG should commit itself to supporting the SDG agenda as a whole.

Ending extreme poverty was repeatedly mentioned by respondents as a key focus. "Extreme poverty, being the moral center of this overall agenda, fits quite well with where AID has been over the past year," one respondent said. "It builds on the President's commitment over the past three State of the Union addresses." Other potential emphases mentioned by respondents included child and maternal mortality, malnutrition, climate, fragility, governance and data.

Respondents also stated that much of USAID's work already fits into the SDGs and that SDG targets therefore provide an opportunity to refine ongoing work. "USAID

can promote some specific SDGs, for example, on peace and governance," one respondent said. "USAID will put some focus there and say, 'what do we need to make sure is in place so that countries are taking this seriously?'" As noted above, respondents saw the USG as a major driver of Goal 16 on peace and governance in the final negotiations and in large part responsible for its adoption, despite political opposition from several countries. Another respondent mentioned science, technology and innovation as cross-cutting themes where USAID could be a leader. "[It could be] USAID's unique contribution to achieving the SDGs."

Developing metrics was also seen as a key leadership opportunity for USAID and a challenge for SDG implementation. Given the selective focus emphasized by respondents, certain bureaus within USAID are likely to play a larger role than others. Bureaus like Global Health, for example, will be tasked with determining how to engage on the indicators within their purview.

Some respondents emphasized that USAID will not only be focused on its own integration of the SDGs, but also will work alongside a multitude of other organizations to influence how they engage globally. "How do we work to influence and drive the international agenda that goes beyond just what USAID does?" one respondent asked. "That's really important to us. What is the international architecture going to be for follow-up? We will have an important role in defining that as part of the U.S. government." Respondents added that given the broad SDG framework, part of USAID's task in the coming months will be "figuring out what parts it can lead on among the international community."

Mandate

In order to exercise effective leadership and successfully integrate the SDGs into USAID's policy, programs and practices, U.S. foreign assistance agencies will need a publicly and specifically defined mandate on how to do so. Our findings indicate that while USAID, the State Department and other agencies have publicly praised the SDGs and indicated their importance to U.S. foreign assistance, there is as yet no internal mandate on how to align USAID's work with the SDGs. But if alignment is to occur in the coming months and years, a clear mandate on how USAID and other agencies should integrate the SDGs into their work will be important.

Several respondents were frank regarding their concern: "There's no real mandate yet," one respondent said.

"There is certainly conversation going on. There's an embrace of the SDGs and … of what it can mean for the agency." Another referred to enthusiasm in the agency around the SDGs, while acknowledging some of the challenges that exist. "There is a very active process around this," one respondent said. "[But] it's complicated to figure out the best approach. It will continue to be a long process."

Respondents also emphasized that the focus of the USG effort up until September had been to contribute to the development of the SDGs rather than to focus on how they might be implemented. "[A mandate] doesn't exist yet because the SDGs are only now getting agreed to," one respondent said. Respondents also stated that there is a stronger embrace of the SDGs today as compared to a similar period in the MDG process under President Bush.

Achieving a mandate for SDG implementation faces a number of challenges, one of the major ones being the U.S. political calendar. The SDGs will thus be one of several foreign assistance initiatives that the Administration will seek to institutionalize during the remainder of the President's term in office.

"The political timing is really difficult," one respondent said. "We will be winding down the eighth year of a two-term administration [as the SDGs are finalized], so it's not a great time to be launching new large policy initiatives."

Capacity and Resources

The next major challenge on the horizon is devolving responsibility for institutionalizing the SDGs to the mission level and among other U.S. foreign assistance practitioners working throughout the developing world. At this level, the extent to which USAID and other agencies develop policy and programmatic capacity and devote resources to integrating SDGs will be critical.

Respondents repeatedly indicated that USAID's strength as an organization is its expansive field presence, voicing the opinion that the alignment of work at the mission level will "make-or-break" USAID's success in aligning with the SDGs. But the same respondents offered few specifics on precisely how the SDGs should be incorporated into U.S. development work on the ground. "It's still TBD…how to make this a helpful frame at the country-level for missions," one respondent said. "I think it will take a little time because we are going to have to socialize the potential…of what's in the agenda and how it can be used to their benefit."

While the engagement of USAID missions with the SDGs remains an open question, respondents said they are exploring options, including integrating the SDGs into county-level planning, but added, "We have time, we don't have to answer this question tomorrow. We are going through global planning now." Another respondent said alignment with the SDGs is being considered as a potential factor in USAID's multilateral as well as its bilateral work. Respondents mentioned Country Development Cooperation Strategies (CDCS) as an opportunity to engage the SDGs at the mission level. "There's a lot of conversation on how to get it down to the mission level," one respondent said.

Integrating the SDGs into CDCSs is important, according to one respondent, because "that flows into project design and goals and objectives and results and evaluating the impact. I think it's going to take a lot of work," the respondent said, adding, "I think we have to be realistic as far as our expectations about how far we can go in certain countries, particularly as we link it to our mission statement of ending extreme poverty."

During the summer of 2015, 70-80 mission staff were consulted about the SDG process during a rotation in Washington. Feedback at the time reflected concern that the large number of goals will make it difficult, "to get countries to focus." On the other hand, the respondent added, the SDGs are, "good fodder for dialogue with governments on development goals. It varies by country the extent to which USAID mission directors are engaged," the respondent said, "But PPL has communicated with a lot with missions on [the SDGs]. There was much more communication than during the MDGs process. All mission directors have come through for formal consultations [on the SDGs]."

Respondents noted that USAID's work on the SDGs at the mission level will depend heavily on the level of engagement by the host countries themselves. "Some countries are further ahead than others," a respondent said. "Colombia has budgeted based on the SDGs. Others [other countries] are going to … just sign the agreement." To some extent, use of the SDG framework will be the result of a negotiation between the host country and USAID. "Countries are going to look at the SDGs and say, 'OK, our plans align with the SDGs in this particular place, we might want to elevate particular priorities amongst that,' and I can see USAID saying, 'From our perspective, here's what we can offer on those particular things,'" one respondent explained.

The SDGs should also serve as a platform for USAID missions to hold nations accountable on governance issues – an area many respondents identified as a central USG focus within the SDG framework. "There could be countries – for some more controversial parts of the agenda – where it is useful for missions to say, 'Wait a minute, you are not doing the work you need to do on democratic … institutions. We all just signed up to this; you made a commitment to this; we are willing to help you with this,'" one respondent said.

Ahead of the U.N. Sustainable Development Summit from 25-27 September, a 10-minute film introducing the Sustainable Development Goals is projected onto U.N. Headquarters, Sept. 24, 2015.

One respondent flagged a lack of discretionary funding as a potential problem making it difficult to devote significant resources explicitly to meeting the SDGs. "Globally [in terms of budget] there will not be changes," this respondent said. "The shifts will occur at the country level…on a selective basis." Ultimately the SDGs should push the U.S. Government to work toward reducing earmarks and presidential initiatives so that missions and countries can utilize donor assistance with maximum flexibility to pursue the SDGs in accordance with national plans and budgets.

Respondents named USAID's Bureau of Policy, Planning and Learning (PPL) as crucial to internal capacity building and translating the SDGs to the field. More resources for PPL will be required to ensure that it is equipped to play this vital role. According to one respondent, "We can be briefing the [missions] on … the latest on the SDGs and they [will ask], 'How … is that relevant to me? PPL will be key…and we will have to invest in it."

Accountability

In the United States., questions regarding potential conflicts between the SDGs and U.S. foreign policy objectives will need to be navigated when assessing accountability. "Expectations are enormously high," one respondent said. "We have to be careful about balancing larger U.S. foreign policy goals and the SDGs. At times they are going to really match up well and …at other times [we are going to have to focus on U.S. policy goals]."

On the country level, while broad principles for "follow up and review" of the SDG agenda have been adopted, a robust system has yet to be established for allowing citizens to hold governments accountable for implementing the SDGs in a participatory and transparent way. The U.S. Government could play an influential role in ensuring strong civil society participation in the U.N. High Level Political Forum, the main forum for annual reviews of progress on the SDGs. Furthermore the USG could put pressure on country governments to ensure they are designing, implementing and assessing national SDG action plans in close coordination and with meaningful participation from civil society and other stakeholders.

Since the SDG agenda was approved in September 2015, input on the global indicators has been one of the key avenues for the USG to feed into the development of the SDGs. "The conversation at this point is just to make sure we got the metrics to even know what progress looks like at the country-level and globally," one respondent said. "There is no measurement beyond that. It's not something we have figured out yet."

Additional metrics must be developed to measure and hold USAID and other agencies accountable for contributing appropriately to the global effort to achieve the SDGs "We are still working on how we frame our embrace of the SDGs, how to seriously approach implementation," one respondent said. But, according to the same respondent, the SDGs already, "align with a lot of USAID policies."

David Donoghue, Ireland's UN Ambassador and co-facilitator of the final phase of negotiations on a new global development agenda, talks with two youth delegates at Save the Children side event during the U.N. General Assembly.

PHOTO: SAVE THE CHILDREN

CONCLUSION AND RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Conclusion

USAID and the U.S. Government's integration of the SDGs is in its very early stages and thus it is difficult to assess success. With that in mind, USAID has an opportunity to show its strong leadership on the SDG agenda this year before the transition to a new administration. Save the Children proposes some key metrics for success in 2016:

1) Work to put in place a SDG point of contact to monitor and coordinate progress on integration of the SDGs across the U.S. Government and to ensure momentum for the SDG agenda into the next administration.

2) Make ambitious financing commitments to support the SDG agenda at key moments including at the Rio Olympic Nutrition for Growth Summit, the World Humanitarian Summit and the G7 and G20 Summits this year.

3) Set clear benchmarks to ensure that the poorest and most marginalized people, particularly those living in conflict-affected and fragile states, are making progress to achieve the targets within the SDG agenda.

4) Establish metrics and increase commitment to country ownership to ensure that the work of SDG implementation and national development transitions to local actors.

5) Support strong global accountability as well as robust national accountability mechanisms in each country to strengthen the citizen-state compact to enable people to hold their governments to account for services they require to realize their full potential.

Research Methodology

This policy review was developed through analyses of relevant documents and semi-structured interviews with key respondents at USAID and the U.S. Department of State engaged with the post-2015/SDG process.

1) **Review of agency documents:** In order to ground our analysis, we began with a review of relevant USG, U.N. and other documents to understand how USAID and other relevant USG officials talked about the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the SDGs in policy papers, speeches, interviews and other publicly accessible resources. These included documents such as the Quadrennial Diplomacy and Development Review (QDDR), USAID reports and blogs, State Department and USAID speech and discussion transcripts and think-tank research reports. This review provided background and context on USAID's public position on the SDGs and helped the research team develop key questions for interviews. We continued to update the document based on documents released by the agency throughout fall 2015 and early 2016.

2) **Key respondent interviews:** The core data for this report was gathered through in-depth, semi-structured interviews with relevant USG experts. Interviews were conducted in person and recorded for subsequent qualitative analysis of key themes. Broadly speaking, the interviews focused on preparations and plans to integrate the SDGs into plans, programs and priorities for USAID and U.S. foreign assistance generally. All respondents' comments included in the report are anonymous.

The document also has information from conversations with government personnel regarding the implementation process. Interviews were conducted in person in Washington, D.C. during August 2015 and were audio-recorded to ensure accuracy. Information gathered from respondents was transcribed and coded thematically based on the major themes discussed below. The prevalence of themes across interviews was assessed by a simple counting procedure. Following analysis of the interviews and recurring themes, we incorporated quotes and other materials in our findings. Draft reviews of the report were also shared with respondents for their input prior to final publication.

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FROM WORDS TO ACTION:

USAID's Integration of the Sustainable Development Goals

In September 2015 the world agreed to a new set of ambitious U.N. Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The three years of negotiations – among UN diplomats with millions of citizens voicing their priorities – to deliver the new SDGs were among the most collaborative in United Nations history. Following on the Millennium Development Goals, the SDGs comprise a holistic agenda of 17 goals with ending extreme poverty at its core supported by a healthy planet in a peaceful world.

But now the United States – and the world – confronts the more difficult task of integrating the broad set of SDGs into the daily programming, policy and practice of foreign assistance and national development. This policy brief provides an analysis of the Obama Administration's early thinking on how it will integrate this transformative framework into its agenda.

Specifically, Save the Children examines how the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) is beginning to implement the SDGs into its overseas development work. We propose ways forward for USAID to demonstrate leadership and early progress on the SDG agenda.

Our aim is to strengthen collective global efforts to build a world in which no child lives in poverty and where every child has a fair start and is healthy, educated and safe.

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