High Level Panel Lunch on the post 2015 Development Agenda

Statement

by

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Ladies and Gentlemen

Let me begin by thanking the President Johnson Sirleaf, and the people of Liberia for the warm hospitality accorded us during our stay. I also commend the remarkable progress being made by this historic African country despite a difficult road to recovery.

I am pleased to have this opportunity to share some personal perspectives with this distinguished panel. It is by such means that a post 2015 development agenda reflecting the hopes and aspirations of billions of ordinary people will emerge.

The MDGs have undoubtedly been successful in several respects. To start with, they have helped to leverage political and economic support around a set of global development issues. They have framed policy discourse, shaped global partnerships, informed national development frameworks and influenced global funding priorities.

Africa has made good progress on the MDGs particularly with respect to primary enrollment, women’s empowerment and gender parity. However, more effort is required to halve poverty, reduce HIV/AIDS incidence and prevalence rates, promote child and maternal health and achieve environmental sustainability. The post 2015 development agenda provides yet another opportunity to fulfill our shared responsibility and get our global agenda right and to squarely tackle the emerging threat of climate change.

Let me then highlight some of key lessons from the MDG experience from an African perspective. A post-2015 development agenda will no doubt benefit from an understanding of what worked well and where improvements would be required. I will focus on three dimensions. The first is on the process that gave birth to the MDGs. The second is about the content and implementation of the Goals. The third area I will address is about monitoring of progress.

It is important to understand how the MDGs became so successful. There was first of all an innovative political process, very different from the norms, leading to the adoption of the Millennium Declaration. This consensus document was mainly political. What it did however was to provide an opening for an on-going technical track. The OECD had started an initiative on standardized measures of poverty involving the IMF, World Bank, UNDP and later DESA. This work led to the framing of the MDGs by marrying the technical discussion about poverty to the political content of the Millennium Declaration. It however took five years before member States formally adopted the MDGs which were already being used by the UN. This gave the unfortunate impression of the UN agencies and secretariat leading the process. There was criticism of weak ownership by member States. This is something to avoid now.
An interesting dimension introduced by the MDGs was that they provided a rallying point for desired development outcomes without giving policy prescriptions. This helped to create a completely different dynamic and it could be argued that the MDGs provided developing countries with policy space. The contrary view of course is that the MDGs placed a disproportionate share of performance burden on developing countries. This was because they largely ignored the impact of geopolitical and global dynamics on developing countries particularly the influence of external factors on domestic outcomes. To take the example of trade, the rules governing agriculture in the WTO must necessarily impact on development conditions in a country like Burkina Faso which depends on cotton for 60% of its exports. This in turn affects the achievement of the MDGs.

Due to initial limited country-level awareness, MDG-based planning was for a while limited. This changed as awareness grew but the tendency was to retro-fit planning frameworks to accommodate the MDGs. This often tasked limited capacities of national planning experts and sometimes led to a misalignment of priorities. It seemed furthermore that the MDGs had a disproportionate focus on the social sectors, relative to directly productive sectors. It would therefore be important in framing of the post 2015 agenda to have a more holistic approach.

In drawing lessons from the MDG experience it would be important to take account of the quality of service delivery and inequality. Another vital observation to be made about the MDGs is that they seem to have been reliant on secure and increasing official development assistance. Expectations were unduly raised about the availability of external funds to drive the process. Countries eagerly costed their MDG requirements with the expectation of external funding which was in any case often inadequate to meet programme costs. The expectations of donor-funding reinforced existing imbalances in partnerships between recipient and donor countries. It also inverted government accountability more to development partners than domestic constituents.

It should also be pointed out in this regard that with the economic challenges facing the developed countries, this model cannot be sustained. Fortunately, African countries are paying greater attention to the issue of domestic resource mobilization. Just this last weekend, I spoke to the Heads of State and Government of NEPAD on this topic. Some fairly interesting work is being done. Take for example, the fact that Africa’s collective reserves are in the region of half a trillion dollars. You can just imagine the impact on the continent if some of these resources are deployed to finance its development and infrastructure projects.

A successor framework to the MDGs must rectify the current focus on development outcomes without enablers. This is in effect like identifying a destination without providing a roadmap. While it is true that each country should be free to develop its own roadmap, it is also true that there are some generally accepted enablers of development. By highlighting the important role of peace and security, institutional strengthening and infrastructure development, a post 2015 development agenda can be
instrumental in unlocking some of the binding constraints to development at the national and regional level.

Let me then talk about some of the more practical issues. In developing the MDGs we failed to anticipate the data challenges associated with monitoring their achievement. A number of indicators are simply not being monitored due to data limitations and weak institutional capacities for data gathering and analysis. Countries have adapted to the situation by customizing targets and indicators to their specific contexts and data constraints. This however undermines cross-country comparisons. This also means that effective monitoring of progress on the MDGs remains a challenge, especially in Africa. The success of the post 2015 agenda will hinge on how effectively it tackles the data constraint. On its part, ECA will help in the context of its new strategic directions to overcome this challenge by working hard to generate robust data and statistics on economic and social conditions in the continent.

Measurement issues are important for another reason. The MDG targets did not take account of the fact that countries are in different stages of development. As a result, despite Africa’s substantial efforts such as vast declines in infant mortality, its relative performance is obscured by its failure to meet the global target. It should be noted as well that halving poverty will be harder in countries with initially high rates of poverty. We should accordingly give some thought to expressing any targets that emerge in a post-2015 development agenda in both absolute and relative terms.

The lessons learnt from the MDGs provide a good basis for designing an even more effective development agenda for the future. The wide ranging consultations on the post 2015 development agenda also point to a more consultative approach. In Africa there is an active and energetic engagement of stakeholders including civil society organizations, parliament, academia, the private sector, Regional Economic Communities and governments.

An African common position on the post-2015 development agenda is about to be finalized. Some of the emerging issues relate to a desire to fast-track economic transformation and inclusive growth; enable greater use of science technology and innovation; and a wish to broaden the pace and scope of human development. I do hope that some of these points along with the lessons learnt will be taken on board as we look to shaping a post-2015 development agenda. For such an agenda to be sustainable, it must be grounded in a genuine global partnership with both developed and developing countries playing their own part. The composition of this distinguished Panel attests to a recognition of this fact.

Permit me to conclude by adverting to concerns about the complexity of the various processes for framing a post-2015 development agenda. However, complexity in this case is not itself a bad thing particularly since our emphasis must be on innovativeness and inclusiveness. What is important is to have a clear understanding of what it is that we want to achieve at the end of the day. Let me therefore state in this regard that it be counterproductive to focus principally on goals at this stage since member States are
also working on sustainable development goals. What is needed, is something similar
to the political guidance provided by the Millennium Declaration which could help the
technical shaping of the final outcome.

I wish you all the best in your exciting if challenging assignment and thank you for this
opportunity.