



Negotiation of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda: Role of Bangladesh

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Abstract

How were the sustainable development goals (SDGs) negotiated at the United Nations, and what role did Bangladesh play in the SDG negotiation process? This paper addresses these questions by sharing first-hand account of a senior Bangladeshi diplomat who served at the Bangladesh permanent mission to the United Nations (UN) in New York and is well-versed in the theories and practice of multilateral negotiations. It argues the SDG negotiation process was unique because of the depth and dimension of the agenda and the structure and processes involved. It uses the theoretical framework of global governance to analyse the role of various UN bodies, and UN-centric groups and coalition of actors which played a critical role in multilateral negotiations

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leading to the adoption of 17 SDGs in 2015. The paper contends that while the Global Southern countries played a key role in shaping the SDG Agenda and negotiation process, the Bangladesh delegation was at the forefront in pressing for several development issues including climate change, migration, and transboundary water cooperation. The findings have implications for the theory and practice of multilateral diplomacy and global governance.

There is a rich body of literature on the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Jeffrey Sachs is considered to be a leading authority on SDGs. Sachs traces the evolution of the SDGs from the 1992 Earth Summit and the 2000 Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to the 2012 Rio+ 20 Earth Summit.¹ Others look at the changing nature of diplomacy. Dodds and his colleagues define the SDGs negotiation process as tortuous event involving multiple stakeholders. Most of these authors were well involved in the negotiation process in different capacities.² Macharia Kamau, Kenian diplomat at the United Nations, environment specialist Pamela Chasek, and UN's senior policy specialist David O'Connor define the SDGs negotiation process as an outcome of transformational multilateral diplomacy. Given their background and proximity to the process, the authors bring a quality of information and offer rare insights into a long, challenging but fruitful process.³ Scholars extend the discussion to combine the diplomatic negotiations with the implementation of the SDGs.⁴ Regarding the agency of the developing countries, Fukuda-Parr and Bhumika Muchhala emphasise the role of the Global South for conceiving the idea of SDGs and sticking to the ambitious development objectives.⁵

This paper is based on the first-hand experience of a professional diplomat who acted as the lead negotiator for the Bangladeshi team at the United Nations. It seeks to analyse the process through which the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs were

initiated, negotiated, and adopted. In doing so, it provides a detailed description of the evolution of the SDGs as a concept; the politics and negotiation that took place in defining the SDGs; and the role Bangladesh played in the negotiation process. This paper will ultimately try to achieve three objectives: first, upholding the significance of multilateral diplomacy despite its inherent complexity to find a consensual outcome; second, validating the usefulness of global governance in finding solutions to the global problems; and third, informing the readers about the contributions of Bangladesh to shaping this landmark document.

The story of SDGs negotiation process is important and interesting for both the Bangladeshi and global audience. The unique process, the actions, and interactions of the membership of the United Nations during the negotiation, as well as its findings and insights, deserve serious introspection and evaluation. Moreover, the contribution of Bangladesh in this phenomenal exercise and its success in certain areas of negotiation is little-known outside the close diplomatic circles. For students of international affairs, the analysis is important as it focuses on multilateral diplomacy. The SDG negotiation process was unique because of the depth and dimension of the agenda and the structure and processes involved. The delegations from 193 countries engaged in the negotiation process to reach an agreement on sustainable development by consensus, rather than by majority voting. Some negotiators participated in the process with the theoretical knowledge of multilateral diplomacy, but most others learned about the intricacies of multilateral diplomacy during the process. The process followed established theories of multilateral diplomacy. This paper is, therefore, useful for social scientists and practitioners to understand and evaluate the negotiation process for conceptualizations and further insight.

This paper employs a qualitative case study method. It analyses both primary and secondary data coming from UN's official documents and statements and scholarly analyses. In addition,

it blends the author's observations and insights as a negotiator and active participation in various stages of the SDGs negotiation process.

The article has several sections. After a brief historical background to SDGs, it introduces the concept of global governance involving the roles played by different actors. It then analyses the negotiation process leading to the conclusion of a multilateral agreement. The next sections assess the roles, achievements, and lessons of Bangladesh in the entire SDGs negotiation process. Finally, the paper concludes that a relatively small state like Bangladesh can play an important role in multilateral negotiations provided the right kind of strategy is adopted.

A Brief Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development was adopted by the United Nations in 2015, heralding a new era in global development. This landmark development framework is considered a turning point in sustainable development as it effectively brought together environment, development, and governance under a single discourse. At the heart of the 2030 Agenda are the 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The Agenda and the SDGs are unique in terms of their scope, ambition, and approach. It has successfully integrated all three dimensions of sustainable development: economic, social, and environmental. Together, they represent a shared vision of the international community to end poverty, protect the planet, and share prosperity with the motto 'leaving no one behind.'⁶

The new set of goals was built on the success of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight MDGs, adopted in 2000, aimed at tackling a range of challenges such as poverty, hunger, disease, gender inequality, and water and sanitation. The MDGs proved that setting goals could help lift millions out of poverty, improve their well-being, and provide them with opportunities for better lives.⁷ The MDGs were set to be achieved by 2015. As

the deadline for achieving the MDGs was approaching, the international community felt the necessity for developing a new set of goals for another 15 years, taking lessons from the MDGs. The MDGs were primarily social goals directed at developing countries. It was underscored that the next Agenda must address not just the social, but also the economic and environmental aspects in a comprehensive and integrated manner.⁸

At the Rio+20 Summit in 2012, the member States decided to launch the process of developing a set of SDGs, built upon the experience of MDGs.⁹ It was agreed that the new sets of goal would be global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while respecting different national realities, capacities, and levels of development. It was emphasised that the goals should be integrated into the proposed 2030 Agenda.

A review of the UN-level documents suggests that UN conferences and summits held in the 1990s generated an unprecedented global consensus on a shared vision of development.¹⁰ The issues captured in these international meetings included economic and social development, demographic dynamics, human rights, environment, biodiversity, habitat and so on. Broad-based agreement around the outcome documents of these events led to the drafting of the Millennium Declaration in 2000.¹¹ Based on this Declaration, the UN Secretariat developed the MDGs and tried to galvanise global support to achieve these goals within the targeted time.

After the Millennium Declaration, the UN organised several important conferences on critical issues including financing for development for countries with special circumstances and needs such as the Least Developed Countries (LDCs), Small Island Developing States (SIDS) and Landlocked Developing Countries (LLDCs). There was a growing sentiment that the development activities must equally address issues such as the impacts of globalization, inequalities among and within countries, participation of developing countries in global

economic governance, sustainable production and consumption patterns. The subsequent UN summits and conferences addressed these to pursue the full scope of development. Many of these events were held at the summit level, resulting in the adoption of important outcome documents. These international documents served as precursors to the debates and subsequent drafting of the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda.

Finally, the adoption of the 2030 Agenda exemplifies the success of the UN, the leading institution of global governance, to shape up the common future of humankind. It also glorifies the role of multilateral diplomacy as a tool of global governance to tackle the contemporary challenges facing the world.¹²

Global Governance – Key Actors

This section employs the global governance framework to examine which actors and stakeholders played a crucial role in the SDGs negotiations process. Global governance refers to a process of managing international affairs through a plethora of institutions, processes, agreements, and mechanisms¹³. As there is no global government, global governance typically involves a range of actors, including states, non-state actors and international organizations for collective and concerted actions at the global level. In other words, it is the sum total of norms, policies, and institutions that define, establish, and facilitate relations between and among various actors in the international system.¹⁴

Mechanisms of global governance are composed of elements and methods emanating both from the public and private sectors.¹⁵ The elements include agreed-upon standards and norms based on shared values, and directives issued and ultimately enforced by states. Methods of global governance include harmonisation of laws and standards among states and the establishment of international regimes.

UN as the Leading Institution of Global Governance

The most important institution in charge of global governance is the United Nations. It was established in 1945, in the aftermath of World War II, with the primary responsibility to prevent future wars and conflicts.¹⁶ The global body has subsequently expanded its areas of responsibility to promote the rule of law, human rights and fundamental freedoms and foster development for shared prosperity in a stable ecosystem.¹⁷ The UN system comprises more than fifteen specialised organizations and a number of technical agencies with a myriad of subsidiary bodies and entities. The body of international norms that govern the global system is negotiated, adopted, legislated, and implemented through this system of organizations, and agencies. The 193 member states are in the driving seat of decision-making in the UN system. They use UN General Assembly as the principal deliberative and decision-making forum where global issues of concern are addressed. Apart from the member states, civil society organizations, businesses and think tanks are becoming increasingly more active in global discourse and taking greater roles in global governance. Most decisions are taken at the UN through a complex series of multilateral negotiations.

Multilateral Negotiations

Multilateral negotiations generally mean negotiation by more than two parties over one or more issues conducted simultaneously aiming to reach an agreement for all.¹⁸ It is known to be a complex and cumbersome process,¹⁹ yet has been widely and frequently used as a tool in international forum to address common challenges. Since the establishment of the UN, multilateral negotiations have been a regular feature in conducting international relations. Negotiations under the auspices of the UN have been used for two purposes. First, UN negotiations are held to conduct regular and ritual diplomatic business in the UN General Assembly, the UN Security Council,

the UN Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC). Second, negotiations are steered to establish and maintain international regimes or standards generally on a theme or themes of importance, such as the United Nations Convention on the Law of the Sea (UNCLOS), the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the 2009 United Nations World Conference against Racism (WCAR).²⁰

Negotiations in a multilateral forum like the UN are undeniably more complex than bilateral ones. The complexity is due to the large number of stakeholders involved, the variety of interests at stake and the multiple issues to be dealt with.²¹ On top of this, most multilateral negotiations follow the consensus rule.²² The different parties to multilateral negotiations come into the room with different interests, concerns, and priorities. The larger the number of participants, the greater the likelihood of conflicting interests and positions. So, consensus building is a daunting task when many parties and varied interests are involved. Despite its inherent challenges, multilateral negotiations have grown in prominence as an effective means of reaching agreements on global issues.

The complexity of multilateral negotiation is managed through, among others, simplifying, structuring, and orienting the debates towards the desired outcome. A standard negotiation generally proceeds through a few phases: pre-negotiation, negotiation, and agreement.²³ The pre-negotiation phase is characterised by initial contacts among the stakeholders during which important aspects of the negotiation are addressed. This is the time when the list of participants, composition of bureau, organization of work, rule of procedure, agenda of the meeting and general framework are decided.²⁴ Once the organizational matters are dealt with, the negotiation phase soon follows when negotiators exchange information, argue in favour of respective positions, explore various alternative options, and reach tentative or conditional understanding on substantive matters. It follows the agreement phase when the parties reach an agreement on a possible outcome document.²⁵ During this time,

the delegates may give a second thought on the terms that they have provisionally agreed upon. These last-minute differences, if any, are sorted out usually by the Chairperson of the meeting through behind-the-door deal-making with important interested actors.

Coalition and Group formation

The cumbersome process of multilateral diplomacy is somewhat simplified by forming coalitions or groups among the participants. The coalition can be well defined and sustained through the entire negotiation phase. Alternatively, it can be an *ad hoc* formation based on positions over particular issues. In either case, coalitions simplify the process by reducing the large number of actors to a very few negotiators. The coalition or group formation also facilitates communication among the stakeholders, information sharing and participation in the actual debate.

There are generally three types of groups active in the UN system: electoral groups based on geographic distribution such as Asian group, African group and GRULAC; regional groups or organizations such as ASEAN, GCC; and political groups that are formed on the basis of mutual affinity or interest.²⁶ These political groups may be broad and institutionalised, such as the Group of 77 (G 77), LDCs, the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC), as well as less-institutionalised, and *ad hoc*, such as the SIDS.²⁷ Political groups are usually formed on the basis of similar interests of developed or developing states. However, there are many instances when diverse parties may join and form a group such as the Friends of Water comprising Switzerland, Egypt and others. The electoral groups are less active compared to the political ones as geographic proximity does not necessarily offer commonality in challenges or prospects. For example, the Asian group usually deals only with procedural, organizational and election matters, whereas the African group deliberates on substantive issues as the countries within the group have generally shared interests. Regional

groups also hardly negotiate as a group. It is largely the political groups who actively participate in any multilateral negotiation.

Group Dynamics

Group dynamics play an important role in intergovernmental negotiations. Political groups may act differently in different UN bodies. In any development-related debates in the UN, the G77 plus China is the main negotiating group.²⁸ It is a group of 134 countries with diverse cultures and customs, development levels and geo-political interests. The members of G77 are also concurrently members of other types of groups. For example, within the G77, the LDCs represent the 'poorest of the poor.'²⁹ Their concerns are different from the development countries. Challenges regarding economic impediments are more severe compared to the others. On social issues, there are growing rifts between the Latin and the Afro-Asian countries. On the climate issue, the industrialised economies and oil producers have positions opposite to the small island and the climate-vulnerable developing countries. There are many such fault lines within the G77. So, adopting a group position is complex and time-consuming. Among the other groups, the OIC is vocal about social and human rights issues such as discrimination and Islamophobia. Although the European Union (EU) is very active on regional issues,³⁰ it is not always easy to adopt a common position as its members have diverse national interests.

Role of Small Developing States

The United Nations is composed of different types of states, small, medium and big. It is usually the ones with greater economic and military capabilities who get the maximum focus in multilateral diplomacy. The activities of small states, particularly the developing ones and their influence in decision-making, are relatively little known. There are many reasons for this. The smaller states have lesser capacities than their bigger counterparts to influence multilateral negotiations. These states have limited administrative, financial and economic

strength, which restrict their ability of active and effective participation in multilateral negotiations.³¹ They have fewer members in their delegations and as such a higher workload for individual delegates than those in big states to prepare for and engage actively in the negotiation. Moreover, small states have lower political weight, which reduces their power of influence vis-à-vis the bigger ones.³²

To overcome such capacity constraints and yet exert influence over the negotiation process, small states try to be strategic. Small states get more negotiating power by forming coalitions during negotiations. In so doing, small states not only increase their collective bargaining power but also master the framing of effective arguments, thereby, influencing negotiation outcomes.³³ Moreover, it is noted that when negotiators are efficient, thorough and well-conversant with the subject matters, they can make a compelling case in their favour and achieve a better result. When arguments are based on solid information and are backed up by convincing reasons, success becomes more achievable.

Bangladesh is geographically a small state though it has a large population. It is still a least developed country, though on course to be graduated out soon. The country may not have necessary political weight to influence global actions. It will be, therefore, interesting to explore how this small developing country contributed to the negotiation process of SDGs and the 2030 development Agenda.

Negotiating SDGs

At the Rio+20 Summit in 2012, the idea of SDGs was conceived. The Summit decided to establish an inclusive and transparent process for developing the SDGs.³⁴ Based on this, the UN General Assembly (UNGA) formed the Open-ended Working Group (OWG) for the SDGs in 2013. Member states showed a deep commitment to the process by sending delegates regularly to participate in the OWG.

Several work streams were engaged in support of developing the post-2015 development Agenda alongside the OWG and Intergovernmental Negotiation (IGN). The UN Secretary-General launched his High-level Panel (HLP) of Eminent Persons to present their recommendations on the Agenda. HLP was co-chaired by the Presidents of Indonesia and Liberia and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom. The panel assembled representatives from civil society, private sector, academia and local and national governments.³⁵

Another group, named the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Finance (ICESDF) was created to consider the means of implementation for the SDGs. There were civil society inputs, such as the report from the Sustainable Development Solution Network (SDSN).³⁶ Finally, over 100 national consultations and eleven thematic consultations were held globally, whose outcome was fed into the deliberations.³⁷ Thematic meetings were held on the following issues: education, inequalities, health, governance, conflict and fragility, growth and employment, environmental sustainability, hunger, nutrition and food security, population dynamics, energy and water.³⁸

Pre-negotiation Phase

In the pre-negotiation phase of the process, a list of the composition of OWG, the election of Co-Chairs, working methods, reporting procedure and the format of the meetings were decided. The guiding document was 'The Future We Want' adopted by the Rio+20 conference. Ambassador Maria L. R. Vittoli of Brazil, the host country of the conference was assigned for this job.³⁹ The Rio document envisaged an open working group composed of 30 members nominated from the five electoral groups equitably. Since there were more aspirants than the available seats for OWG, an innovative way was devised to accommodate more countries through sharing seats by forming 'duos' and 'troikas'.⁴⁰ It allowed a total of 70 states

to be represented in OWG from different electoral groups. As for leading the discussions, two Co-Chairs were selected: Ambassador Csaba Korosi of Hungary representing the developed world and Ambassador Macharia Kamau of Kenya on behalf of developing countries.⁴¹

The UN follows fairly standard modalities of work. Despite that it was subjected to intense discussions. The challenge was to decide, what would be the reporting line, how the work ongoing in other streams would be taken on board, how inclusivity and transparency would be ensured, what the status of civil society would be and who would provide technical support to OWG. Eventually, it was decided that OWG would submit a report to the General Assembly containing a set of SDGs for consideration. All other work streams would be directed towards the Secretary-General, who would prepare a report for consideration by OWG. Arrangements were made for the non-governmental organizations (NGOs) having ECOSOC consultative status to participate in the debates as observers.⁴² They were asked to organise themselves along the thematic lines and make interventions towards the end of sessions. The UN specialised organizations and agencies would provide technical support, and clarifications as and when required by OWG.⁴³

Negotiation Phase

With all organisational issues settled, OWG was ready to commence the substantive work for drafting the new set of goals. Eventually, OWG held 13 sessions, 8 of which were used for thematic mapping and the remaining five were for the drafting of SDGs. Once the thematic mapping exercise was completed, the co-chairs presented an initial draft with a set of goals, which were modified in the course of the negotiation. Initially, many delegations preferred that the new set of goals be like the MDGs, *i.e.*, limited in number and concise. Some of them proposed to finish the 'unfinished business of the MDGs.'⁴⁴ The Co-Chairs also made sincere efforts to reduce the number

of goals. They tried various options, but none reached to consensus. Nobody was willing to sacrifice their favourite issue for the sake of brevity.

As generally agreed, the Co-Chairs incorporated the MDGs' unmet goals and targets in the opening set of objectives, *i.e.*, poverty, hunger, education, health, gender equality and partnerships. After that, contemporary issues of concern were included. Requests from the delegations and groups were also given due consideration.

There was a consensus that the first goal should be eradication of poverty. Member states expressed overwhelming support for an ambitious goal in this area. However, the rest of the goals or target proposals prompted heated debates.⁴⁵ Even goals such as gender equality, health, and education were not spared from criticism. For example, the goal of gender equality and women's empowerment garnered widespread support, but the inclusion of issues of child marriage and inheritance caused unease for many developing countries.⁴⁶ Everyone agreed that health or education as goals would be absolutely essential, but when it came to including sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR), there was a substantial divergence.

Navigating Conflicting Issues

The list of conflicting issues is quite long. A few of them are briefly mentioned below to give a sense of the complexity of debates.

Common But Differentiated Responsibilities (CBDR): Throughout the negotiations, the G77 and China stressed that the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities (CBDR)⁴⁷ should apply to the entire development agenda. They argued that the implementation of the lofty goals should be differentiated according to varying levels of development and capacity. They proposed that developed countries support developing countries by providing financial resources,

technology, and capacity building. On the other hand, the developed countries argued that CBDR applied only to the environmental field.⁴⁸

Peaceful and Inclusive Societies: On the debate about whether there should be a standalone goal on peaceful and inclusive societies, the disagreement was very strong. Many Western European and Other Groups (WEOG) members underscored the invariable link between peace and development. On the contrary, G77 members pointed out that the Rio+20 outcome had made no reference to peace and security, and as such, should be outside of the mandate of the OWG.⁴⁹ Western countries pressed for the inclusion of the rule of law and good governance as well as concepts such as freedom of speech, media, and association. Opposing the position of the developed countries, the developing countries argued that these elements are not quantifiable or measurable and, therefore, did not qualify as targets.⁵⁰

Sexual and Reproductive Health and Rights, and Comprehensive Sexual Education: One of the major controversies was a proposed reference to women's sexual and reproductive health and rights (SRHR). The majority of the Muslim countries opposed the inclusion of any language on SRHR, and comprehensive sexuality education as they claimed these go against the values and religious beliefs of their people. On the other hand, delegations from the West and Latin America said that, without these interventions, the entire SDG Agenda would be incomplete. The position was irreconcilable and continued till the last minute.

Climate Change: From the outset, many delegations highlighted the importance of climate change for the sustainable development agenda. Some of them proposed a standalone goal on climate change as well as mainstreaming it across the Agenda. The industrialised countries opposed the point that the forum for considering climate change was the UNFCCC.⁵¹ The inclusion of a goal on this would impede the negotiations in that

forum. The G77 was divided on this issue, as bigger developing countries such as China, India, Brazil and the oil producing countries in the Middle-east opposed a standalone goal. However, members of the Alliance of Small Island States (AOSIS), the LDCs and a few others continued to pursue it.⁵² The G77 supported the mention of equity, CBDR and inclusion of mitigation and adaptation in the target set, as well as the operationalisation of the Green Climate Fund.

Sustainable Consumption and Production: The sustainable consumption and production (SCP) goal was proposed to address overconsumption in affluent societies, impacting the rest of the world.

Means of Implementation: The G77 and China sought a standalone goal on the means of implementation (MOI) and global partnership. On top of that, they also insisted on goal-specific MOIs. WEOG countries neither wanted to have a standalone goal nor goal-specific MOIs.

On the Road to a Multilateral Agreement

The positions of negotiating groups were quite divergent on many issues, though the deadline for completing the work was approaching. The Co-Chairs, delegates, and UN officials were responsible for making progress through intense consultations. The Co-Chairs wanted to significantly narrow down the difference, but some seemed irreconcilable. Through skilful commitments, OWG came up with a set of SDG Agenda. Although nobody was entirely happy with the final content, the delegations accepted the document. The Co-Chairs gavelled the text, which contained 17 Sustainable Development Goals and 169 targets. The 17 SDGs are symbolised as: (1) No Poverty, (2) Zero Hunger, (3) Good Health and Well-being, (4) Quality Education, (5) Gender Equality, (6) Clean Water and Sanitation, (7) Affordable and Clean Energy, (8) Decent Work and Economic Growth, (9) Industry, Innovation and Infrastructure, (10) Reduced Inequality, (11) Sustainable Cities and

Communities, (12) Responsible Consumption and Production, (13) Climate Action, (14) Life below Water, (15) Life on Land, (16) Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions, (17) Partnerships for the Goals.

Negotiating Post 2015 Development Agenda

Once the set of SDGs was agreed upon, the discussion began on how these will relate to the proposed post-2015 development Agenda, which later became known as 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The G77 and China strongly pressed for the OWG report to be the basis for elaborating the post-2015 development Agenda. Nonetheless, the developed country groups preferred that the synthesis report of the Secretary-General be the basis.⁵³ Finally, the WEOG relented to the pressure of the developing countries and accepted their demand. Through a resolution, UNGA decided that the report of the OWG containing SDGs shall be the primary basis while recognising that other inputs will also be considered for integrating into the post-2015 Agenda.⁵⁴

Pre-negotiation Phase

The adoption of the SDGs by the UNGA paved the way for the Intergovernmental Negotiations (IGN) on the post 2015-development Agenda to commence their work. The UNGA President appointed two co-facilitators (CoFs), Ambassador Macharia Kamau, Permanent Representative (PR) of Kenya at the UN, and Ambassador David Donoghue, PR of Ireland, to conduct the negotiations. Ambassador Kamau was the Co-Chair of OWG. In comparison to OWG, IGN for the elaboration of the post-2015 development Agenda was open to all member states. Following the practice of OWG, IGN decided to allow civil society organizations and other stakeholders to participate in the IGN except directly engaging in the drafting exercise.⁵⁵

The Co-facilitators organised a few informal meetings to read the objectives of the delegates, firm up the modalities and chart

the way forward. In terms of modalities, the preference was to maintain the same working methods of the OWG to the extent possible during IGN. After the informal session of stock-taking, the CoFs proposed that the outcome document of the negotiations would consist of: i) an opening political declaration; ii) the SDGs and targets; iii) MOI and a new global partnership for development; iv) a framework for follow-up and review.⁵⁶

Negotiation Phase

The CoFs held a series of monthly meetings, attended by many delegates, both from the Missions and the capitals. In general, there was a broad agreement that the new Agenda should be universal, ambitious, transformative and inclusive. In terms of the declaration, it was agreed that this should be concise, visionary, and inspirational. It was also agreed that the SDG set would be integrated into the entirely new Agenda. The synthesis report prepared by the UN Security General might also be seen as relevant. The total time available to craft a post-2015 Agenda was only eight months. So, the delegations generally resisted the temptation to reopen compromises reached during the OWG stage.

The most debated issues were the development of indicators for the targets and 'technical proofing' of some targets. Some EU member states initially proposed changes in a few more goals and targets, but soon realised that there was no prospect. The G77 was especially categorical on the sanctity of OWG outcomes. Cases were made for the needs of SIDS, AOSIS, LDCs and LLDCs. After a technical review of targets, IGN decided to assign the UN Statistical Commission (UNSC) to develop global indicators.

Member states concurred that the follow-up and review should be handled by the High-level Political Forum (HLPF), a hybrid body under UNGA and ECOSOC.⁵⁷ This body should keep track of progress and identify gaps and shortcomings in various

countries in implementing SDGs. HLPF might also make recommendations on what countries would need to do to stay on track and on the global partnership and MOI.

Complications: At some point in the discussion, the CoFs circulated a paper proposing the ‘tweaking’ of some targets, which were actually more than just technical proofing. WEOG countries were supportive and they had suggestions for further change. The G77 opposed the move. This group made it clear that they would resist any initiative that would ruin the delicate balance achieved in OWG outcomes.⁵⁸

On the CBDR, the G77 insisted that this principle was a fundamental underpinning for sustainable development, whereas WEOG responded that the validity of CBDR was limited only to environmental degradation. In the case of OWG, it was not possible to bridge the traditional North-South divide.⁵⁹ There was also a classic stand-off over a proposed reference to the right to development.

WEOG countries wished to see the human rights and gender equality references strengthened. They emphasised the importance of the rule of law, justice, and good governance for sustainable development, and proposed a strong reference to these elements in the declaration. In contrast, many G77 countries, African Group, and the OIC, felt that human rights was already overemphasised in the declaration.

The Arab group, Pakistan and a few other delegations insisted on the inclusion of a reference to peoples living under foreign occupation in the draft declaration, which Israel and other WEOG countries challenged. Many delegations, including Bangladesh, wanted to have migration appropriately captured in the declaration recognising its positive effects on development. Migrant-receiving countries contested this.

The Final Outcome Document

After over eight months of intergovernmental negotiations and numerous revisions of the draft, an agreement was finally reached. The title was given as *Transforming Our World: The 2030 Agenda*.⁶⁰ The 2030 Agenda consists of a political declaration, the SDGs and targets, MOI, and follow-up and review. This Agenda serves as the basis for the development endeavours of the world for the next 15 years.

The ‘five Ps’—people, planet, prosperity, peace, and partnership, mentioned at the beginning, capture the broad scope of the Agenda.⁶¹ The Agenda is unique in that it calls for action by all countries, rich, poor, and middle-income. As they embark on this collective journey, member states pledge that ‘no one will be left behind.’⁶² It highlights poverty eradication as the overarching goal of the new development agenda.

The goals and targets aim at tackling systemic barriers to sustainable development, such as inequality, unsustainable consumption and production patterns, inadequate infrastructure and lack of decent jobs. The environmental dimension is covered in the goals on oceans and marine resources and ecosystems and biodiversity.

The Means of Implementation (MOIs) outlined in the document focus on finance, technology transfer and capacity building. In addition to a standalone goal on MOI, specific means were tailored to each of the goals. The Agenda calls for a revitalised global partnership, including multi-stakeholder partnerships for sustainable development. It also calls for increased capacity-building for collecting authentic data and statistics in order to measure progress. It entrusted the HLPF on sustainable development to serve as the principal forum for follow-up and review.

The Agenda included a Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) to support the implementation of the new goals, based

on effective collaboration between the member states, civil society, business and scientific community and the UN system.⁶³ It also set the operationalisation of the Technology Bank for LDCs as a target under the SDG 17.

Role of Bangladesh Delegation

Bangladesh is regarded as a dynamic and contributing country in the UN. Its moderate but principled position earns respect from others. In keeping with this tradition, the Bangladesh delegation actively participated in the formulation of the new development agenda. Bangladesh was a member of OWG from the Asian region and participated in all the deliberations. It took part in the thematic debates and made specific proposals on goals and targets. The delegation worked within the various regional and political groups to pursue national as well as group interests. The prominent political groups where the Bangladesh delegation actively engaged were the G77, LDC Group, NAM, and the OIC. It contributed to forming group positions on many issues. Moreover, the negotiators from Bangladesh made efforts to reach out to delegations on the other side of the aisle to make their case. That approach played an important role in protecting the interests of Bangladesh.

Bangladesh chose to be a member of OWG and formed a troika with Saudi Arabia and South Korea. This delegation participated in the SDG negotiation, keeping in view its national development policies and strategies such as the Vision 2021, Perspective Plan and 2100 Delta Plan of Action. It also played a very visible, constructive, and effective role in protecting the shared interests of LDCs.

Formation of the Negotiating Team

The Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MoFA), the assigned authority to steer the process on behalf of Bangladesh took the job seriously and engaged with the negotiation process from the outset. It formed a negotiating team comprising officials and

experts both from the capital and the Permanent Mission. The author was the lead delegate from the Mission as the Deputy Permanent Representative to participate in the negotiation. Other members of the team included Dr. Qazi Kholiquzzaman Ahmad, Chairman, PKSf and senior officials from MoFA and the Mission. MoFA officials, while mostly attended the formal sessions of OWG and IGN, missed many of the intersessional activities and bilateral and small group meetings throughout the years. It was an excellent collaboration between the Headquarters and the Permanent Mission. Dr. A K Abdul Momen, the then Bangladesh Ambassador and Permanent Representative, supervised the teams from the capital and the Mission. Mr. Shahidul Haque, the then Foreign Secretary, for his special interest in multilateral works and considering the importance of the subject matter, kept a vigilant eye on the ongoing negotiations.

Priorities and Expectations of Bangladesh

Bangladesh expected the new development agenda to be universal in nature, contributing to economic prosperity, social cohesion and environmental protection. It wished that SDGs should be limited in number, aspirational in nature, and simple to comprehend. It wanted equity and fairness to be at the heart of crafting the SDGs.

In terms of specifics, Bangladesh reiterated that the overriding objective of the development agenda should be poverty eradication. It emphasised that the water, food, and energy needs of the world must be met, but without destroying the ecosystem.⁶⁴ Access to healthcare through universal health coverage must be ensured. Prevention of infectious diseases such as HIV/AIDS, malaria, tuberculosis and polio should get priority attention. Access to education should be guaranteed, ensuring its quality and promoting the use of ICT. Achieving gender equality and the empowerment of women should be another top priority. Bangladesh stressed the creation of opportunities for the youth through education, skills

development and employment.⁶⁵ Among others, it recommended that the development agenda should encourage safe, orderly and regular migration. Bangladesh emphasised the need for rules-based, fair, equitable international trade and meaningful and effective market access for developing countries.

In keeping with the priorities, the Bangladesh delegation firmly pushed for the inclusion of the issues such as climate change, demographic change, migration, maritime rights and blue economy, integrated water resource management, and eradication of water-borne diseases in the SDGs. Bangladesh emphasised that among the developing countries, LDCs require international support in terms of finance, technology transfer and capacity-building to achieve the SDGs. Finally, it insisted that each SDG must be accompanied by dedicated MOIs. In this connection, the delegation stressed the robust global partnership and international cooperation through the fulfilment of ODA commitments.

Major Accomplishments of Bangladesh

Through intense engagement with the negotiation process for more than three years, first in OWG and then in IGN, the Bangladesh delegation established that it might be a small country, but Bangladesh is a serious and committed member of the international community capable of contributing to the global policy debate. During negotiations, the delegation received appreciation from its partners for adopting a balanced, accommodative, bridge-building, non-adversarial, and value-based position. On many occasions, the negotiators from Bangladesh were seen to punch above the weight and earn respect from their friends and foes equally. What it achieved in the outcome documents for the developing countries, particularly for the LDC group, certainly benefitted the country. The accomplishments, specifically for the country, are also considerable. A few are highlighted below:

A Stand-alone goal on Climate Change (SDG 13)

It was a major success considering that the Bangladesh delegation had to fight against an insurmountable opposition ranging from oil-producing to major industrialized countries to secure a place for climate change in the SDGs. From the very beginning, the Bangladesh delegation was resolute in pursuing a standalone goal on climate change as it also sought different aspects of climate change covered in other goal areas. By agreeing to include climate change in the 2030 Agenda, the global community had implicitly recognised the overwhelming and cross-cutting nature of its impact.

Migration

The Bangladesh delegation played a proactive and leading role in pressing for international migration in the text and highlighting an orderly, safe, regular and responsible migration governance. Together with other migrant sending countries, the negotiators could incorporate this issue at various places in the document. Bangladesh was the first to propose a target to reduce remittance transaction costs to under 3% and eliminate remittance corridors with costs higher than 5%. This proposal was finally agreed upon and incorporated in the outcome document.⁶⁶ The Dhaka Declaration on Population Dynamics⁶⁷ adopted in March 2013 had helped draw global attention to the migration issue and propose specific languages. Migration governance and rights of migrants appeared under three Goals as four targets.

Transboundary Cooperation for Water Management

The Rio+20 declaration did not refer to the management of transboundary water. So, when it was proposed under the water goal, some thought it would not get sufficient attention. However, the negotiators saw a momentum generating around this issue. Switzerland, Egypt, and a few other countries took

the main initiative. The Bangladesh delegations worked behind the scenes to have a target on the implementation of integrated water resource management at all levels, including through transboundary cooperation.⁶⁸

Promotion of a culture of Peace and Non-violence

Apart from climate change and migration, Bangladesh also succeeded in including the culture of peace, which was premised on its flagship resolution on the subject tabled annually in the UNGA.⁶⁹ It was also not easy as some G77 members, as well as a few western countries, generally promote the alliance of civilisation over the culture of peace.

Securing LDC Interest

These apart, Bangladesh could ensure references to LDCs under the most economic and social goals. The Bangladesh delegation got a good number of its proposals reflected in the final text. Getting a target on ‘investment promotion regime for LDCs’, was a success.⁷⁰ There is an opportunity now to build upon it further as was done for Technology Bank.

Lessons Learned

The configuration of OWG, with the ‘duos’ and ‘troikas’, changed the traditional nature of negotiations. The North-South divide was less evident as countries were less constrained to follow the directions of their respective larger groups. The seat partners would seek to identify what they have in common and pronounce those accordingly. So, the G77 or EU would make general remarks initially, and the rest would be left with the troikas or duos to debate. However, towards the later part of the negotiation in OWG and IGN forums, the G77 could demonstrate group unity almost in every goal, except the SDG 16, which refers to peaceful and inclusive societies.⁷¹ The group solidarity of G77 was extremely beneficial for mounting pressure on the partners to get the desired outcome.

Bangladesh is a small country with a modest global influence. From substantive association with the negotiation of SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, the Bangladesh delegation realised that the only way to make a mark is through sincerity and hard work. It is important to be conversant with the issues under discussion. That gives confidence. Having good communication skill is a blessing. At one point, the negotiators from Bangladesh were arguing if human rights should be included in the SDG framework. The issue was pushed by the western group. The position of the G77 was that it is primarily a development agenda. The issues such as human rights or good governance might dilute the focus on development and bring in new conditionalities for getting development support. The author, in his capacity as the lead delegate from Bangladesh, made an intervention justifying the position of the developing countries. After the intervention, some delegates approached him to express their appreciation. It proves that Bangladesh had a distinct role and position among the core group of negotiators.

Perseverance is a great virtue in negotiations. Here, the climate change may be mentioned. In the initial drafts of the Co-Chairs, climate change was included. However, due to opposition from several powerful countries of the North and South, the item was dropped mid-way through. Seeing formidable opposition, most of the supporters of climate change gave up, but Bangladesh persisted. At one point, it was only the Bangladesh delegation that stood firm on having climate change as a goal in the SDGs. Persistence paid off and eventually, climate change found a place in the final document as a goal.

A diplomat needs to make friendships, earn credibility and trust from his or her peers. At the same time, one must be tactful. This is more relevant for a delegate from a relatively smaller country like Bangladesh. The transboundary water management issue may be referred in this connection. This is a sensitive issue for Bangladesh due to the position and close relationship with its neighbour—India. Switzerland took the lead of a cross-regional

group on this issue in OWG. The Bangladesh delegation worked with them on sidelines of the meetings. It also brought the LDC group on board to form a larger coalition. So, when the matter came up for consideration in the formal meeting, the LDC Chair placed it as a group position, which was eventually agreed upon and reflected in the final document. The position of Bangladesh and its substantive contributions to the LDC group is well-known. It has significant leverage on this group as LDCs continue to depend on our intellectual inputs.

Migration has always been a debated issue in the UN, with the receiving countries' refusal to address this. There is no common position on this issue in the G77 group. So, the Bangladesh delegation worked through the LDC Group, and persuaded them to include migration in the proposals of the LDC group for the 2030 Agenda. There was a deadlock and the Co-Chairs had to find a common language. Around that time, one day, an NGO representative came forward to help the team to get out of the impasse. As per the rules of procedure, he or she could not do it since only a member state can formally propose text during the ongoing negotiation. The Bangladesh delegation looked through it and found it balanced and covered the main areas of concern. It proposed the language from the floor right away and it was agreed then and there.

Bangladesh was one of the countries where a broad-based national consultations took place involving the government, NGOs and civil society. These UNDP-led national consultations delivered 11 sets of possible goals, with several targets in each.⁷² The report was forwarded to the Permanent Mission to submit to the UN for consideration. The goals resembled the HLP and other UN-led processes. Some of the goals and targets, however, were contradictory to the positions the Bangladesh delegation took in the UN for tactical purposes. In OWG, the developing country delegates were opposed to include issues such as human rights, good governance, peace and security, in apprehension that these issues would dilute the focus on development. However, the national reports were foreseen to

form part of the Secretary General's 'synthesis report'. In effect, the participating states including Bangladesh needed greater coordination among different entities and exchange of views before firming up their national positions.

Conclusions

Negotiating the 2030 Agenda was an enormous task and an incredibly complex process, as the number of negotiators was huge, interests were varied, issues diverse, and coverage vast. The SDGs were finally adopted after three years of countless official and informal meetings, retreats, and breakfast-lunch-dinner consultations. The 17 SDGs with 169 targets, to be achieved in the next 15 years, formed the core of the 2030 Agenda.⁷³ The integrated, interlinked, and indivisible goals aimed to free humanity from the scourge of poverty while securing the planet. These goals sought to ensure that ending poverty and other deprivations could go hand-in-hand with improving health and education, reducing inequality, and stimulating economic growth while tackling climate change and preserving biodiversity, oceans, and forests.

No one really believed at the beginning that universal sustainable development goals could be adopted using such a broad-based consultative process. The beauty of the negotiation process was that it involved not only member states but also representatives from UN agencies, funds, and programmes; civil society; the private sector; and other non-state actors. This was uncommon in the modern history of multilateralism. At a time when the future of the UN or multilateral diplomacy was questioned by many, the outcome of these negotiations must be considered a remarkable success.

The role of the Bangladesh delegation and its accomplishment in the outcome document prove that when the preparation is done well, negotiators are committed, conversant and competent, there is an effective coordination among relevant entities, and negotiators work with the groups or can forge a

coalition with other member states on issues of interest, a state can make a meaningful impact during multilateral negotiations and deliver a good result.

The SDGs and the 2030 Agenda are the first to be characterised by universality, where all countries, both developing and developed, made efforts to achieve sustainable development. The key to delivering this vision and transforming the lives of millions lay in how seriously governments, the UN, international organisations, civil society, and businesses took their roles. Indeed, fifteen years is a short time to achieve such a transformative vision. No doubt, the implementation of the SDGs is a monumental task. However, if it is done well, the rewards will be even greater for the generations now and those to come.

Notes

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