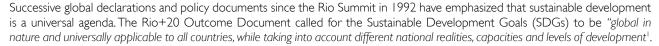# Universality in the Post 2015 Sustainable Development Agenda

AT A GLANCE

The UN Charter and the Universal Declaration of Human Rights were amongst the first international agreements to frame the notion of "universality". Since then the term has been used in various fora and processes, for example in the context of common principles and standards, of global public goods, and in the notion of leaving no one behind. Sustainable development is a universal aspiration, requiring international cooperation and joint responsibility for a greater common good. Clarity on the meaning of universality - and what this implies with respect to differentiation - may help facilitate consensus towards the Post 2015 Agenda. In translating these concepts into practice, lessons can be drawn from many years of experience and practical application of the concept of universality in the international human rights, labour and environmental arenas.

UNIVERSALITY

Successive global declarations and policy documents since the Rio Summit in 1992 have emphasized that sustainable development is a universal agenda. The Rio+20 Outcome Document called for the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) to be *"global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development*[1].

The Synthesis Report of the UN Secretary General points out that the new Post 2015 era must be an ambitious, universally applicable agenda and one that integrates the economic, social, environmental and human rights dimensions of sustainable development.

But what does universality mean? International processes have used the notion of universality in different ways. For example, universality in the context of human rights or labour law focuses on common principles and standards applicable to all States, while in the context of environmental issues such as climate change or biodiversity it focuses on the protection and use of global public goods. Some see universality as a reflection that development is a continuum rather than a dichotomy of "developed" and "developing". Others have expressed a concern that universality could potentially undermine the focus on the poorest. Given the varying interpretations, it is important to fully understand the concept as it applies to the Post 2015 context. There are at least four aspects to the notion of universality.

1. Universality requires the **recognition of universal principles, standards and values applicable to all countries and all peoples**. Universality as a legal concept has been recognized in international agreements in the areas of human rights, labour and the environment. For example, the Universal Declaration of Human Rights declares human rights as the "…*common standard of achievement for all peoples and all nations*, to the end that every individual and every organ of society shall strive… to secure their *universal and effective recognition and observance*…". Indeed, as it approaches its 70th Anniversary, the United Nations System's efforts towards achieving universal standards and principles is recognized as one of its hallmarks.

2. Universality means **recognising the interconnectedness of national and global development challenges, and therefore universal commitments to address them.** Certain social and environmental challenges, such as reducing inequality and illegal trade in wildlife, are global issues, due to the interconnectedness of the global marketplace. Sustainably managing and protecting global public goods, such as biodiversity, the global climate, the international financial and trading systems entail global responsibilities and concerted global cooperation for addressing challenges and impacts that extend beyond national borders, and that affect everyone regardless of wealth or income, gender or race. Social, economic and natural wealth should be managed and increased for the benefit of, and respecting the rights, of current and future generations. Such issues need to be addressed by all countries, both individually and collectively. This requires a paradigm shift in thinking about 'development' and international cooperation that goes beyond the traditional donor-recipient formula. It entails mobilizing a broader, deeper, and more innovative range of solutions for implementation of the SDGs.

3. Universality means **recognising that sustainable development issues exist in all countries,** regardless of their income levels. Poverty, inequality, social exclusion, maternal and child mortality, unemployment and environmental degradation exist in all countries to varying degrees, and are not confined to developing countries. The Secretary General's Synthesis Report states that *"all countries will need to change, each with its own approach, but each with a sense of the global common good."*[2] For example, social and economic disparities in both developed and developing countries are often transmitted to future generations (for example, the 15 - 27% rural-urban gap in child health can be attributed to their parent's health which in turn is a result of poor environment and quality of life[3]). Drastic weather changes causing abnormal temperatures, sea level rise, and precipitation affect the realisation of universal human rights that relate to food and water security, air quality, health and shelter across all countries.[4]

Pollution affects us all
- In Europe, pollution of air, water, and noise, and degraded natural areas, has resulted in at least one million healthy life-years lost every year due to cardiovascular disease, cognitive impairment, sleep disturbance and tinnitus.[6]

- In Australia, it is predicted that the mean temperature will rise faster than the rest of the world from excessive concentration of greenhouse gas emissions in its localised atmosphere.[7]

Globalization of e-waste
80 per cent of toxic electronic hazardous wastes (E-waste) end up, often illegally, being shipped from developed to developing countries for recycling and disposal. E-waste is expected to grow to 65.4 million metric tons in 2017.[8]

This has serious environmental and health implications for local workers and residents, who are exposed to hazardous chemicals, such as skin and stomach diseases, and DNA damage from contaminated air, water and soil.

4. Universal commitment to **leaving no one behind** means shared concerns for reaching everyone, including the most vulnerable, marginalized and excluded populations. This is reflected in the Post-2015 SDGs by absolute targets, such as 100% access to quality healthcare or education, or 'getting to zero' to end poverty and hunger for all, or to completely phase out environmental pollution. In this sense, universality is closely linked to the principle of equality and non-discrimination, requiring equal rights for all, including the right to an adequate standard of living.

All of these four aspects of universality have been captured in the proposed SDGs. The first appears in the narrative proposed by the OWG SDG; the second is exemplified by Goal 13 (Climate change); the third by Goal 12 (Sustainable Consumption and Production), and the fourth by Goal 7 (Energy). The strength of the proposed Agenda is also in its integrated nature: focusing only on leaving no one behind is not sufficient, as the failure to reform the global economy and restore the global commons, will ultimately leave many behind. Interconnectedness means that isolationism will not achieve sustained results in a globalized world.

UNIVERSALITY AND DIFFERENTIATION

Universality implies that all sustainable development goals and their means of implementation are applicable to all Member States and all peoples - they cannot be an à la carte menu. However, universality does not mean that 'one size fits all' or that national sovereignty is to be set aside.

Lessons in differentiation can be drawn from the application of universal standards set out in international environmental and human rights law. International environmental law takes account of the differentiated national contributions to protecting global goods. For example, the Framework Convention on Climate Change refers to the notion of CBDRRC *"common but differentiated responsibilities and respective capabilities"*. As another example, international human rights law recognises the different starting points and levels of development of Member States, through concepts such as *progressive realisation that are applied in the context of economic, social and cultural rights.* These rights must be progressively realised in accordance with *"the maximum of [a State's] available resources"* and take into account duties of international cooperation.[5]

Furthermore, it is useful to distinguish different responsibilities from different capacities.

- **Responsibilities:** In a universal agenda, we have a common responsibility, a shared destiny. People are increasingly aware of the impacts of their individual behaviours. Commitments to a renewed global partnership should aim to reduce negative effects (do no harm approach) and maximize positive effects. Countries also have different responsibilities, both historical and into the future. Years of negotiation in the human rights and climate change arenas have matured the conversation, and recent developments (such as in UNFCCC COP 20) show hopeful signs that Member States see ways in which they can take action that is in line with their responsibilities and available resources. The Post 2015 Agenda needs recognition of both common and different responsibilities.

- **Capacities:** There are different pathways for transformative change. Countries will move at different rates of progress and the pace and pathway chosen by a country will be determined by its needs and abilities – that is, it's starting point, and the resources it can mobilize. But a country's existing capacities cannot be the sole determinant of its pathway – capacities can be dramatically lifted through innovative means of implementation, political commitment, and a strong global partnership. Exchange of know-how and capacity development is no longer just a one-way flow but can also liberate home-grown innovations. Capacities can be enhanced through supportive enabling environments. Countries will make different contributions to the common good but the sum of collective action cannot fall short of the global aspiration. Any country that wants to be more ambitious can be so.

TRANSPARENT, PARTICIPATORY, AND ADAPTIVE NATIONAL TAILORING PROCESS

Translating a global agenda to the national level will require some tailoring. Common principles for tailoring, for example, as applied in global/multi-lateral environmental agreements and the MDGs, could be developed as guidance for countries. In addition, as countries progress in implementation, the national agendas should be adapted to changing circumstances. Many countries have already initiated national dialogues or institutional reforms in order to hit the ground running in January 2016. A strong commitment to stakeholder participation will help to ensure that national targets are ambitious yet feasible and relevant to the specific context. Conducting stakeholder dialogues through a clear, transparent and participatory process, inclusive and without discrimination, will help foster national accountability for SDG commitments, and more fully engage those affected by these commitments.

References can be found at: http://www.unep.org/post2015