Summary

On 25 September 2015 the United Nations General Assembly adopted 'Transforming our world: the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development' (the 2030 Agenda) as an outcome of the UN Sustainable Development Summit. Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, development experts, statisticians and organizations have discussed the follow-up and review mechanisms for monitoring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In MY World, a UN survey conducted prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda, people voted for 'an honest and responsive government' as the fourth most important priority after education, health care and employment. These results reflect people's aspirational expectations for the world they want through the SDGs.

This Policy Brief focuses on the Pacific and argues that accountability to citizens, in particular through democratic political processes, is a crucial enabler of the SDGs. In order for the SDG monitoring process to be accountable, it is essential that the SDG indicators include peoples' own assessments of the availability, accessibility and quality of services.

About International IDEA

The International Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (International IDEA) is an intergovernmental organization with a mission to support sustainable democracy worldwide.

Democratic accountability in the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development: lessons from the Pacific

Background

Since the adoption of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in September 2015, development experts, statisticians and various organizations have discussed the implementation, follow-up and review mechanisms for monitoring progress on the implementation of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs).

In order for the SDG monitoring process to be accountable, it is essential that the SDG indicators include peoples' own assessments of the availability, accessibility and quality of services provided. In particular, the intention expressed by the UN's MY World survey (UN 2016), and by SDG 16—namely, to foster peaceful and just societies and inclusive and accountable institutions—makes it crucial to include people's voices in monitoring progress towards the goal. To this end, SDG 16 should, where feasible, include survey-based evidence, which tends to be the best way to represent people's lived experiences and assessments.

This Policy Brief argues that accountability to citizens, and in particular accountability through democratic political processes, is a crucial enabler of the SDGs. Further, democratic accountability can help make the SDG monitoring framework truly people-centred; this is particularly evident with, but not limited to, SDG 16.

Accountability and the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

Accountability can be defined as an obligation to account for one's activities, accept responsibility for them and disclose and justify results. Accountability is a fundamental cross-cutting dimension of the SDG framework. The most explicit reference to accountability at the goal level is grounded in the language on the quality of institutions in SDG 16, which commits UN member states to 'promote peaceful and inclusive societies for sustainable development, provide access to justice for all and build effective, accountable and inclusive institutions at all levels' (UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs 2015). Thus, government accountability in their responsibilities as service providers (or regulators of service provision) is a crucial element of the SDGs.

Accountability features at the target level, as in target 16.6: 'Develop effective, accountable and transparent institutions at all levels.' Accountability also features in paragraph 45 on national parliaments, in paragraph 47 on the primary

responsibility of governments, and in paragraph 73 on accountability to citizens. Accountability is also present in the cluster on 'Data for monitoring and accountability' in SDG 17, in SDG 5 on gender equality, and in SDG 10 on reducing inequality within and among countries.

What is democratic accountability?

Democratic accountability refers to the many ways in which people, political parties, parliaments, media, civil society and other actors provide feedback to, reward or sanction officials in charge of setting and enacting public policy (International IDEA 2014). It is therefore a crucial enabler of human rights that provides a monitoring framework for implementation. There can be no sustainable development without respect for democracy and human rights.

The principles of democratic accountability are embedded in regional norms in the Pacific. For example, the Biketawa Declaration, endorsed by Pacific leaders in 2000, commits to good governance which is described as 'the exercise of authority (leadership) and interactions in a manner that is open, transparent and accountable' (PIF Secretariat 2000: 1). See Box 1 for more recent examples.

How can democratic accountability make a difference?

It is people-centred and participatory
In *The Road to Dignity by 2030*, the UN Secretary-General noted that 'effective governance for sustainable development demands that public institutions in all countries and at all levels are inclusive, participatory and accountable to the people' (UN General Assembly 2014).

In International IDEA's view, free and fair electoral processes; democratic political parties; popularly elected parliaments with legislative, oversight, budgetary, representative and conflict management functions; ombudsman offices; and supreme audit institutions all contribute to comprehensive representation and human rights.

Social movements and interest groups provide further opportunities for people to participate in and influence the democratic process. The media also provides an arena for public debate, and acts as a watchdog.

In the Pacific, parliamentarians at a recent regional seminar acknowledged that 'the people we represent should be at the centre of our concerns', recommending the involvement of key stakeholders, including citizens, civil society and academia, in the SDG implementation process (IPU 2017: 3).

It can protect minorities and disadvantaged groups
Democratic accountability can facilitate the human right of all to public service on equal terms. Its mechanisms translate human rights commitments and equality goals into action through governance reform that provides public institutions with the incentives and skills to respond to the needs of disadvantaged groups.

In the Pacific, the potential for democratic accountability to protect disadvantaged groups can be facilitated by the values expressed in the Framework for Pacific Regionalism: namely, full inclusivity, equity and equality for all people of the Pacific (PIF Secretariat 2014). The Forum Principles of Good Leadership (PIF Secretariat 2003), in turn, include the 'respect for cultural values, customs, traditions and indigenous rights and observations of traditional protocols in the exercise of power', and 'respect for religious beliefs'. Regional parliamentarians further recommend gender-sensitivity in the implementation of all SDGs (IPU 2017: 3). See Box 2 for an example from Fiji.

It builds openness and transparency
Democratic accountability entails the public's right to obtain information on the organization, functioning and decision-making processes of public administration. Greater transparency in government budgets, procurement and spending improves oversight, policy choices and service delivery. Yet it is meaningless without the right to information and an independent and active media. Democratic

Box 3. Freedom of information in the Cook Islands

In 2008 the Cook Islands became the first Pacific country to enact freedom of information legislation, the *Official Information Act 2008*. The act gives access to the public to government information and is administered by the Ombudsman's Office (Cook Islands 2008).

Box 4. Answerability in the Pacific

Since 2011, seven supreme audit institutions (SAIs) in the Pacific region have made their audit reports available via their websites, and that media organizations have access to them. Seven SAIs have also formed partnerships and working relationships with civil society organizations to improve government accountability (PASAI 2015).

Box 5. The Pacific Monitoring Alliance for Non-Communicable Diseases Action

The Pacific Monitoring Alliance for Non-Communicable Diseases Action (MANA) was a response to the non-communicable diseases crisis in the Pacific Islands. Bringing together regional agencies, international organisations, research institutions, and civil society, among others, a Dashboard for Action was developed to visually present progress on implementing policies and actions. It has been a successful example of how responsiveness can be strengthened within a critical issue such as public health (Tolley et al 2016: 7).

accountability bolsters the right to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds.

Openness and transparency are firmly grounded in regional norms of the Pacific: the Forum Principles of Good Leadership (PIF Secretariat 2003) commit leaders to correct 'any misleading information … at the earliest practical opportunity; publicizing information on legal wrongdoing, ethical lapses and false or misleading statement'. See Box 3 for an example from the Cook Islands.

It includes answerability

Answerability measures the extent to which a government carries out its duty to explain and justify its decisions, and is linked to how claims holders articulate their demands, but also to officials' capacity and willingness to take responsibility for their actions. In this context, democratic accountability can contribute to the promotion of people's right to participate in public affairs while providing the free flow of information necessary for governments to be held accountable by their citizens.

In the Pacific, the Forum Principles of Good Leadership and Accountability urge country leaders to actively publicize and correct information to achieve 'honesty in dealing with people and Parliament' (PIF Secreteriat 2003). See also Box 4.

It includes responsiveness

This principle is about whether public officials consult with and listen to citizens or their representatives before a policy or law is approved, so that decision-making reflects their views and demands for human rights.

Democratic accountability mechanisms can help ensure people's right to participate in public affairs and exert influence over the policy-making process while fostering the implementation of principles such as the rule of law, equal access to justice, the proper management of public affairs and property, judicial integrity and transparency.

The Forum Principles of Good Leadership seek to promote responsiveness. Several Pacific Island states (including PNG, Solomon

Islands and Vanuatu) have legislated the Leadership Code which realizes this objective (PIF Secretariat 2003). See Box 5 for another example.

It guarantees enforceability

This principle refers to the formal or informal consequences that duty bearers—government officials being held accountable—might face, as well as their impact. Research by International IDEA suggests that almost all countries with low scores on service delivery have either limited or no provision for effective sanctions, and no credible incentives for politicians to be responsive.

Mechanisms for democratic accountability can provide sufficient incentives and sanctions to encourage governments, elected representatives, and public officials and employees to work in the best interests of the people.

Pacific Island parliamentarians recognize that many citizens lack access to public services (IPU 2017: 3). Regional commitments to ensure enforceability include the Pacific Plan (PIF Secretariat 2008: 7), promoting 'the establishment of regional ombudsman and human rights mechanisms to support implementation of Forum Principles of Good Leadership and Accountability'.

In addition, the PIF's Good Leadership Report (2009: 2) mentions that for leaders to be accountable and perform their duties, 'strong, independent and constitutionally empowered leadership watch bodies' need to be 'empowered to effectively and decisively execute their functions'.

Conclusion

In order for the SDG monitoring process to safeguard people-centred accountability, it is essential that the SDG indicators build on peoples' own assessments of the availability, accessibility and quality of services provided.

Survey-based indicators have the advantage of incorporating people's lived experiences into the monitoring of SDG targets over time to complement administratively-based indicators. Indeed, the follow-up process on the SDGs should be as inclusive and

people-centred as possible to mirror popular understanding of the SDGs, including the critical importance of 'honest and responsive governments'.

Hence, democratic accountability can provide the necessary framework for inclusive realization, follow-up and review of the SDGs by protecting minorities and disadvantaged groups, and building openness and transparency, answerability, responsiveness and enforceability.

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