



The post-2015 development agenda: what do civil society and policymakers want from science?

PolicyLab, Royal Society, London, UK: 6 June 2013

Summary Report

Introduction

While policymakers at the heart of the post-2015 development agenda recite the mantra of evidence-based policy and civil society groups lead the way in outlining their visions, most scientists have so far been absent from the debate. This begs the question does science have a role to play and, if so, what is it?

The PolicyLab discussion asked what scientists and innovators need to do to ensure that their insights are both usable and used. Are those involved in UK science funding and policy collectively doing enough for scientists to deliver what is required by the post-2015 development framework?

Chaired by Sir John Beddington, former UK Government Chief Scientific Adviser, and Fellow of the Royal Society and of UKCDS, the discussion began with contributions from speakers at the heart of the post-2015 debate. They presented their ideas for how science can contribute to the post-2015 development agenda.

Speakers

- **Michael Anderson**, David Cameron's Special Envoy on the UN Development Goals
- **Amina Mohammed**, Ban Ki-moon's Special Adviser on Post-2015 Development Planning
- **Dominic Haslam**, Steering Committee member for the BOND Beyond 2015 UK Group, and Director of Policy and Strategic Programme Support at Sightsavers
- **Duncan Green**, Senior Strategic Adviser at Oxfam GB

Full-length video and presentations, as well as a summary and background document, can be found here: <http://www.scidev.net/global/content/post-2015.html>

A summary video can also be found here: <http://bit.ly/15A39ce>

[It should be noted the dinner for panellists and research funders was not recorded by video although the outcomes of these discussions are reflected in this report.]

Summary of presentations and discussion

Michael Anderson provided some background on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) and the post-2015 development agenda. He said that the MDGs are a powerful tool for focusing agreement on what we are trying to achieve in development. The widespread perception is that the MDGs have really made a difference, and they have been most effective where they are precise, objective and measurable.

The High Level Panel report recently proposed five transformative changes for the post-2015 agenda. The new agenda, like the MDGs, will have no binding force, and it will stand or fall depending on how compelling it is. It needs to recapture the 'magic' of the MDGs and inspire people to action. Michael suggested four areas where science can make a big difference:

1. Helping develop really good proxy indicators for complex change, which in turn helps communicate with ordinary people.
2. Helping policymakers to understand complex causal relationships.
3. Helping understand risk: psychological perception of risk is different to statistical risk.
4. Helping policymakers take informed action in situations of uncertainty.

Amina Mohammed said that everyone agrees that science is relevant to the post-2015 development agenda, but we face a challenge as to how we move from policy to action. If we want to take action, then we need to assess the context and we need to be able to measure results. Development has moved from a social agenda to a sustainable development agenda, with more emphasis on the environment than before. Science and technology present great opportunities but the task ahead is enormous considering the scale of challenges such as poverty, migration, conflict, health and the empowerment of women. She argued that the highest impact will come from working with national and local governments including parliamentarians to ensure that laws and policies are based on human rights.

Building scientific capacity in the South is critical. Not enough investment goes into strengthening scientific institutions and scientists. If science and technology are going to be critical in the future, then how do we get young people involved in science? Science education is important, as is getting young people involved in participatory research at the community level. Putting real people at the centre of science delivery is critical. Many successes in the health sector are due to technology, such as hand held phones and good communication. If we bring science to the people, then we will make good headway to making the five transformative shifts recommended in the High Level Panel report (a focus on inclusion, sustainable development, job creation, governance and global partnerships.) Therefore the post-2015 agenda needs to be compelling because the greatest advocates will be the people. They need to see it as an essential tool for them to move the government agenda towards their needs.

Dominic Haslam asked how science can help create a framework of evidence-based goals. He argued that the post-2015 framework must be based on the realities of people who live in poverty, through their input into the process and outcomes. How do we ensure the participation of people, and understand what they think and want? The framework must also be based on lessons learnt during the MDG experience, including reporting processes. In particular, any framework needs to be adaptable so that changes can be integrated according to new evidence.

Science has been critical to understand the impact of the current MDGs. It has also been helpful in articulating counterfactuals – for example, what would have happened if there were no MDGs? However, more work is needed to be able to compare MDGs that delivered and those that have not delivered, and to understand why that is the case. What about the quality of the outputs that are claimed as a success? For example, if a pit latrine counts as a successful output, will it last twenty-five years?

The new framework will focus on the distribution of benefits across populations, and the data revolution will help this. While disaggregation techniques are working well, it is complicated to do this across different groups.

Duncan emphasised that the critical engagement point for science is now; we should not wait for the framework to be established before engaging. He made a call for scientists to join the 'Beyond 2015 campaign' to help define the evidence-based criteria for a framework.

Duncan Green argued that scientists can inform the aid and development community about what counts as evidence. In aid and development, people think of science as linear cause and effect, and they think of measuring change and attributing it to interventions. However, aid and development operate in complex political and social systems. The aid business therefore needs to apply different kinds of science to different contexts. If science can challenge the dumbed-down version of systems and impact in aid, it will be hugely important. Scientists therefore need to communicate better.

NGOs are conscious that science and technology are not power neutral and that scientific breakthroughs tend to benefit wealthy people first. The distributive impact of science is really important and we need to discuss issues of inequality and power.

The following key themes emerged from the speakers' presentations, the Q&A and the subsequent discussions during the evening:

1) It is important to use the post-2015 development process to create and communicate compelling messages about global problems to raise awareness and buy-in among policymakers and the public.

The MDGs were an effective communication tool to raise awareness and inspire action. The post-2015 agenda must do the same. Unlike UN conventions, the new post-2015 goals will not be legally binding. Messages about goals must capture the 'magic' of the MDGs and allow people to engage with governments and other development partners to advocate for the changes they want to see. It is therefore important for the science community to engage now with the post-2015 debates, rather than wait until a new agenda is announced. Science can help develop indicators and proxy indicators for new goals, which will make communication to the public and policymakers much more effective. Technology can play a role to collect the data for such indicators.

2) International collaboration to fund and do science is essential to address complex problems and systems. Scientists, NGOs, business and governments need incentivising to work together.

International collaboration and funding is critical for big science projects (for example, the Large Hadron Collider) that no national government can afford on its own. Many different stakeholders need to work together on the science and development agenda, both to promote and implement it. They include donors, development agencies, scientists from both North and South, civil society organisations, private sector and ordinary citizens and communities. It is important to develop synergies between the development community and the environment community. Equally, there needs to be more integration between different sectors such as health, education, water and sanitation, and agriculture.

Scientists often end up working in isolation in their own disciplines. How scientists interact with others is a largely political process. There needs to be more co-creation of knowledge and incentivising of parties to come together. This lack of a connection between scientists and other groups, can lead to a lack of understanding as to who science is being done for, and why?

The role of markets is significant in terms of delivering science. What is the delivery mechanism for science and how do we ensure markets are inclusive and effective? The private sector is a big new player in the development arena and it must be represented in discussions about delivering science to people.

NGOs often have clear and loud voices on development issues, and this can crowd out scientists' voices. By collaborating more closely, NGOs can support science in development. Together, they can help funders identify where to push forwards in science.

3) How can science address the issue of global over-consumption?

More people globally want more material goods and do not fully understand the impact on the planet and why this is not sustainable. Unless people's values about consumption change, there will not be any progress. It is a challenge as growing economies like China and India and other developing countries aspire to the same standards of living as the West. More research is needed to see how values can change, taking into account issues of wellbeing, community care, and lifestyle.

4) How is the environment being represented in the Post-2015 development agenda?

The environment can be seen from three perspectives:

1. The environment and climate change as a pressure or constraint on development (the 'planetary boundaries' concept).
2. The environment in its own right; what resources are left when everyone has done their development.
3. The environment as a resource to underpin public goods such as food security and freshwater provision, health, disaster resilience etc.
4. The post-2015 development agenda needs to place greater emphasis on the environment than the MDGs did, and development and the environment need to be better linked. The post-2015 development agenda also needs to be closely aligned to other international negotiations, such as those around climate change and disaster risk reduction.

5) Improved communication of what science can actually do is needed.

Scientists need to communicate their work better. It is not enough to sit on a panel or publish academic papers. Science communication needs to reach the public, and engage policymakers. Scientists also need to communicate better about what science can achieve. For example, science cannot provide absolutes or firm truths but rather it can discuss uncertainty and probabilistic answers in complex systems. Science can help policymakers understand how to articulate and respond to uncertainty.

6) What is the role of science as a driver of fairness?

There needs to be consideration of how to make the delivery of science more equitable so that the poorest people also benefit. Choices about the way science is implemented means there are often unequal effects on populations. Being aware of power imbalances and how science can leave people behind is critical when pursuing equality. Given that science is one of the best objective frameworks for decision-making, can science be used as the great leveller of inequalities? For example, can science point to the ways in which policy link environmental health, community resilience and human development in a way that matches our aspirations?

Science and the future of global development Four leading scientific institutions, the Royal Society, British Council, SciDev.Net and UKCDS are working together to explore the role for science in the future of global development, and specifically its contribution to the post-2015 development goals.