No turning back

Mr Ban reaffirms a transformative, pro-peace vision for post-2015

Key points:

1. The United Nations (UN) Secretary General's synthesis report (SG's report) on the post-2015 development framework makes a very sensible call for a fine tuning of target language through a technical review process which would help avoid putting at risk the significant consensus that has been built through the Open Working Group (OWG).

2. The SG's report makes a useful initial proposal for drawing the OWG's 17 goals and 169 targets into a set of easily-communicated priorities through his identification of six essential elements. More work might be needed on these, but the SG's report sets out a good model.

3. The importance of peace is clearly articulated throughout the document. It makes clear the negative impact of violent conflict and insecurity on sustainable development, points to the extensive consensus on this issue, and demonstrates how the inclusion of peace in the post-2015 framework should be about much more than the mere absence of violence and be linked to issues such as justice, human rights or voice and participation. References to social cohesion and reconciliation help fill a gap in the OWG Outcome Document.

4. Some of the wording of the SG's report could have been more careful. For example, along with peace, the report calls for strong institutions, rather than inclusive, responsive, fair and accountable ones. While institutions are certainly part of the answer, we need to keep the focus on outcomes for people.

5. The SG's report makes a strong case for why we need broadly disaggregated indicators with benchmarks for progress to be set at the national level through an inclusive process. But it misses the opportunity to make clear why we need a shared set of common and universal indicators. This is central to creating a monitoring system that allows us to compare progress at the global level.

6. The SG correctly identifies the need for a people-centred multilateral framework that covers an extensive set of issues during a troubled period of uncertainly and volatility in our globalized world. He also correctly makes clear that it is up to Member States to grasp this opportunity.

Introduction

Debates on the post-2015 agenda so far have consistently agreed that the world's new development framework must advance not only sustainability and poverty reduction but also, crucially, peace and good governance. Yesterday, UN Secretary General Ban Ki Moon released his Synthesis Report On the Post-2015 Agenda. The SG's report follows a year of negotiations by Member States on the goals and targets in the Open Working Group (OWG). It thus has a potentially important role in ensuring that Member States get over some big hurdles that could result in a post-2015 agenda that is unclear, impractical and neglectful of sensitive peace, governance and justice issues. In these informal comments, Saferworld analyses whether the report will help Member States towards a framework that fulfils its peacebuilding potential.

What was at stake in the SG's synthesis report?

Our comments on the SG's report focus on how it handles five key risks to the peace agenda going forward (see table). The rest of this article explores whether the SG's report addresses these risks and lives up to its potential.

Risk	Potential role of the SG's report	Our verdict
1. The final framework may remain too long and unclear for the public to understand and get behind it, for planners to implement it and for statisticians to monitor it	Without disrupting the political consensus on the framework's priorities (and the inclusion of peace), call for improving the framework by fine-tuning the goals and targets	**Achieved**
2. Peace could be dropped in the upcoming negotiations or buried in the wide array of other goals and targets	Reaffirm the central place of peace and all its core elements	**Achieved**
3. A core element of the peace agenda – on tolerance and resolution of disputes – is missing from the OWG's peace goal, and could be left out of the final goals and targets	Endorse all the core elements of the peace agenda that have been affirmed by key inputs to the post-2015 debate	**Achieved but with gaps**
4. If the framework is insufficiently universal, including in how it is monitored, each state would have its own indicators, and cross-country comparison and accountability would become impossible	Endorse universality of the framework – including in how it is measured	**Achieved but with gaps**
5. Some targets could do harm in some contexts – especially if some flexibility is not built into the framework	Balance universality with flexibility and sensitivity to context – in particular through country-owned processes for setting baselines and benchmarks. Call for revision of targets that could do harm.	**Some gaps and insufficient clarity**

1. A sensitive call for fine-tuning

'This is no time to succumb to political expediency, or to tolerate the lowest common denominators', says the SG's report, setting out a valuable early marker. But does the report provide helpful ideas on how to keep the ambition and the ultimate value of the framework alive?

As anticipated, the report's agenda for building on the OWG's hard-won consensus on a rather long list of 17 goals and 169 targets is its most interesting element. Mr Ban congratulates the OWG: its targets 'break new ground' – not only in relation to peace but also in relation to closely associated priorities of justice, inequalities, decent jobs, cities and institutions - 'a remarkable step forward'. This makes the OWG's goals 'the main basis for the Post-2015 intergovernmental process'. But, just as the UNGA instructed participants in Rio+20 to make the SDGs 'action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate', Mr Ban advances 'the possibility to maintain the 17 goals and rearrange them in a focused and concise manner that enables the necessary global awareness and implementation at the country level'.

What Mr Ban has in mind is arranging the goals according to an integrated set of six 'essential elements':

- **Dignity** To end poverty and fight inequality
- **People** To ensure healthy lives, knowledge, and the inclusion of women and children
- **Prosperity** To grow a strong, inclusive and transformative economy
- **Planet** To protect our ecosystems for all societies and our children
- **Justice** To promote safe and peaceful societies, and strong institutions
- **Partnership** To catalyse global solidarity for sustainable development

This suggestion will no doubt catalyse much debate, and may well upset some Member States. From a peace perspective, however, giving safe and peaceful societies and governance issues their due place as one of six essential elements is both helpful and fully justified given the importance people all around the world have consistently ascribed to them when consulted. While some might be disappointed that peace was not one of the six elements, the heading of justice is fitting as an overall guiding element that works in favour of peace and better governance, alongside which issues such as ending poverty and creating a transformative economy should remain in focus. The six essential elements are also welcome in their emphasis on equality and inclusive economies.

On the downside, some of the wording of the SG's report could have been more careful. For example, along with peace, the report calls for 'strong' institutions, rather than inclusive, responsive, fair or accountable ones.

While institutions are certainly part of the answer, this language leans too far towards a model of control rather than the vision for people's empowerment that comes out very strongly throughout the rest of the report (which repeatedly calls for a focus on building public trust through a focus on participation, civic engagement, accountability and so on). Most importantly, language that promotes institutional development needs to keep the focus on outcomes for people.

Furthermore, 'empowerment' or 'equality' of women – which the report does in fact promote - would be better as a headline than the 'inclusion of women' (which perhaps implies that the agency for including women lies with men). Overall, these essential elements also seem to lack the compelling phrasing of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs): perhaps the difficult task of summarising 17 goals into six essential elements has detracted from the potential to pledge specific outcomes clearly enough.

Nonetheless, the success of the MDGs was partly about the public seeing priorities they could agree with on posters and shopping bags and expecting their leaders to deliver on them. In the face of opposition from Member States, Mr Ban has given a suggestion for how to make the SDGs similarly accessible. Even if his suggestions require more honing, he deserves significant credit for putting a more concise agenda on the table, despite the likelihood that he will be criticised for doing so.

To achieve a more concise agenda, the report also calls for a fresh look at targets. It praises Member States for 'proposing an array of targets, which bring a strong integrating effect, and go a long way in defining the substance of what we need to achieve'. But at the same time, Mr Ban again does not flinch from drawing the obvious, albeit inconvenient, conclusion: the 'array' of targets could benefit from a technical review. Many are 'robust and responsive to the goals', but others 'serve better the ongoing work of developing indicators for the agenda', are 'less ambitious than already agreed', or (somewhat cryptically) would be 'better placed where commitments to policy change can be ensured'.

The report thus calls for 'a technical review to ensure that each [target] is framed in language that is specific, measurable, achievable' and consistent with existing UN standards 'while preserving the important political balance that they represent'. In short, the targets promote the right things, but they could do with an edit. This again will perhaps prove unpopular with those Member States who felt exhausted by last year's OWG negotiations and do not wish to revisit them. But the success of the framework depends upon this crucial task of improving content without losing consensus, and the UNSG should be applauded for grasping the nettle on this issue.

2. Reaffirming the inclusion of peace

As it builds up to the articulation of its agenda, the SG's report makes many important recognitions. It affirms 'ensuring peace and realizing human rights' early on, and recalls the vision of the UN Charter 'to save succeeding generations from the scourge of war'. It also notes that, 'armed conflict, crime, terrorism, persecution, corruption, impunity and the erosion of the rule of law are daily realities', highlights 'gross inequalities' and 'unacceptable – and unsustainable – levels of want, fear, discrimination, exploitation, injustice'. And it highlights that 'Particular attention should also be given to the challenges faced by', inter alia, 'countries in situations of fragility and conflict'.

The report also recognises the imperative of responding to people's voices, which ' have underscored the need for democracy, rule of law, civic space and more effective governance and capable institutions'. And it further highlights the 'unfolding data revolution' with its potentials to 'ensure that everyone is counted'. All these points reinforce the core of the case for integrating key peace priorities into the world's new development vision.

Before introducing its vision of consolidated priorities, the report acknowledges many of the major inputs to the process so far, including Rio +20 and the last SG's report 'A life of dignity for all' (July 2013). Peace is mentioned as a priority issue several times in this synthesis. The SG's July 2013 report 'recommended the development of a universal, integrated and human rights-based agenda… highlighting the link between peace, development and human rights'. In yesterday's report, the UNSG nods towards the results of worldwide public consultations, and the many key reports that have viewed peace, governance and justice as important priorities for the framework.

Taking stock of all the contributions to the post-2015 process so far, Mr Ban correctly observes that 'All contributions… have called for strengthening effective, accountable, participatory and inclusive governance; for free expression, information, and association; for fair justice systems; and for peaceful societies and personal security for all'. He also notes that they have called for 'an end to all forms of gender inequality, gender-based discrimination, and violence against women, children and young boys and girls'.

Responding to this, all the core elements of sustainable peace that have been prominent in the process so far are reaffirmed by the SG's report: reduced violence, public safety, fair access to justice, livelihoods, resources

and services, voice and participation, and anti-corruption. There is no ambivalence on violence against women: 'We must ensure zero tolerance of violence against or exploitation of women and girls'.

Further peace-related priorities of 'reforming tax systems, fighting tax evasion, correcting inequities, and combatting corruption' as well as 'ethics-driven investment by the private sector' are also stressed. Highlighting the international dimensions of the corruption issue, it acknowledges calls for 'vigorous action to fight corruption, curb illicit financial flows, combat money laundering and tax evasion, and recover stolen and hidden assets'.

The SG's call for agreement 'that no goal or target be considered met unless met for all social and economic groups' picks up on one of the most valuable suggestions made to date as to how to galvanise efforts to eliminate the harmful horizontal inequalities that are a key driver of conflict in many countries. Likewise, in calling for 'availability of and access to data' to be improved and for 'disaggregation of information by gender, age, race, ethnicity, migratory status, disability, geographic location, and other characteristics relevant to national contexts' the report helps push for ways to measure progress that shine a light on horizontal inequalities. Improving 'access to information, data literacy, promoting civic space and enhancing the sharing of data and information' would also be helpful for enabling participation and accountability – a key way to promote the improvement of state-society relations around the world, with important benefits for conflict prevention.

The report is thus helpful in reinforcing the sense that 'a remarkably consistent vision has emerged'. The report is unambiguous in affirming that the priority of promoting peace, better governance and meaningful justice – which people around the world, experts and Member States all agree on – must be given due prominence in the final framework, mitigating the risk of backsliding in the months ahead.

3. Missing pieces of the peace agenda?

Missing from the draft goals and targets so far has been a commitment to promote social cohesion, tolerance or dispute resolution. Helpfully, the SG's report speaks up on this, mentioning cohesion several times, and stating that: 'Reconciliation, peacebuilding and state-building are critical for countries to overcome fragility and develop cohesive societies'. This could present an opportunity to restore a missing emphasis on these issues to the framework.

The only clear point of weakness of the report in handling peace issues is that it does not promote addressing irresponsible arms trade, the negative impacts of drugs (and the war on drugs), the flow of other 'conflict commodities' or indeed any aspect of organised crime apart from corruption and financial flows. These global issues – the solution to which lies well beyond the countries worst affected – have been raised repeatedly in many of the key inputs to the post-2015 debate, including the OWG's report, and deserved the SG's reinforcement.

4. A strong call for universality… up to a point

One of the key issues we hoped to see reinforced in the SG's report was the universality of the agenda – including its indicators. On this issue, the report again includes much that is positive. It acknowledges the interconnectedness of today's world, and argues that this compels us to act, and demands 'new heights of multilateral action'. It thus reaffirms the common understanding that has been reached on the need for a universal agenda. This is positive given the need to look at each and every context with prevention of violence in mind.

The SG further highlights that the post-2015 vision should be achieved through 'solidarity, cooperation, mutual accountability, and the participation of governments and all stakeholders'. It envisages that accountability will be upheld through a 'rigorous and participatory review and monitoring framework to hold governments, businesses, and international organizations accountable to the people for results'. Later on, it also stresses that the new framework should include 'strong, inclusive public mechanisms at all levels for reporting, monitoring progress, learning lessons, and ensuring mutual accountability'. The report goes on to say that such mutual accountability should be enabled by the development of 'a draft set of indicators' that enable us to 'collect, compare and analyse' relevant data, with reporting based on 'globally-harmonised formats'. This emphasis on the need for mutual accountability, depending on a single set of comparable indicators, and the allusion to harmonised formats are valuable hints that – as Saferworld has consistently argued – global, shared indicators are the way forward.

The Secretary General builds on these hints in his call for a 'comprehensive programme of action on data'. He emphasises the 'country-led, national' (or elsewhere 'state-led') basis for producing the data to monitor progress. Helpfully, what is set out is a vision for multi-stakeholder monitoring, where the role of other actors – including civil society and the international community – in ensuring independent and impartial monitoring of

progress is as strongly emphasised as the role of governments. What remains unfortunate in the 'programme of action on data' is that the 'universal review process' is described without an explicit endorsement of the need for some indicators to be universal to support cross-comparison and prioritisation.

Without an agreement on this point, global accountability on a 'universal' agenda will remain a distant dream. Instead, there is a risk of creating a clunky and ineffective process of 'universal review' for the SDGs – disappointing given that the [pitfalls of 'Universal Periodic Reviews'](#) should already be familiar. The real risk is that it will be impossible to compare the apples grown in one country with the oranges produced in another, and thus it will be impossible to compare the fruits of progress meaningfully between contexts or worldwide. This would deny the accountability that needs to be at the centre of the framework.

5. Flexibility, conflict sensitivity and do-no-harm

At the same time as strengthening the case for a universal agenda, the report argues for a framework that is 'adaptable to the conditions of each country'. This strikes a useful balance: universality is needed for a transformative impact, but there is also a need to be context-sensitive in promoting key conflict prevention priorities. One way to make the case for a single set of shared indicators is to emphasise that such indicators can also be flexible: countries should in the interests of flexibility set out their own aspirations for the pace and extent of progress they will make in relation to shared indicators. Here, Mr Ban appears to get it right, calling for an inclusive process at country level to establish benchmarks. All countries would of course be free to add any combination of country specific indicators to a concise list of shared, global indicators.

The SG also makes no mention of a 'do-no-harm' criterion in his proposal for a 'technical review' of goals and targets. If this technical review goes ahead, the ToR should consider conflict sensitivity and do-no-harm issues very carefully: for example, the OWG's draft target 16.a on building capacities for 'combating terrorism and crime' would ultimately do more harm than good if not refocused on achieving public safety and confidence in security provision.

Conclusion

The SG's report does well in reaffirming the most important issues for the peace, governance and justice agenda – and puts constructive options on the table on the sensitive question of how to refine the draft framework. These are significant achievements, making the report a positive endorsement of the peace agenda that bodes well for the year ahead. However, there are weaknesses, including failure to reinforce some core peace priorities, and not doing enough to promote shared global indicators and conflict sensitivity.

As the SG argues, 'We are on the threshold of the most important year of development since the founding of the United Nations itself'. Highlighting issues from political upheaval to climate change and the ineffectiveness of international institutions, he rightly concludes that 'today's world is a troubled world' in which, amongst other related risks, the peacefulness of our societies is at stake. Overall, his report should be commended both for recognising the array of challenges our world faces and for calling boldly for the SDGs to be the ambitious collective response that we need: a genuinely people-centred multilateral drive to help manage our globalised world.