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How the IAASTD helped shape the SDGs

In 2015, the international community agreed on 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)¹, to be achieved by 2030. The SDGs are a call for action by all countries to promote peace and prosperity while protecting the planet. SDG 2 is “Zero Hunger” and offers a historic opportunity to achieve a world with enough nutritious food for all that is produced by healthy people in a healthy environment.

As the gavel came down for the last time late on the evening of 2 August 2015, one of the most complex negotiations of recent times was brought to a successful end. On that evening, all 193 UN Member States agreed on 17 SDGs to end poverty, protect the planet, and improve the lives and prospects of everyone, everywhere. As part of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development which set out a 15-year plan to achieve the goals, the SDGs provide an evidence-based holistic blueprint to the most pressing challenges of our time such as eradicating poverty, ending hunger, creating jobs, and ensuring access to healthcare and education, healthy ecosystems, and gender equality. In times of increased geopolitical tensions and a general weakening of multilateralism, bringing together more than 190 countries in one room to agree on an ambitious agenda to transform the world was momentous.



I. Navigating uncharted territory

The journey that concluded with overwhelming applause, relief, handshaking, and hugs among negotiators and observers that lush early-August evening, as well as a final document that was revealed at the official SDG Summit in September 2015, started for us in May 2013 in one of the monotonous conference rooms in the basement of the UN headquarters in New York City. On the agenda: An interactive exchange on “Food security and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, desertification, land degradation and drought.”

This meeting presented the first opportunity to present some of the key findings and recommendations of the IAASTD to the Open Working Group (OWG), a 70 UN Member States body mandated to propose a set of SDGs to the UN

General Assembly. Hans R. Herren was invited to present on a panel, and we also organized an informal exchange with Member State delegates and observers to discuss what a food-related goal could potentially look like.

Even before we started, it was mostly agreed that issues such as malnutrition, women, and small-scale food producers would be prioritized. There seemed to be a consensus that they would be included in a food-related goal. However, it became apparent that many of the more complex and novel approaches and at the time rather progressive suggestions such as multifunctional agriculture or multi-stakeholder assessments of national food systems would require further refinement and many more hours of discussion.

In addition, it became apparent that for many Member States the entire concept of “sustainable development,” firmly established in Stockholm in 1972 at the UN Conference on the Human Environment, was still unclear, especially now that they were asked to boil it down into a limited number of concrete global goals and targets. The Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), while groundbreaking, took a narrower approach that focused solely on developing countries and aimed to address the symptoms and not the root causes of poverty. Sustainable food systems are critical to achieving many development goals, from safe access to food to healthy ecosystems and even conflict resolution. However, the potential of sustainable food systems to combat global challenges that was recognized in the IAASTD was not taken up in the MDGs.

Finally, how to create a systemic plan of action with co-benefits between issues, such as between agriculture and climate change, land degradation or youth employment – to name a few – was not obvious to governments. They were still used to working in silos. Taking an integrated and systemic approach was new to many of them. With this context in mind, when the post-2015 negotiations started in spring 2013 it was not completely clear that there would be a goal on agriculture, and even less so that the goal would include “sustainable agriculture” in its title or make a reference to food systems.

2. Making progress – line by line and target by target

In order to avoid the status quo and ensure that the SDG that addressed hunger, food, and nutrition was truly transformative and would help establish the foundation for the paradigm shift necessary to achieve sustainable development, we recognized that we needed to educate Member States on the findings and recommendations of the IAASTD. We also realized that we had to be strategic in the way we suggested specific language to include in the positions and drafts coming out of these complex negotiations. What started during the May 2013 session of the OWG continued throughout many weeks of intense negotiations. To ensure that the important messages of the IAASTD were at the forefront

It took thousands of coffees in the UN Vienna Café to ensure that important IAASTD messages made it into the SDGs.

of discussions on what would become SDG 2, we attended all the OWG meetings and SDG negotiations as observers, organized several side-events to shed light on the many benefits of sustainable food systems, produced dozens of one-pagers and discussion papers with language suggestions and rationales, engaged in hundreds of bilateral meetings with negotiators, representatives of UN agencies and the secretariat, civil society, business and academia, and drank thousands of coffees in the infamous Vienna Cafe.

An important milestone in “translating” the comprehensive IAASTD into a concise goal and accompanying targets was a high-level multi-stakeholder roundtable that was co-hosted by the Government of Benin. Participation from high level representatives from governments, the UN System, research, civil society, farmers, and the private sector demonstrated the global importance and cross-cutting nature of this issue. The timing of this event was crucial since it was just prior to the end of the OWG, when the original proposal for the SDGs was finalized. At this roundtable, the SHIFT message emerged – echoing IAASTD’s call for transformational change in agriculture and food systems. SHIFT stands for:

Small-scale food producers empowered;
Hunger and all forms of malnutrition ended, and full access to food ensured;
Inclusiveness in decision-making on sustainable agriculture, food security and nutrition;
Food systems established which are sustainable, diverse and resilient, less wasteful, restore soil fertility and halt land degradation;
Trade policies reshaped and food price volatility mitigated.

Most of the SHIFT elements made it into the SDGs (S, H, F and T), due to the outcome from this roundtable, as well as the efforts and perseverance of many Member State delegates and non-governmental actors.

The I from the SHIFT message was reflected in the inclusion of the reference of the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) in the Agenda 2030 Declaration (Paragraph 24). While many agriculture and food security experts were aware of the value added and expertise of the CFS, this was not immediately apparent to many of the negotiators. Therefore, efforts were successfully made to include language outlining the important role and inclusive nature of the CFS to support the achievement of SDG 2. This reference is very valuable since it establishes the CFS with its multi-stakeholder approach as instrumental in the implementation as well as the follow up and review of Agenda 2030, particularly those elements related to agriculture, food security, and nutrition. This recognition of the CFS also increases the likelihood that concepts from the IAASTD and agreed upon at the CFS (e.g. “sustainable food systems”, and to a lesser extent “agroecology”) will be accepted and supported in future sustainable development discussions

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SDG 2 targets 2.3 & 2.4

2.3: By 2030, double the agricultural productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, in particular women, indigenous peoples, family farmers, pastoralists and fishers, including through secure and equal access to land, other productive resources and inputs, knowledge, financial services, markets and opportunities for value addition and non-farm employment

2.4: By 2030, ensure sustainable food production systems and implement resilient agricultural practices that increase productivity and production, that help maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change, extreme weather, drought, flooding and other disasters and that progressively improve land and soil quality

that take place at the UN Headquarters in New York and beyond. One example of this occurring was in 2017 when “agroecological principles” were for the first time mentioned in a resolution by the UN General Assembly.

In order to promote the shift towards more sustainable food systems and ensure that the right language was included in the SDGs and Agenda 2030, we had to build awareness and widely disseminate our message. We quickly learned that the best way to be recognized and heard was to work in partnerships. We therefore approached various organizations to receive feedback on our positions, exchange valuable information about the issues and the process, and increase the credibility of our messages. In civil society circles, the findings of the IAASTD helped us to garner support and build a coalition around the key messages. We also collaborated with representatives from UN agencies, particularly the Rome-based agencies (FAO, WFP, and IFAD), well-established experts on issues around sustainable agriculture, food security and nutrition. This collaboration included key representatives from these agencies supporting and speaking at our side events. We also worked together with various partners on language to include in position statements.

3. Every word matters

While most of SDG 2 and its targets reaffirm the messages outlined in the IAASTD, targets 2.3 and 2.4 most closely reflect the findings and recommendations of the IAASTD. Although most Member States and stakeholders were in agreement that supporting small-scale food producers and promoting sustainable agriculture were important enough to include in the targets, it was not always clear how this would be done. At the end it was not only ensured that the targets included language that supported the IAASTD, but also excluded language that could slow down, halt or even reverse the change in course in global agriculture.

Looking more closely at Target 2.3, the focus on increasing the productivity and incomes of small-scale food producers, particularly women, and ensuring their access to productive resources and assets, clearly demonstrates that most Mem-

ber States recognized the potential of the millions of smallholder farmers around the world to lift their communities out of poverty while protecting the ecosystem. The strong wording in Target 2.3 clearly supports their empowerment and the improvement of their livelihoods.

Although most of the wording of this target was not very contentious, there were still calls from some Member States to not only increase agricultural productivity, but to increase production as well. This was something that was not in line with the IAASTD since there is evidence that an unqualified increase in production has had and would continue to have negative impacts on people (e.g. working conditions) and the planet (depletion of natural resources). Even though some Member States requested the inclusion of “increase production,” this kind of detrimental language was prevented from being included in Target 2.3.

Under Target 2.4, we worked hard to ensure that it echoed the Rio+20 Declaration’s call, in which we were already heavily involved with proposing IAASTD wording, for a much needed transformation to sustainable and resilient agriculture and food systems that conserve natural resources and ecosystems and realize a land-degradation neutral world. We were pleased to see that many of these elements are included in both Target 2.4 and also Target 15.3 (“(...) strive to achieve a land degradation-neutral world”). For example, the inclusion of resilient agricultural practices is significant since we cannot achieve sustainable development without ensuring that our food production adapts to the effects of climate change.

However, one obstacle we were not able to surmount was the reluctance by many Members States to agree on “sustainable food systems,” a term and concept that applies to both the production and the consumption of food. In particular, emerging economies argued strongly for the qualifier “production” and a sole focus on the production side of food systems. This was because many of them were faced with a two-sided challenge: While they were still combatting hunger among some groups of their populations, they did not want to put (unnecessary) restrictions on how their emerging middle-class would consume food and emit greenhouse gases. Despite the fact that the exact language we wanted was not included in the final document, we still believe that this was a good starting point because the pressure to transform the way we produce and consume food globally continues.

4. IAASTD providing the narrative for SDG 2

Looking back on the lengthy and complex Agenda 2030 negotiations, it is hard to say precisely where, when, and how the IAASTD was instrumental in shaping the SDGs and in particular SDG 2 Zero Hunger. The process involved many actors – on a normal negotiation week there were several hundred representatives from Member States, UN agencies, civil society, business and academia present in- and outside the conference rooms. There were many firm positions – e.g. on agricultural trade it was impossible to make progress beyond what was agreed at the WTO. Also, the negotiations saw unexpected developments – for example, the two co-

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chairs maintained control of the drafting throughout the negotiations, which was different from previous negotiations, for example in Rio+20. This was, in our view, one of the success factors that contributed to an ambitious set of SDGs. At one point, the discussions on the means of implementation (MOI) were partly shifted into the more politicized “Finance for Development” forum, which probably did not help to increase the ambition level on the MOI-targets. Given all these variables, it was not easy to secure IAASTD’s specific messaging in negotiations that were at times chaotic and the attention of the Member States was elsewhere.

However, we can wholeheartedly say that the IAASTD provided us, our partners, and most importantly, negotiators with an invaluable source of evidence-based information and concepts, which we then tried to boil down to 2-liners and bring into the SDGs. Some elements never made it in (agroecology, food governance issues, the right to food) or were weakened at the last minute (sustainable food systems). From today’s perspective, we might say that they may have just been ahead of their time. The IAASTD helped us connect the dots between issues that would not have been seen as an obvious interlinkage (e.g. food systems and stable institutions). It helped us and the negotiators to stay on course towards a coherent and ambitious SDG 2.

Throughout the process, we were reminded at various instances that the IAASTD – signed by 58 governments and called by some the IPCC of agriculture – was considered controversial in some circles, in particular among large-scale agriculture producers and proponents of GMOs. This sometimes forced us to omit the source of our rationales for change. But it did not prevent us from working hard to use Agenda 2030 as an opportunity to highlight IAASTD’s call for a radical transformation. Because the IAASTD and the Agenda 2030 have something in common: they are both a transformative plan of action for people, planet and prosperity.

Endnote

1 <https://www.un.org/sustainabledevelopment/>



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