

A Short History of the SDGS

Note: These are brief and informal reflections on a long and complex process. No attempt is made to capture the full complexity of the negotiations. I merely seek to share a few highlights of the SDG journey. Only a few names are mentioned as it would be impossible in this short space to give full credit to the many friends and colleagues who made the SDGs a reality.

Shortly after joining the Colombian government as Director of Economic, Social and Environmental Affairs at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in October 2010 I started to think about Rio+20. It was such an historic opportunity to galvanize global political will around a renewed commitment for an agenda on sustainability and equity. For better or for worse, I was concerned that the entire Conference was to focus on green economy— a concept mired in controversy – and a new international architecture for sustainable development. Neither were particularly compelling for a broad audience. Most importantly, neither had the potential for incentivizing the deep transformations at scale so urgently needed on a planet that is breaching so many boundaries all at once, while remaining stubbornly inequitable at many levels.

Early Days

So in early January 2011 I convened a small group of government colleagues to a brainstorming session. In the midst of the discussion I suddenly said, “I’ve got it! Here’s what we can do.” Despite shortcomings that have been endlessly analyzed, the MDGs have brought about widespread changes in approaches to development. I suggested that Colombia propose a new set of goals, but one that would encompass the many dimensions of development. The idea resonated and a short while later I went upstairs to Vice Minister Patti Londoño’s office. She immediately grasped the idea. “You will have all the support you need, now go write it”. Over the weekend I drafted a first version that I showed to a few friends. On Monday I shared it with Vice Minister Londoño who promptly pinned it on her otherwise bare wall. A few days later, the Minister of Foreign Affairs, María Angela Holguín, also expressed her unconditional support.

A few weeks later, using the opportunity of being in NY for other negotiations, I started to share the proposal. It was largely met with skepticism - and in all truth, a healthy dose of derision. Few colleagues were willing to even discuss the proposal, and among those that did two stand out: Jimena Leiva of Guatemala and Ye-Min Wu of Singapore. In their personal capacities they diligently went over the proposal and recommended that it be linked more explicitly with Agenda 21 to demonstrate that it was fully embedded in Rio 1992’s legacy.

So I went back to hotel and wrote a revised version that posited the SDGs around the chapters of agenda 21. This was the first of many versions and SDG-related documents that were drafted at The Pod hotel on 51st street. As I often joked, we should put a plaque outside the hotel that would read “The SDGs were born and raised here.” This was truly the first version of the SDG proposal as it was the basis for Colombia’s advocacy over the next 7 months.

During those early months I used every opportunity around other negotiations in New York to discuss and explain the SDGs. I spent hours and hours sitting in the Vienna Café on the second

floor of the UN New Lawn Building (NLB), talking to anyone who was willing to listen. There was initially little interest, and often, fierce resistance. Arguments that would gain strength, traction and advocates over the next months were tabled. Many – both from developed as well as developing countries – saw the SDGs as an attempt to undermine the MDGs and to detract attention from the “core” development issues. It was insistently pointed out that the MDGs still had a few years to run and that a new set of goals could marginalize them. Why start advocating for a new set of goals when the MDGs were still “unfinished business” and unlikely to be fully met by 2015? Why think about Post-2015 when it was still early 2011? Much better to roll over the MDGs after 2015, with a few minor adjustments. This is what came to be known as MDG+.

Colombia always underlined that the SDGs were building upon the MDGs. Colombia had fully committed to achieving the MDGs, and believed profoundly in their importance and continued relevance. However, the fact was that the full achievement of the MDG targets could never be achieved with an agenda that did not include energy, or governance, or food security (beyond hunger), or connectivity –to cite just a few issues. Much has been written about the fact that the gains in poverty eradication were largely achieved in China and India. Continued poverty eradication in the future, in a planet facing natural resource degradation and scarcity, climate change and climatic variability impacts, rapid and often unplanned urbanization, and increasing landscapes of insecurity will be much more challenging. For that an agenda that embraces the complexity of development is needed. A telling anecdote is a conversation I had in those early days with a colleague from an African country who emphatically affirmed that Africa would never agree to merge the three MDG health goals under a single health goal. We had an interesting conversation because he did not realize that non-communicable diseases are actually the greatest and growing public health care burden today for developing countries - and were not included in the MDGs.

Moreover, the fact that what was being proposed was a universal agenda – applicable to all countries and for which all countries were accountable – raised deep concerns on all quarters. The concerns were varied. Some felt that a universal approach undermined the tenet of differentiation around which key negotiations, like UNFCCC, were structured. Others felt that only developing countries had “real” issues related to development, and that the agenda should therefore focus exclusively on them. And others still queried what development targets could mean for developed countries. I remember an early exchange with an outstanding negotiator and good friend from the US delegation who encouraged me early on to desist, noting that the US Congress would never accept the national application of targets set by the UN. (Fast forward to the last days of negotiations in Rio+20 where the US played a uniquely decisive and constructive role that ultimately helped to deliver the SDGs.)

Many questioned with a dose of exasperation why Colombia was even bothering to prepare for Rio+20 when “it was still so far away”. And many asked “Why Colombia? Why is Colombia leading on a global agenda?”

One interesting fact that stood out is that often there were completely different positions within the same government. Some government agencies and delegates saw the SDGs as the stepping stone towards an agenda of integration and change whereas others, in the same government, would see these as a threat. I often noted that at some level, Colombia did not negotiate the SDGs with 193 governments but with hundreds of delegates and constituencies.

Indeed, as the preparatory process got underway, civil society, private sector and academia started to play an increasingly visible and influential role. Colombia always worked with the same energy and commitment with these constituencies as with governmental colleagues. One proud achievement for the Colombian government was the recognition that was often given by civil society organizations of the best practice that we created in our many productive and rich exchanges with non-governmental stakeholders. All the international consultations Colombia organized had a place at the table for NGOs and CSOs. And we participated in innumerable side-events organized by these colleagues.

Despite the challenges and minimal traction, the Colombian government was undeterred and persisted. To us it was clear that business as usual is not tenable given that the development trajectories and economic models that have prevailed over the past decades have set in place trends that are both unsustainable and inequitable – as Minister María Angela Holguín often put it, within nations, between nations and between generations. There is an urgent need to rethink what growth and prosperity and well-being mean. In a small and fragile planet development consists of an array of parameters - including on sustainability and equity – which constitute a spectrum along which all countries are to be found– both developing and developed. Shrinking planetary boundaries and the refugee crisis are bringing home the fact that our human and natural systems are profoundly interconnected and that no one nation or people can either develop or maintain high development standards separate from others. The most controversial manifestation of this is the discussion around a global carbon budget, but analogies could be made about other planetary resources and systems. This means that only by working together towards a shared agenda of inclusion and sustainability can we avoid approaching development as a zero sum game.

The MDGs were simply not up to the task. They had played a decisive role in galvanizing action around fundamental development issues, and had changed how many approached these. The MDGs stood out in the landscape of development assistance. But they reflected a minimalist agenda that was unable to deliver the deep system-wide change and broad structural transformations that are needed.

Another driver was precisely the need to create a platform around which all – public and private sector, developing and developed, civil society and others - could converge. We were working against a backdrop of contentious and at times seemingly intractable negotiations in other fora – ranging from WTO to UNFCCC - that pitted different national perspectives and made it difficult to find a common landing ground, let alone consensus. Colombia is a G77+China country that aspires to join the OECD. We are bridge builders. The SDGs were therefore an offering we put forward to create a single common agenda that entailed collective

responsibility and at the same time, collective empowerment. We wanted to catalyze a sense of shared destiny.

The Beginning

On 27 May 2011 the very first informal intergovernmental consultation on the SDGs took place at the Colombian Mission on 57th street. About 20 people came, a small but representative group from all the UN regional groups. The proposal was met with friendlier skepticism but there was no clear support. A few colleagues affirmed that it was interesting but considered that it would be impossible to get agreement around it. I was reminded yet again that the themes for Rio+20 had been defined in a UN resolution, and that it could not be modified. A few, however, said that Rio+20 definitely needed a higher level of ambition.

This meeting was a first milestone in a long journey where the Colombian Permanent Mission to the United Nations in New York, under Ambassador Nestor Osorio as Permanent Representative and Camilo Ruiz as Deputy PR, and with the support of David Rodriguez, our delegate to the Second Commission, played a decisive role. The Mission was endlessly supportive, facilitating negotiations, organizing events, and maintaining high levels of advocacy in New York.

In June during the UNFCCC negotiations in Bonn, I continued Colombia's advocacy work. Among the many I talked with was Andrei do Lago, head of delegation of Brazil. He expressed interest but at the time was still unclear as to how Brazil could formally support the proposal. Other colleagues also started to come up to me in the hallways to express informal support for the idea, affirming that Rio+20 desperately needed to deliver concrete and tangible results. This seemed to be the only option on the table given that discussions around the two agreed pillars had minimal traction: "green economy" had not advanced and was the subject of acrimonious discussions around the very definition of the concept; discussions on the International Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD) in the end proved to be the most difficult to resolve of all.

By then, we had our sights on the upcoming consultations hosted by the Government of Indonesia on the International Framework for Sustainable Development (IFSD). Financing was available so I submitted my request which was soon approved. The meeting in Solo, Indonesia was the very first time the SDGs were presented at a UN event. Colombia was not given the opportunity to discuss the SDGs, but we formally presented the proposal. However, what was really exciting, a watershed in fact, were the conversations in the hallways. There were many bilaterals with countries from various regions who wanted to understand the proposal better and who had started to see this as a real possibility for Rio+20. I remember a very rich and long conversation with the entire EU delegation. And it was during one of these meetings that the representative of Guatemala, Rita Mishaan, confirmed her Government's interest in supporting this proposal. Many CSO's and NGOs were warmly encouraging and asked that Colombia hold the course. It was the first time that there was a real sense of hope that the proposal might prosper.

The following month, Brazil held the first of two informal consultations they were to host in the run up to Rio+20. I asked for permission to present the proposal and it was confirmed that participants could present any contribution they wanted. So on 21 August, in the first morning session, I presented the SDG proposal - still the version linked to Agenda 21. There were other topics on the agenda but the entire meeting started to refer to the SDG proposal. It was incredible to see delegates from Cuba to Norway welcoming the proposal, keen to explore its dimensions and implications. However during the day I realized that the linkages to Agenda 21 were more confusing than helpful and that a simpler proposal that focused only on the SDG concept itself was needed. So that night I wrote out a new proposal in my hotel room describing the SDGs and what they offered. I shared the draft with Vice-Minister Londoño and with Rita Mishaan from Guatemala. I got clearance from the former and agreement from the latter that the Government of Guatemala would co-sponsor it.

I came in early the next morning to Palácio Itamaraty in Rio de Janeiro, and requested permission to use their printer. As participants came in for the second day's sessions they were handed a copy of the new version of the proposal, now with two governments supporting it- Guatemala and Colombia. This is the version that is widely considered the basis of the SDG proposal. The rest of the meeting centered mostly on the SDG concept. These were rich and substantive exchanges, and even though many voiced concerns about the implications for the MDGs, there was a broad sense of emerging support from several quarters. I distinctly remember Ambassador Luiz Alberto Figueiredo of Brazil saying towards the end of the meeting that Rio+20 could not focus only principles and that concrete deliverables were also needed. He made no explicit reference to the SDGs, but his words seemed to imply tacit support for a very tangible proposal.

At the time, my team was struggling to support work on the SDGs as it became ever more demanding and intense. UNDP generously agreed to finance a dedicated professional to support this work. Alicia Lozano joined the core SGD team at that time, and together with Angela Rivera, Claudia Vasquez, Heidi Botero, Isabel Cavellier, Carolina Aguirre – and David Rodriguez in the NY Mission - provided indefatigable support throughout the long road ahead.

The UNCSD Bureau had set 1 November 2014 as the deadline all Parties and constituencies to submit their inputs for the so-called “zero draft” that would constitute the basis for the negotiating text for Rio+20. Colombia knew that garnering sufficient support for the SDGs was critical. This became the backdrop to our efforts over the following two months.

The next milestone on the journey was the regional meeting on Rio+20 held in the headquarters of the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC) in September 2011 in Santiago, Chile. Alicia Barcena, Executive Secretary of ECLAC, was an early and energetic supporter of the SDGs. She had immediately gauged the potential. I recall rich discussions in her office about how the SDGs could be structured, what they could encompass, how they could be explained. For Colombia, this regional meeting was a unique opportunity to substantively discuss the proposal for the first time in a formal UN setting, even if a regional

one. Colombia submitted the proposal well ahead of time so that it would be an official conference document. As always Colombia's objective was to get widespread support from all countries in the Latin American and Caribbean region so that it could be presented as a regional contribution to Rio+20. Colombia always aspired to having this be a proposal from the entire region, not just a few countries and not just Colombia. Unfortunately, despite strong support from many delegations, this proved ultimately impossible. In the end the final decision text referred to the SDG proposal but did not endorse it.

While Colombia continued advocating and lobbying for the proposal through a steady stream of communications, Vice Minister Londoño and I, with the support of Minister Holguín, decided that it was important to have a formal international consultation on the SDGs. We are still deeply grateful to the Government of Netherlands whose generosity made this meeting possible.

October was a flurry of activity as we continued to drum up support for the SDGs while organizing for the consultations, set for 4-5 November. Meanwhile the deadline of 1 November drew closer and although we sensed growing momentum we had no way of gauging whether enough support for the SDGs would materialize to get them into the zero draft.

The SDGs are in!

On 1 November, as proposals started coming in and were uploaded onto the UNCSD website, my team was glued to their computers checking to see who was including the SDGs in their submissions. In the end over 50 States and international organizations, including CARICOM, mentioned SDGs as a tangible result for Rio+20. As the submissions came in we contacted the Secretariat, and were happily informed that the SDGs "were in". Enough support had been evidenced. This was the decisive moment. What had been deemed impossible just months earlier was now fast becoming a reality. The SDGs were slated to be part of the negotiating text, and were therefore formally a part of Rio+20 preparations. Although the road ahead was challenging, the first historic step had been achieved.

The meeting in Bogotá hosted by the Colombian Ministry of Foreign Affairs and chaired by Vice Minister Londoño, kicked off with great dynamism and expectation in the impressive Salon Simon Bolivar where the Libertador himself had worked. Over 40 delegates from a wide range of countries, including representatives from Netherlands, Mexico, Kenya, India, Chile, United Kingdom, Norway, United States, and Australia were present together with those from international organizations, UNCSD Secretariat and NGOs. As always Colombia invited civil society and NGOs to the table. The conversations were deeply probing and surfaced both strong support for the proposal from many countries as well as sharp concerns about the proposal from others.

The consultation was held under Chatham House rules, but the discussions were so informed and rich that I was authorized to prepare a chairman's summary, which was ultimately tabled as "*Insights from the Informal Consultations on the SDG Proposal*". The linkages between the

MDGs and the SDGs were a subject of intense discussion, but other aspects were also explored. A few excerpts provide a good sense of the depth of the discussion:

“There was no consensus on an approach but it was agreed that there is a need for further consultations on this issue. Some considerations that were iterated were:

- The MDGs are widely acknowledged as a highly successful and key approach for enabling international cooperation at all levels.
- There is full consensus that the MDGs must not be in any way undermined by any other process and that they should be amply supported. The MDGs must continue their planned trajectory to 2015.
- There were suggestions that the SDGs could provide a useful input to the MDG review process and to the definition of the post-2015 framework. Some noted that the MDGs do not sufficiently address underlying economic and environmental issues and drivers.”

“In addition to the relation between the SDGs and the MDGs, other concerns were voiced regarding issues that will need to be addressed in further elaborating the proposal. Among the most salient:

- How to reconcile the universal dimension of the SDGs with the fact that these will need to be tailored to specific national circumstances, i.e. one-size-does-not-fit all
- How to approach issues of implementation, recognizing that implementation includes not just financial resources but also institutional and governance capacities at national level, as well as issues such as absorptive capacity for new technologies, dissemination of best practices, and inclusion of key stakeholders ranging from youth to private sector for effective implementation.
- Linking up with private sector and IFIs.”

During that meeting strong friendships were forged, that would prove decisive in the long journey ahead. This group slowly coalesced over the coming months, and even after Rio, when we were already in the Open Working Group discussions, would meet regularly to strategize on how to achieve a high level of both ambition and common sense. We also agreed to work on a series of informal consultations to enable stakeholders to better understand and mature the idea, thereby garnering support. The SDG friends included Kitty van der Heijden of Netherlands, Farrukh Khan of Pakistan, Jimena Leiva of Guatemala, Chris Whaley of UK, Victor Munoz of Peru, Majid Hasan Alsuwaidi of UAE, Yeshey Dorji of Bhutan, Franz Perrez of Switzerland, Damaso Luna of Mexico, Marianne Loe of Norway, Anders Wallenberg of Sweden and many others. Sometimes, when the negotiations were particularly challenging, it was a space for collective catharsis. In the long preparatory process, Surendra Shrestha of UNEP provided permanent support. (Fast forward to Rio, it was he who mobilized the necessary support to make the buttons we handed out in Rio on “SDGs – People and Planet”.)

In mid-December 2011 – right after the UNFCCC Cancun COP - the UNCSD Secretariat held consultations in NY in preparation for the upcoming negotiations. At this juncture, building on the discussions and exchanges of the previous 4 months I sensed that there was a need to focus

more strongly on the process ahead and the deliverables. Therefore, back at The Pod hotel, I prepared a new version of the proposal that I shared with Vice Minister Londoño. As always she was fully supportive. This time it was endorsed not just by Guatemala but also by Peru. This was presented at a second international consultation hosted by Colombia in Room 3 of the NLB which was attended by 114 countries. We know this because we counted. We could still not quite believe how far we had come. It was a short affair, a 2 hour side-event with little opportunity for a proper discussion. But momentum was growing.

Back in Bogota, conversations that had been ongoing since the November consultation picked up. Many of the growing coalition around the SDGs felt that the meeting in Bogota had been so rich that it was important to have another 2 day international consultation but with much broader participation and in New York. And it had to take place before the formal negotiations started in February. By now we were just days away from the Christmas holiday when many were leaving. But we somehow came together and once again generous donors, including Norway and Netherlands, confirmed their support. We were able to secure the venue of Tarrytown and issued invitations for a consultation on 22-24 January 2012. We tasked a small, diverse and dedicated group of colleagues in New York to relentlessly follow up on each invitation. At this juncture the World Resources Institute (WRI) –a global research organization at the nexus of environment, economic opportunity and human well-being, became a part of the informal SDG support group and prepared 3 briefing papers for the consultations.

In the meantime, on 10 January, the UNCSD Secretariat issued the zero draft of the Conference’s negotiation document “The Future We Want”. The SDGs were included in Chapter V “Accelerating and measuring progress”. From that moment onwards the SDG proposal – now formally endorsed by Colombia, Guatemala and Peru - was officially integrated to the negotiations.

On 21 January, ahead of our second international consultation, I arrived in Tarrytown Estate together with Heidi Botero from my team. We wandered the imposing grounds covered in fresh snow, holding on to over 60 name cards and wondering if or how the SDGs would ultimately see the light of day. Although many questioned the format, I organized the meeting around a huge rectangular table that seated 80. We had a full house, with a widely representative group of delegates from all regional groups as well as representatives from the UNSG’s office, UNCSD Secretariat, several UN agencies and several NGOs and CSOs. The format worked wonders. The fact that everyone could see each other created a sense of purpose and openness. The discussions were intense, often contentious, and they surfaced the many diverse takes on the MDGs, the MDG+ option, and the SDGs. There were difficult conversations around universality and differentiation, about the unfinished business of the MDGs, about the need to “prioritize people”.

Again, given the richness of the discussions and how enlightening they were as we collectively matured the SDG concept, I got agreement to be allowed to issue a *Chair’s Summary*. The following excerpts give a sense of how much this meeting contributed to the process:

“There was broad agreement on **four core aspects**:

- Rio+20 is a milestone event and the international community should strive for a high level of ambition, with clear and robust outcomes in the form of a renewed and focused sustainable development agenda.
- Sustainable Development Goals are understood in the context of the post-2015 development framework. SDGs have a definitive added value and will be further elaborated and completed within the post-2015 process.
- There should be a single unified process leading to the definition of the post-2015 framework, building upon government consultations as well as inputs from stakeholders, and expert and scientific advice.
- There should be a single set of international development goals with sustainable development and poverty eradication the overarching focus.

There was strong support for including **SDG guiding characteristics** in the Zero Draft, including:

- Poverty eradication as an overarching goal;
- Universal relevance of the SDGs, but allowing for varied country and regional circumstances and priorities and capacity for implementation of specific voluntary targets;
- Action-oriented;
- Strongly linked to Agenda 21 and JPol;
- Effectively address and integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development;
- Enable articulation of the nexus between the different issue areas covered by the SDGs;
- Voluntary application, in keeping with national realities, priorities, and capacities;
- Time bound and measurable, with targets and indicators; and,
- Few in number and easy to communicate and understand.

In addition, the following **considerations** were reiterated throughout the discussions:

- There was a clear understanding that the formulation of SDGs should not divert or in any way undermine the focus of the international community on achieving the MDGs by 2015.
- SDG should build upon and complement the MDGs, and reflect lessons from MDG implementation.
- In line with keeping the SDGs simple, succinct and few, many underscored the need for the SDGs to set clear and focused priorities, which was a key strength of the MDGs.
- In addition to the definition of themes or issue areas for the SDGs, it is equally important to define cross-cutting issues. These issues are no less important than those to be captured in an SDG, and indeed are critical given their prevalence and relevance. Cross-cutting issues could include aspects such as technology transfer, capacity building, means of implementation, climate change, equity and gender.
- In the development of the SDGs, consideration must be given to the institutional and governance arrangements required for their implementation, taking into consideration

the current mandate and work of existing agencies, as well as gaps and future requirements. It will equally be important to work with an understanding of relevant existing agreements and programs.

- The capacity of developing countries for managing information and data, and for reporting, will need to be strengthened.
- Implementation will require the support and commitment of all stakeholders, including civil society and the private sector, so their participation in the process is fundamental.”

The discussions also already evidenced strongly differing views on the process beyond Rio for defining the SDGs that “reflect differing levels of ambition for Rio as well as different understandings of the required process for defining the SDGs...”

This was exactly what was needed ahead of the negotiations, which started the following day, on 25 January. The consultation enabled us to fully understand the political economy of the SDGs for the first time, the baseline as it were. Over the coming months the SDG concept continued to evolve through substantive and continuous exchanges. In those early days one could sense delegations grappling with the concept, and exploring it in the context of their positions on many other negotiating fronts in many other parallel negotiations. But gradually the SDG concept was framed with increasing clarity, and as the discussions matured, came into its own.

The Negotiations Begin

Up to that point, Colombia had tried several times to get endorsement from the Latin America and Caribbean region so that it would be a regional proposal for Rio+20. The latest attempt had been by then Minister of Environment Frank Pearl at the Latin American and Caribbean Environment Ministers Forum on 31 January 2012 where the region registered support for the proposal, but not full endorsement.

As the negotiations were about to start, the Colombian Government decided that it was time to formally present the proposal to G77+China. Vice Minister Londoño travelled to New York for the sole purpose of doing so. She did not do it at Ambassador’s level as the negotiating responsibilities were in the hands of G77+China delegates who covered the Second Commission. The Colombian Mission requested that a G77+China Second Commission meeting be convened, and Vice Minister Londoño explained the proposal. She also met with several regional groups. That a Vice Minister would undertake this task personally caused a deep impression and signaled the decided commitment of the Government to take the proposal forward.

This mission to New York also marked the first of many invigorating meetings with Sha Zukang, then UN Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs and Secretary General of UNCSA. He was supportive of the SDG concept from the start and helped our delegation to mature the concept. Others in the Secretariat and in UNDESA were also incredibly supportive including Nikhil Seth, Brice Lalonde and David O’Connor.

With negotiations about to start up, G77+China designated coordinators for each of the main negotiation strands. The fact that the SDGs were adopted in Rio owes enormously to the designation of Farrukh Khan from Pakistan to lead these discussions. Farrukh is an astute, seasoned and innovative negotiator who had a deep knowledge of countries' positions and an acute capacity to steer negotiations. The SDGs found a truly unique champion in him.

January was eventful as President Santos of Colombia convened a meeting with the Ministers of Foreign Affairs and of Environment and Sustainable Development of Colombia to discuss the SDGs. The President was enthusiastic in his support of the proposal and instructed me to get it approved at Rio in June "no matter what". That decided and unwavering support from the Colombian Government, at all levels and agencies, was decisive in enabling the Ministry of Foreign Affairs to take the proposal forward.

The start of negotiations signaled for me the beginning of endless trips between Bogota and New York. The agenda for Rio+20 was quite dense, and the number of items and paragraphs rapidly spiraled. This meant that there was insufficient time to discuss the SDGs both informally and formally. David Rodriguez from the Colombian Mission was the Colombian representative to the Second Commission, and worked tirelessly to advance the negotiations. But the negotiations quickly became very difficult which meant that I started coming to NY both for the formal negotiations as well as the informal negotiations within G77+China. This was particularly challenging as these informal negotiations had moving agendas and it was never entirely clear when the SDGs would be discussed.

We also started organizing side-events and participating in innumerable side-events and sessions in order to advance the understanding of the proposal, and to mature the proposal as it was discussed and explored. A key aspect of the SDG concept is the degree to which it was the product of endless dialogues, discussions, meetings. The SDGs are truly, from the beginning, a collective construct. Inputs from countless engagements enabled Colombia to gradually fine-tune and mature the proposal, both in terms of the concept as well as the process.

In February Colombia organized another international consultation at our embassy in Nairobi during the UNEP Administrative Council, and also hosted an event with civil society representatives. By now momentum was really growing. Everyone wanted to talk about the SDGs. No one asked any longer "Why Colombia?" There were endless bilaterals with Ministers from developed and developing countries, high-level dinners, meetings with leading NGOs. We had a particularly rich conversation with Minister Isabella Teixeira of Brazil who was supportive of the proposal. Later in the month, Colombia was invited as a special guest to the United Nations System Experts' meeting on Rio+20, to present the SDG proposal. The UN agencies were increasingly interested and supportive of the proposal too.

The negotiations however, were off to a difficult start, even if at an informal level. Concerns about the impact of the new proposed framework on the MDGs came to the fore. Many from both developed and developing countries insisted that the MDGs were not going to be met by

2015 and that therefore they should be rolled over, with minor adjustments, for another period – the MDG+ version. The broad agenda being proposed would detract from core development priorities. The inclusion of the three dimensions in the SDGs – economic, environmental and social – was also questioned by many who considered that “real development issues” – that is economic and social issues - would be undermined by bringing in environmental considerations. Not all negotiators appreciated the linkages between functional, resilient natural systems and long-term human wellbeing. Both developed and developing country representatives fretted that funding for the MDG’s core priorities would be diverted. There were real concerns that key MDG targets would be waylaid. Many G77 delegations were concerned that the SDGs would be turned into conditionalities that would constrain developing countries “policy space”.

At this time another challenging alternative proposal emerged that called for two completely separate sets of goals, one for rich countries and another one for poor countries. This proposal undermined some of the greatest strengths of the SDG option, and would have locked countries into a static system that did not recognize the evolution of countries’ development trajectories, the fact that both resources and responses are often shared. At the same time, deep concerns about universality surfaced. The idea that development targets could be relevant for all countries was rejected both by those who clung to a vision that was MDG-centric as well as by those who did not welcome implementation (as opposed to only financial support) responsibilities for developed countries.

Today is difficult to remember how much resistance there was to the SDGs and how improbable their adoption often seemed. On the margins of the negotiations an array of initiatives –side-events, consultations, dinners and breakfasts - took place to create spaces for discussion, for explaining the SDGs, for building up trust. One suite of initiatives that stands out was orchestrated by Franz Perrez of Switzerland. We organized dinners with both donor and recipient countries, for frank discussions about continued financing for the MDGs to demonstrate that the SDGs would not undermine commitment to the MDGs. I remember one particularly memorable exchange one night, when a G77 colleague spoke bitterly about the fact that the 0.07 target had not been met and questioned the commitment of donors. Marianne Loe of Norway gently responded that her country was supporting the SDGs precisely in order to better deliver on the promise of the MDGs but that Norway was committed to the MDGs and would remain committed. He looked at her thoughtfully and replied, “You know what? I believe you. Norway has always delivered”.

Colombia drafted a third concept paper on the SDGs which detailed the SDGs and the process forward, which was endorsed by Guatemala and Peru.

In March Vice Minister Londoño decided it was important to explain the proposal to the Indian Government which initially had serious reservations about it. Together we travelled to Delhi where we met with a wide array of government officials and spent any fruitful hours in deep and substantive conversations. In the end the Government of India understood the merits of the proposal and its potential contribution to both the sustainability and equity dimensions of development. The rich discussions helped Colombia to further mature the proposal. The

Government of India committed to supporting the proposal. A few weeks later, in G77+China negotiations, one delegate who had participated only marginally in the drawn out negotiations informed the Group that the SDG language agreed to that point – so painstakingly crafted - would never be accepted by his government. There was deep silence and I sensed the gains of weeks evaporating. Then the Indian delegate spoke up, and with characteristic thoroughness and diplomatic verve pulled out the exact text that had been already agreed to, invoked the principles that should govern G77+China discussions, and in an instant resolved the matter. When I thanked Vivek Wadekar afterwards he looked at me with a smile and said “India said we would support this proposal. India always keeps its word”. The SDGs continued to pick up advocates as the negotiations advanced.

As the rounds of negotiations evolved, however, progress was often illusory. Dozens and dozens of paragraphs were added to the text. I remember one paragraph that had something like 27 different options to it at one point. This limited enormously the time allotment both within G77 as well as in the formal negotiations for tackling the SDGs. Agreement on text made at one meeting was undermined at the next. But gradually G77+China came around to generally supporting the concept of the SDGs, and to broadly characterizing them.

In parallel, Colombia continued to host side-events and consultations. Another major international consultations was organized in Tarrytown with generous support from donors and WRI. WRI was a dedicated partner throughout the negotiation process and helped to organize a suite of consultations during that period – and then over the coming years as the Open Working Group process was underway. In March with the generous support of the Ford Foundation we hosted a consultation for G77+China in the morning to which many Ambassadors came, and for all governments in the afternoon. A total of 63 countries participated. These aimed to give delegates the space to explore options, to understand what the SDGs implied, to have the difficult informal discussions that are needed to advance negotiations. Colombia also continued to participate, as special guest, in multiple events organized by civil society, international NGOs, MDBs and others to present the proposal.

As the concept of the SDGs gained traction, I became increasingly concerned about what I termed Rio+1 – that is, what would happen the day after Rio. I knew that unless we got agreement in Rio on a specific and detailed process for defining the SDGs, we could easily spend the years until 2015 just agreeing on this. (My concern was well founded: after Rio it took Member States 7 months to agree on who would sit on the Open Working Group on the SDGs). Colombia had three deliverables it wanted to see come out of Rio: agreement on the concept, agreement on a “tentative, indicative, demonstrative, potential list” of SDG goals, and agreement on the process. At that juncture, the first had essentially been achieved, and the latter was the most important.

Therefore during the third round of negotiations in April Colombia prepared a fourth paper that focused more on the actual process going forward. This paper marked a watershed because it was endorsed not just by Latin American countries – Peru in the event, but also by United Arab Emirates (UAE). This was a strong signal of how deeply the proposal had advanced. During that

week, the Community of Latin American and Caribbean States (CELAC) informally expressed support for the proposal, and agreed that Brazil would lead on it. Brazil, the Conference's host, stated that for President Rousseff one of the key results of Rio was to launch a process to develop the SDGs. In parallel, the Minister of Environment and Sustainable Development of Colombia, Frank Pearl, participated in a ministerial consultation on the SDG proposal hosted by the Swedish government in a "Stockholm+40" event.

At the end of May a final informal negotiation round was convened to attempt to reduce the negotiating text which at that point was a sprawl of over 270 paragraphs. Ahead of the negotiations, I decided that another paper was needed, focusing exclusively on the process after Rio. Given the broad scope of the negotiations negligible time was being devoted to this key issue. Isabel Cavelier, a member of my team who was part of the UNFCCC delegation, suggested that the Transitional Committee under the UNFCCC which had delivered the Green Climate Fund be used as a model. It seemed a perfect fit. So we prepared a paper suggesting that a small open (not open-ended) technical working group be convened, based on the Transitional Committee model. Colombia shared the proposal informally and the idea gained traction and adepts – this was the genesis of the Open Working Group.

My small core team – Angela Rivera, Alicia Lozano and Carolina Aguirre - arrived in Rio for the informal preparatory segment of what was formally the Third Preparatory Committee Meeting of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development. The full Colombian delegation arrived over the coming days, led by President Santos with Minister Holguin, Minister Pearl and Vice-Minister Londoño, and which included representatives from key line ministries. We immediately entered into high stakes, intense negotiations both within G77+ China as well as in the formal plenary. Farrukh Khan did a stellar job of managing the negotiations, keeping to the highest possible ambition while respecting the very diverse views and concerns within the Group. It is to no small degree thanks to Farrukh's skillful management of the negotiations that the SDGs were ultimately reflected in the final text, and included paragraphs on the process going forward.

Substantial progress had been made already on the SDG concept and characterization, so these negotiations were tractable. However, there had been little time or space to discuss, let alone negotiate, the process after Rio. And there were bitter and deep divisions around this.

There were a number of perspectives on how to formulate the SDG's. For the EU and the US, it meant a technical working group appointed by the Secretary General. For many in the G77 and China, the technical working group meant a working group comprising experts and negotiators with significant political oversight and consistent with United Nations General Assembly rules. This would have meant a political body, negotiated by the established groups including G77+China and the EU. It would have meant a replay of the political wrangling that characterized the Rio+20 negotiations. Colombia and others insisted that what we were agreeing to was a metric with far-reaching implications for humanity and our planet, and that it could not be beholden to political considerations. We envisaged a technical body that could bring in experts on the daunting array of issues and themes that would need to be addressed,

and that would submit its technical (and therefore hopefully structured, evidence-based) recommendations for approval to the UNGA. The discussions were contentious. After a few days of incredibly difficult discussions, Farrukh and I convened a small group of G77+China colleagues. After long hours we finally reached agreement on the concept of an open working group, in the understanding that its work would be fully transparent. It would deliberate in an open space so that all delegations who wanted to sit in could do so, and it would be transmitted via internet so anyone in the world could key in.

Later, Farrukh and I drafted language to submit to the Brazilian hosts who were preparing a revised negotiation draft. At that point, the discussions on the modality had been so protracted and difficult that we had not had a chance to widely discuss many of the working details of the group. As time was running out, Farrukh and I considered the composition of the group. After some analysis we concluded that as a starting point, the text could call for a total of 30 representatives – 5 x 6 regional UN groups. And that was the number that was submitted. 30 seemed sensible because we knew that in the ensuing negotiations the number would spiral upwards, closer to 60 or more. So 30 was a good starting point. We did not know that Brazil would essentially present “take-it-or-leave-it-texts” that were not open for negotiation. And it is for this reason that the Open Working Group that emerged from Rio had only 30 slots. (The process after Rio however, proved us right. In the end groups of countries ultimately agreed to share the 30 slots and the OWG ended up with over 60 countries sitting in it. However the proposed model delivered. There were several OWG groupings that included countries that were not all members of the same political groups such as EU or G77. And I would submit that this was a key element in enabling the success, the ambition, the clarity of the final SDG agreement.

The Brazilian delegation did a masterly job of managing what could have been intractable negotiations. I remember the refrain from their delegates at all the meetings during the days of negotiations: “If you cannot agree, if you cannot come to consensus text, you are leaving us no option”. And then in fact they presented a single consolidated text which was open for minimal discussion for a short time, and then a final text. They held marathon informal discussions and negotiations with key delegations and produced text that broadly reflected viable consensus. It was an astonishing and incredibly effective process.

The SDGs were never a done deal however, until the very end. Just 12 hours before the text was due to be finalized, progress in the negotiations started to regress – just as the Heads of Delegations started arriving. There was a new mixed political signal and this allowed latent concerns with the SDGs to surface again. Just as we were about to close the deal, it was unraveling all at once. I remember sitting late that night in the hallway with a close colleague wondering if the SDGs would be undermined or derailed. He just shook his head and said, “I honestly don’t know.” This is when diplomacy and trust amongst the core interlocutors came to rescue, catalyzed by the sharp negotiating skills of Farrukh Khan and the dedicated leadership of Brazil. And the proposal ultimately prevailed.

In the morning of 19 June, the Brazilian Presidency of UNCS D presented the final text to delegates who had been up most of the night waiting for it. It was a masterly construct of maximum consensus and ambition. The Brazilian Government had delivered a new development framework. Although a few delegations still had issues related to the international framework for sustainable development (which were not ultimately resolved until the Plenary session), there was a long round of deeply felt and relieved applause. As we were all standing around in blissful exhaustion, Minister of Foreign Affairs of Brazil, Antonio Patriota, called Viceminister Patti Londono and myself up to the crowded, overflowing podium where everyone was celebrating. He pulled us aside and said that on behalf of his Government he wanted to thank Colombia for what we had delivered for Rio+20 - for the SDGs.

After the SDGs were formally adopted in a moving and historic Plenary, and as Heads of State spoke, the Secretary General of the UNCS D, Mr Sha Zukang came down from the podium and walked to the Colombian seat in the Plenary to greet President Santos. He congratulated him and said, "Colombia, it is not a big country. But it has big ideas that can change the history of development."

Postscript

After months of discussions as to the composition of the Open Working Group, it finally kicked off in March 2013. Colombia had the privilege of sharing a seat with Guatemala, where we continued to work closely on a fully shared agenda. Colombia continued to advocate for an agenda that overcame sectoral and temporal silos, and presented several proposals including "The Integrating Approach" and "The Dashboard Proposal". Ultimately the dedication and vision of two outstanding co-chairs, Ambassadors Macharia of Kenya and Csaba of Hungary, the discipline and commitment of 193 countries and innumerable CSOs, NGOs, think-tanks, private sector organizations and scientists, and a unique format that had never before been used at the UN, delivered a metric that truly has the potential to be transformational¹). It delivered a platform that can bring all countries around a shared agenda for sustainability and equity. Today the fact that the Nationally Determined Contributions under UNFCCC were approved after the SDGs, means that these two agendas should naturally converge and serve to catalyze

¹ Many have strongly criticized the SDG framework agreed in July 2014, and consider that 17 goals and 169 are excessive. However, the fact is that at the outset of the process, the dynamics of the group could have resulted in over a hundred goals, and an exponential list of targets. Every constituency, every UN agency, every sector considered that there should be a goal to reflect their specific issue or area. I used to joke that we would have goals "from breast milk to nuclear waste" –these were in fact 2 of the goals that were proposed at one point. So the fact that in the end 193 countries (because in the end *all* Member States did participate in the Open Working Group), and innumerable, very dedicated and informed constituencies agreed to only 17 goals is remarkable. And consider this: the High Level Panel on the Post 2015 Agenda convened by the Secretary General recommended 12 goals. But the fact is that at one point, the draft report included 16 goals. These were later reduced to 12, but the HLP report – which marked a watershed in the Post 2015 negotiations and introduced such key concepts as "Leave No One Behind" to the process – did not include key issues in the goals. For example, it did not include a goal on cities and human settlements. So if one considers that an eminent group of 23 experts at one point came up with 16 goals, the fact that the most participatory intergovernmental process in human history ended up with 17 goals is nothing short of a most remarkable miracle.

each other. But the story of the journey of the Open Working Group process would need another chapter.