

Holding leaders to account

Nations have pledged to eradicate poverty and protect the planet from degradation. How can citizens ensure that governments stick to their promises?

By **Leo Williams**, International Coordinator, Beyond 2015

Agenda 2030, signed off recently by world leaders to great fanfare in New York, is disappointingly weak on accountability. Despite a laudable set of principles that countries should aspire to respect when developing ‘follow-up and review’ processes, Agenda 2030 does not include robust mechanisms that allow civil society and individuals to hold their governments to account for implementation. So, how could true accountability be designed and implemented with a voluntary framework like Agenda 2030, and how will we be able to hold our governments to account?

Why accountability is crucial

For my organisation, Beyond 2015, the purpose of Agenda 2030 – the new Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) – is to enable coherence and prioritisation of action; to secure commitment to action; and to ensure accountability for action.

Agenda 2030 represents a pledge to current and future generations, particularly the poorest and most marginalised. The accountability regime is the test by which people will judge whether that commitment is being met.

This is not revolutionary. Our national civil-society organisation (CSO) deliberations highlighted that people want development to be based on human rights, equality and justice, environmental sustainability and good governance and accountability.¹ Governments recognise this: Goal 16 focuses on accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels. Paragraph 35 acknowledges “the need (for) effective rule of law and good governance at all levels



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Agenda 2030 demands global action, coordination and accountability

and... transparent, effective and accountable institutions”.

This is not just about holding governments to their commitments – all partners in Agenda 2030 must be held to agreed UN standards in respect of human rights, environmental impact, transparency and effectiveness. It is imperative, for example, that governments agree strong laws to protect against environmental and human rights abuses by companies, ensuring that they are fully accountable and, at the least, that they do no harm.

Implementing accountability at national and regional levels

Agenda 2030 clarifies that the “High-Level Political Forum... will have the central role in overseeing follow-up and review at the global level”.

With accountability being a politically loaded concept, Agenda 2030 merely commits governments to a “robust, voluntary, effective, participatory, transparent and integrated follow-up and review framework”, which will “promote accountability to citizens, support effective international cooperation in achieving this Agenda and foster exchanges of best practices and mutual learning”. National-level

▲ Youth leader Rasheen Aldridge of the Ferguson Commission listens as US President Barack Obama outlines plans to address the social tensions and racial inequality behind the civil unrest in Ferguson, Missouri, triggered by the police shooting of an unarmed teenager

processes will be the foundation for regional and global reviews.

So, this is what governments have agreed. However, implementation at national and regional levels will involve many further steps.

1. Monitoring by the people

Agenda 2030 must be monitored not just by governments but by people themselves. Accountability mechanisms must allow people, particularly those experiencing poverty, inequality and marginalisation, to participate effectively and without discrimination.

2. Adapted national strategies

Governments should develop a national sustainable development strategy through a participatory process that includes those most affected by poverty and injustice.

The strategy must include meaningful, measurable commitments on the progressive realisation of all the SDGs, as well as each country's equitable contribution to global achievement of the goals.

This strategy should be the basis for accountability. Paragraph 78 of Agenda 2030 recognises the need for such strategies.

3. Participatory national review mechanisms

Governments should develop a public, inclusive and participatory national review mechanism. The process must include members of the public – especially from the poorest and most marginalised groups – and their legitimate representatives.

These mechanisms should be supported by citizen-generated data collection and analysis. Paragraph 79 of Agenda 2030 speaks of regular and inclusive reviews, but stops short of proposing specific national mechanisms.

4. Enabling meaningful participation

An equal right to participate in all domestic processes of accountability, including the monitoring of Agenda 2030, must be guaranteed and realised – not least, to reflect the commitments within Goal 16.

Concrete steps include the development and implementation of participatory monitoring and accountability mechanisms and provision of financial support for

the most marginalised to enable their meaningful participation in such processes.

5. Innovative sharing of information

Innovative mechanisms, including the internet and mobile technology, can help people access information and evaluate change. Deliberative polling on key issues can foster public discussion, awareness and provide a source of further representative data. Mobile technology can allow for public feedback on the provision of local services. However, efforts must be taken to ensure that inclusivity is not damaged by a 'digital divide' within society.

6. Regional peer review

Each region should establish mechanisms for peer review, drawing on existing structures. These reviews should be comprehensive in their coverage of Agenda 2030 – encompassing all SDGs, their targets and means of implementation – and transparent.

7. Participation at the regional level

The effective participation of people and CSOs should be guaranteed at the regional level, with modalities comparable to those of national and global levels.

Stakeholders should be allowed to submit evidence within the review process and present written and oral contributions, and all official information and documents should be easily accessible to all.

8. Participatory and inclusive multi-stakeholder committees

At regional level such committees should be tasked with facilitating the participation of national and regional stakeholders during the peer review process, and with monitoring the process.

Applying pressure at the national level

People have not worked for years on Agenda 2030 to see it gather dust within the UN. Part of the purpose of Agenda 2030 is to secure commitments to action – to make meaningful changes to the lives of people and the state of the planet. The biggest risk at the moment is a lack of political will to implement Agenda 2030 at the national level. Thankfully, there are many actions

that civil society can take:

- Ensure that governments create cross-departmental committees – consisting of (at least) the national departments of data, environment, finance, foreign affairs and planning – to work on the implementation and monitoring of Agenda 2030.
- Push governments to adopt a national sustainable development strategy through a participatory process that includes people experiencing poverty and marginalisation.
- Support the creation of SDG multi-party parliamentary committees, which would reinforce and support the executive efforts on SDG implementation.
- Call upon decentralised administrations and local governments to work closely with CSOs to ensure full ownership of Agenda 2030 at the national and sub-national levels.
- Call on governments to allocate sufficient national and local resources to the implementation of Agenda 2030.
- Push governments to establish participatory and inclusive monitoring and reporting mechanisms for the implementation of the SDGs, as well as to agree to public, inclusive and participatory national review mechanisms, as outlined above.

National-level accountability mechanisms are, quite rightly, at the heart of the accountability framework. However, the universality of Agenda 2030 demands global action, coordination and accountability. To be fit for purpose, any review mechanism must be based not only on the accountability of government inwards – towards its own people – but also upwards and outwards, to assess how effectively countries, the UN system and other stakeholders are cooperating to achieve the SDGs.

Finally, civil society must continue to insist that governments put in place truly participatory processes at national and regional levels, which will enable people and organised civil society alike to influence implementation plans and to engage in a systematic way in monitoring, accountability and review. ●

1 www.beyond2015.org/cso-led-national-deliberations