



BACKGROUND NOTE

From targets to pathways

Short-term targets are needed to precisely define sustainable development objectives on a time horizon that decision makers can fully comprehend. However, tracking action solely in relation to these targets is not sufficient to provide effective support to the political process of implementation and increase of ambition. A complementary approach is necessary to support discussions on concrete decision-making within and among countries, one that is able to transparently link the targets with the long-term pathways that can support their achievement. This idea is explicitly acknowledged in the official agreements and some demonstration examples have been developed in the literature. Now is the time to address the pending methodological and substantive questions for its implementation in the post-2015 agenda.

1. CONTEXT

Sustainable development objectives are conventionally formulated using very precise, aggregate and short/medium-term targets (e.g., carbon emissions in 2030 as defined in Parties' INDCs, or the targets supporting SDGs which remain quite aggregate).

To support concrete implementation and build a sense of inevitability around these targets, tracking schemes should be primarily conceived to structure the process of discussion and deliberation that help move the lines of political equilibria. This in turn calls for tracking the information that can support accountability with regards to targets, encouraging the increase of ambition, identifying the enabling conditions and facilitating mutual learning, knowledge sharing and the identification of cooperation opportunities.

In this regard, only tracking the outcomes in relation to aggregate targets proves insufficient.

A long-term perspective providing a coherent vision of transformation pathways at different time horizons is needed to inform the sequence of actions, notably in light of the risks of lock-in and path dependencies created by short-term decisions. This may relate, for example, to investment in long-lived infrastructure, such as power plants, buildings or transport networks, storage facilities in the agriculture sector; it can also relate to changes in land-use and agricultural practices involving major behavioural and technical changes. If not taken into account, the long-term effect of these short-term decisions may affect the possibility of achieving the objectives.

Furthermore, the tracking of progress using aggregate targets only will not provide the necessary information to anticipate potential gaps between targets and actions, to identify areas for knowledge sharing and cooperation and to link social, economic and environmental priorities. A broad and consistent vision of the building blocks of transformation pathways is needed, which calls for a detailed, disaggregated and transparent approach. For example, assessments of aggregate carbon emissions are not enough to operationalise the policy debates if not complemented by definitive underlying drivers that relate to different stakeholders and concretize the differences and divergences of their visions (e.g., sectoral energy efficiency, number of dwellings, number of passenger-kilometres, share of renewables, etc.).

On a few occasions, these two principles have supported discussions, essentially on energy transition and climate change (e.g., in the UK Climate Change Committee or in the French Debate on Energy Transition). They have proven their utility to:

- take large-scale transformations into consideration (not only marginal changes around current trends);
- inform the discussions on the sequence of action and option values in a context of uncertainty;
- ensure ownership by different groups of stakeholders;
- manage controversies by making explicit the points of convergence and divergence.

The COP21 Paris Agreement installs this approach in the international climate agenda by formalising the importance of long-term and transparent representations for equitably tracking, in a forward-looking manner, the progress of countries towards commitments that vary in type depending on national circumstances. Article 4.19 explicitly acknowledges the role of a long-term vision to guide national actions towards the 2°C target, while Article 13.1 establishes a unified transparency system according to which countries are to submit not only GHG emission inventories, but also information demonstrating progress (e.g. on climate policies).

Long-term and transparent pathways are also starting to appear as useful tracking instruments in other dimensions of sustainable development as illustrated by the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, which states that the follow-up and review processes for action towards the SDGs and associated targets, "will maintain a longer-term orientation" (Art. 74(c)) and "will be open, inclusive, participatory and transparent for all people and will support reporting by all relevant stakeholders" (Art. 74(d)).

2. ISSUES/SOLUTIONS

Despite progress, a number methodological gaps remain to be addressed to firmly link the tracking of aggregate targets with the monitoring of long-term and transparent transformation pathways, in a way that enables discussions among diverse groups of stakeholders and catalyses a high-quality political debate towards implementation and ambition in each part of the sustainable development agenda.

Although it is quite common to discuss long-term scenarios in some sectors where potential lock-ins are particularly obvious (such as the energy sector), long-term transformation is less debated in other sectors which would highly benefit from such discussions, notably when inertia is related to social, organisational, and behavioural aspects. For instance, a real shift in production practices is needed in the agricultural sector to reconsider short-term oriented decisions that have led to soil degradation over the years, without solving the issue of hunger; but changes towards the sustainable production of sufficient and nutritious food involves considerable changes among the whole food chain, which cannot be considered over short-term periods and need to be carefully crafted through long-term pathways.

Beyond the principle of detailed and transparent information to be provided by countries, neither the Paris Agreement nor the follow-up process of SDGs define explicitly the nature of information and the level of detail that should be provided to track actions. The transparency framework must be further developed in each agenda to standardize the specific information that would have to be provided to enable concrete, transparent and participatory policy discussions within countries, and knowledge sharing from the experiences of other countries.

An additional pending issue relates to the linking of different sustainable development objectives. The evolutions of economic, social and environmental aspects are obviously linked, but the different dimensions have remained largely disconnected. Analysts face a complex trade-off, between a pragmatic approach keeping the objectives independent for the sake of simplicity, and the aspiration for a connected vision of the different dimensions of sustainable development requiring a systemic and comprehensive vision.

Finally, the international dimension, although external to the domestic control by definition, embeds crucial parameters for national pathways (e.g., international trade) and captures important policy dimensions able to unlock the barriers to domestic ambition (e.g., international cooperation on technologies or financial flows). Facilitating the back-and-forth between different countries as well as between domestic and international dimensions requires a comparable system of representation of the country pathways.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE SESSION/QUESTIONS

The objective of the session is to identify the methodological advancements that would be required to make pathways a useful organising framework for structuring and animating the multi-stakeholder debate on the different dimensions of sustainable development.

More specifically:

- What would be the guidelines and methodologies to support construction of long-term transformation pathways that are tangible, grounded in reality, explicit in their narrative and quantified?
- How should we approach the methodological challenge posed by the linking of different sustainable development objectives in the definition of long-term pathways?
- How should we organise and structure the conversation around the long-term pathways in a way that facilitates decision-making?

REFERENCES

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