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the global network on global public goods

Reflections on the Debate

Topic #6: Match or Mismatch: Global Reports and Global Policy Challenges

Discussion open from 26 April through 10 May 2004

The gpgNet Discussion Forum (www.gpgNet.net) provides a platform for public debates on key aspects of public goods - local, national, regional, and global. The views expressed in the Forum are those of the Forum participants and do not necessarily reflect the positions of the organization with which the participants may be affiliated, unless stated otherwise. For further information please contact hana.haller@undp.org

Introduction

Discussion forum number six on gpgNet invited its participants to discuss the role and impact of Global Reports over time. The forum entitled “Match or Mismatch: Global Reports and Global Policy Challenges” took place from 26 April through 10 May 2004. Around 580 researchers, policymakers, academics, students, officials and stakeholders from over 35 industrial and developing countries participated. During the duration of this forum 90 postings were made¹.

This report identifies some of the key messages that emerged from the discussion. It is not intended as a summary of the discussion. Instead, the purpose is to draw upon some of the key ideas that were put forth and point towards improvements that could be made in the area of global reports.

Background

Looking at global reports over time gives us a sense of the various issues that have captured significant attention from policy makers and civil society. The rapidly growing array of data reports and assessments suggests that an increasing range of Global challenges has emerged. But has there been a match or a mismatch between the two? By addressing this question the forum hoped to gain a better sense of where the world is headed, where the shortcomings and problems lie, where progress is being made and what needs to be done to ensure a better future.

To facilitate the discussion, the background paper: “Global Reports: An Overview of their Evolution” was made available. In addition, the following questions were posted:

- What does the explosive growth in Global Reports mean?
- Do they follow trends or do they lead?
- In what areas do they follow or lead and why is this the case?
- What have global reports done?
- What should global reports be doing?
- Do they enhance transparency?
- Do they -can they- reflect global views – the views of all?
- How could they be better prepared? How can they be better used?

Highlights from the discussion

Many in the Forum saw the drastic increase of global reports in the 1990s as linked to globalization and progress in technology. Both led to easier access and sharing of data. A new awareness of issues and a rising feeling of inter-connectedness contributed to the increase in global reports. At the same time, global reports contributed to globalization by drawing attention to global issues.

¹ Read the messages at: <http://groups.undp.org/read/?forum=gpgnet-reports>

Generally, the comments made in the Forum fell into three broad categories: a) The production of global reports b) Issues concerning more substantive aspects of the reports c) The effects of global reports (or lack thereof).

The Production of Global Reports –Limitations and Challenges

Comments on the production of global reports touched on two main issues: the preparation and dissemination processes. As regards the first issue, report preparation, participants pointed to the importance of data, the limitations they set for reporting, the shortcomings in their collection, and the ways in which data collection could be improved. The role of national data collection was highlighted as were the difficulties the centers collecting this data encountered, such as inadequate funding resulting in substandard data, or a lack of flexibility to collect data useful for global studies. In order to address these difficulties it was suggested that closer links between international policy makers and national statistical offices should be formed. This would enable the national offices to have a better idea of what data may be of global concern and would allow for the possibility of a periodic re-orientation of indicators.

In addition to these closer links to the national statistical offices, it was suggested that the quality of data produced at the national level should be improved. Given the important role this data plays in the preparation of global reports and in painting a more accurate global picture from which policy makers base their decisions, it would seem that the improvement of national data collection centers would be an important investment. It was suggested that perhaps donors contributing to global reports could also allocate funding for national data collection centers.

As regards the second issue, the information dissemination process, Forum participants agreed that these reports should be made accessible to as many people as possible by setting reasonable rates for the publications and by making copies available on the internet. In addition to these steps which are already taken by many organizations, it was felt that more aggressive marketing of these reports was necessary to reach as wide an audience as possible. It was also suggested that donors should earmark funds specifically for marketing these reports.

Accessibility of reports is not limited to obtaining a physical copy of the report. Accessibility of the reports also hinges on the type of language used to write the report. Overly technical or jargon-riddled reports would alienate many and would limit accessibility to a much smaller group of people. In addition to the language used to write these reports, it has also been suggested that the overwhelming length of most reports make them difficult to fully digest and is daunting for some audiences. It has been suggested that a shorter more succinct version of the reports should be made available for policymakers and the general public. A technical report with an emphasis on providing more in-depth data and analysis should also be made available for experts and academics.

Substantive Aspects of Global Reporting - which way now?

Despite the perception that the large number of global reports are closely connected to globalization and at the same time contribute to a feeling of global citizenship, most respondents felt that global reports were not able to be representative of the views of all. Generally, it was felt that the reports were representative of the views of the writers or the sponsoring governments or donors of the reports. Even statistical reports that strived to achieve neutrality were pointed out to be using indicators and tools that inherently carry the values of the people who developed them. While most felt that global reports represented “Northern” views, others that pointed to global reports that appeared to have more “Southern” views. Part of the difficulty appears to lie with identifying who “all” are. It would seem that within “all” a diversity of views exist, much like the diversity of views around the world.

Respondents pointed this out when they for example suggested that a diversity of views was important. Some felt that this diversity of views should be apparent in the publication itself. Others held the view that the reports should try to be somewhere in the middle of the views and should illicit a diverse set of reactions for the different parts of the world.

It was also suggested that a diverse set of individuals should be included in the writing of the reports and particular attention should be paid to working more closely with national and regional experts. This would facilitate in the sharing of information, and at the same time it allows the reports to better blend global vision and local action, i.e. to translate shared concerned into local/national follow-up action.

But how could this blending be achieved? The answer was to create a feed-back loop: local/national – regional – global – and back to the regional and national levels (See figure 1). Global reports were seen as necessary to set agendas and to assist in making sense of local data. At the same time local actions are necessary to act upon the issues addressed in the reports. The diversity of situations around the world makes it not only undesirable but also impossible for global reports to provide concrete solutions for all. Certainly, this is a situation where one size cannot possibly fit all. Therefore, there appears to be a gap between the global reports and local action in addressing issues. It was suggested that regional and national reports could perhaps fill this gap by building upon the lessons of the global report and making it more oriented towards impact and action applicable to specific situations. Some suggest that these Global Reports should have national/regional counterparts in a similar manner as the Human Development Report does. To date the Human Development Report has published 475 national and sub-national reports by 135 countries as well as 24 regional reports. These national reports are researched, written and prepared by country teams that have, among other things, introduced the human development concept into national policy dialogue, provided data unavailable elsewhere, and mobilized support for action and change².

While some found the publication of “best practices” in global reports to be unhelpful as individual situations make replication difficult, the inclusion of specific national cases to

² Information on the national reports of the HDR can be obtained at <http://hdr.undp.org/about/nhdr/default.cfm>

illustrate points were seen as helpful. Others suggest that the publication of Global Reports should alternate with national reports.

Effects of Global Reports

Global Reports appear to both lead and follow. Global Reports that reported primarily data and statistics were seen as more likely to follow, given the amount of lag time involved in obtaining, compiling, and publishing the figures. Some Global Reports were seen as able to lead, the most frequently cited report of this type was the Human Development Report. Ultimately it appears that whether reports lead or follow is dependent on the reader of the report. For example it was mentioned that the Food and Agriculture Organization's (FAO) State of Food and Agriculture reports led for some of the less developed countries that were dependent on their reports for data, but could not lead for some other states that possessed superior resources.

Generally it was felt that global reports raised awareness of issues but responses as to whether they brought about policy changes were mixed. Part of the challenge lies in the difficulty in determining causality. Once reports are disseminated it becomes difficult to track who reads them and even more difficult to see if any actions result from the reading of reports. While some argue that the reports do not lead to any effects, others presented (largely anecdotal) evidence of cases when policymakers made use of reports or were pressured by groups who had read the reports.

Conclusion

Global reports, while valuable, still have much room for improvement. Contributions on improving data, credibility, impact, accessibility, representation, and local action were abundant in the discussion forum. Essentially these comments focused on how to improve global reports and how to get them to as many people as possible. Most of these comments were made in the hopes of making global reports more effective tools that would eventually translate into policy action. Action may be taken by policy makers in the upper echelons of national governments, or may be a result of effective pressure from the civil society at the bottom. While showing the direct causality between global reports and policy action is at best a difficult task, it appears that global reports do in some instances influence change.

Figure 1

