

The Muskoka Accountability Report: Assessing the Written Record

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The article presents the analysis of the assessment the compliance of the G8 summit commitments and the importance of the released first full and comprehensive G8 Accountability Report in Muskoka. The author focuses the attention on the questions how 2010 Muskoka Accountability Report came to be, and how the report fared in its delivery through the Report overview, its strengths and limitations. Moreover, the author proposes the recommendations for future G8 reporting.

Introduction

The annual G8 summits produce a series of written and public communiqués or declarations that bind leader in many cases to hard commitments. Can the impact of these commitments be measured once the summit is over, the media have dispersed and the leaders have returned to their domestic, national constituencies? Are there limits to how much or how often the G8 can comply with their summit commitments, particularly given that they are sovereign, autonomous states whose leaders are driven by differing domestic and international demands?

Scholars and practioners alike would argue that it makes little sense for the G8 to invest their time and resources, while potentially risking their political and personal reputations, to generate commitments which they have no intention of complying with once the summit is over. Recognizing the importance of assessing the progress in implementing these commitments and holding leaders to account on promises made has long since been recognized by the G8 Research Group, based at the Munk School of Global Affairs at the University of Toronto.

Since 1996, the G8 Research Group has produced and published both annual interim and final compliance reports, assessing progress made by the G8 in meeting the commitments reached at their annual summits. These reports monitor and assess each country's compliance on a carefully chosen selection of priority summit commitments. Not only do these assessments provide policy makers, scholars, civil society the media and other stakeholders with transparent and accessible information, they also offer systemic data which enables social science analysis of this unique international institution.¹

The G8 Research Group's collaboration on its annual compliance reports has expanded over the years to include an important partnership with the State University Higher School of Economics,² Moscow, adding to the strength and robustness of this annual analytic exercise through the inclusion of the Russian language translation and access to information provided by the key Russian government officials involved in the G8 process.

For those around the world engaged in the exercise of tracking and assessing the G8's annual commitments, as well as follow-through with these promises, the release of the first full and comprehensive G8 Accountability Report in Muskoka was a highly-anticipated and much welcomed event. The question of how the 2010 Muskoka Accountability Report came to be, and how the report fared in its delivery, is the focus of this paper.

Report Overview

The timing in the release of this report is not coincidental with the rapid ascension of the G20 as the preeminent forum of global economic cooperation. In an era of rising G20 prominence, the issue of legitimacy and restoration in confidence of the G8 process was a major driver in the timing and delivery of this report. Despite its 36-year history, a recognition seemed to prevail amongst the G8 that in order to retain its continued credibility and legitimacy, demonstrating its global leadership and effectiveness was key. Assessing progress in implementing commitments was therefore essential in keeping the leaders on track while demonstrating a commitment to transparency and open reporting.

² Collaboration on the annual compliance assessments with the HSE began following the 2005 Gleneagles Summit. For information on the HSE, visit <http://www.hse.ru/lingua/en/> (date of access: 25.10.2010).

¹ See www.g8.utoronto.ca, compliance assessments.

This is not to suggest, however, that the issue of G8 accountability did not exist prior to Muskoka. In fact, the G8 has seen a noticeable surge in the number of remit mandates over the years, with leaders promising to report back at subsequent summits on progress in key economic, environmental, security and development commitments.³

We also saw modest accountability reports released by the G8 in 2007 and 2008. The first, issued at the 2007 Hokkaido Summit included an implementation review of the G8's anti-corruption commitments, with the 2009 L'Aquila Preliminary Accountability Report focusing on food security, water, health and education.⁴

But only at the 2009 L'Aquila Summit in Italy did the leaders commit, for the first time ever, to adopt a full and comprehensive accountability mechanism, task a senior-level working group to devise a consistent methodology for reporting on key commitments, and deliver the report at the 2010 Muskoka G8. In doing so, the leaders noted:

"Guided by our common values, we will address global issues and promote a world economy that is open, innovative, sustainable and fair. To this end, effective and responsible leadership is required. We are determined to fully take on our responsibilities, and are committed to implementing our decisions, and to adopting a full and comprehensive accountability mechanism by 2010 to monitor progress and strengthen the effectiveness of our actions" [1, p. 2].

And deliver they did, as promised, a glossy 88 pages, magazine-format document, including a CD Rom of reporting annexes and supporting documentation. Certainly a key development in the G8's desire to provide what they called "a candid assessment on what the G8 has done" [1, p. 3].

Substantively, the Accountability Report aimed to: 1) report on G8 progress in a number of key development-related commitments; 2) assess the results of G8 action; and 3) identify lessons learned for future reporting. The report clearly acknowledged at the outset that it is *not* an exhaustive review, *nor* is it an assessment of global progress on meeting international development commitments. It further noted, similar to what the

G8 Research Group and the HSE have known for years, is that this type of reporting presents a number of important challenges. But in overall terms, the report rightly argued that it represented a "major step in assessing the extent to which the G8 has lived up to its promises" [1].

Nine thematic areas were assessed in the report, reflecting the range of development-related issue areas the G8 has focused its attention on over the years, including aid effectiveness, debt relief, economic development, health, water and sanitation, food security, education, governance, peace and security and environment and energy.

Given this roster, the question naturally flows, *why* the exclusive focus on development? The answer likely lies in a number of related issues.

First, the G8 has played a leading role in drawing attention to, and catalyzing action for, development. Development issues have consistently and systematically been on the G8's agenda since its inception, generating 406 commitments since 1975. The surge in development-related commitments has been particularly prominent since 2000, with the amount of discussion and number of commitments in this area unprecedented. According to John Kirton, "for the past decade, the G8 has really become a development forum" [2].

Second, the G8 has been able to shape and influence the policy direction of international development issues to a large degree, committing to work with the developing world and the broader international development community on a extensive breadth of development-related issues including, among others, aid, debt relief, food security, health and infectious diseases, energy conservation, water and sanitation.

Third, the summit has been very successful in mobilizing financial resources not only from its members, but from other partners as well. The Muskoka Maternal and Child Health Initiative is a clear example of this effort, with the G8 mobilizing USD 5 billion in new funds to support maternal and child health, along with an additional USD 2.3 billion mobilized in contributions from various international organizations, aid agencies and foundations.

And finally, following on heels of the Muskoka G8, the September UN Summit on the MDGs also offered the G8 an opportunity to flex its global muscle, proving that it could exercise strong leadership and mobilize key resources on those Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) to which maternal and child health were key. This placed the G8 countries in a prominent position going into the UN summit, ultimately enabling the further mobilization of USD 40 billion over five years by the

³ Between 1975–2003, the G7/G8 produced 74 such remit mandates. See www.g8.utoronto.ca/

⁴ See the 2007 Accountability Report on Anti-Corruption at <http://www.g7.utoronto.ca/summit/2008hokkaido/2008-corruptionreport.pdf>. The 2009 Preliminary Accountability Report assessed one commitment for food security, water, health and education, with the health commitment divided into two component parts, one each for malaria and polio: http://www.g8italia2009.it/static/G8_Allegato/G8_Preliminary_Accountability_Report_8.7.09,0.pdf.

private sector, foundations, international organizations, civil society and research organizations – all aimed at accelerating progress on maternal and child health.

Combined, these leadership attributes and strengths, coupled with a general recognition following L'Aquila and going into Muskoka that significant challenges remained on both the Gleneagles 2005 commitments and in achieving the 2015 MDGs, prompted development issues to become the focus of this first-ever G8 official accountability report.

Africa is of particular focus in the report, with the G8 recognizing that its development agenda continues to be very closely tied to Africa. Much of the report therefore focuses on commitments that support Africa's goals of achieving social progress, sustainable economic growth, good governance, and security.

56 development-related commitments were identified on which to report G8 progress. The criteria used to identify these commitments were based on whether the commitments were:

- over-arching (did they encompass more detailed and specific commitments in the same sector);
- measurable (did they include financial resource allocations);
- within the G8's control; and
- did they represent multi-year commitments expiring in 2010.

The report's focus primarily centred on those commitments made between 2005–2009, with particular attention paid to the 2005 Gleneagles development commitments. Within the nine thematic areas outlined above, three basic questions were addressed:

- What are the key G8 commitments within this theme?
- What action has the G8 taken to implement these commitments?
- What results have been achieved?

Report Strengths and Limitations

This type of reporting format is clearly a landmark move and being the first of its kind, represents a clear departure from previous G8 reports where the focus was primarily on identifying and reporting on G8 inputs – things like resources allocated, programs developed and working groups established.

A report of this nature demonstrated an apparent recognition on the part of the G8 that leadership begins with promises being kept, that regular, clear and transparent reporting is an important first step in this process, and that the need for an

on-going Accountability Working Group (AWG) is essential in ensuring this work stays on track.

The report also acknowledges that the G8 should continue to improve how it develops, implements, monitors and reports on its commitments and recognizes that the G8 needs to make commitments that are clear, transparent, measurable and time-bound. It further acknowledges that measurable objectives make future tracking and reporting on results less complicated.

Importantly, also, is the fact that this type of reporting adds an element of peer pressure, which plays a critical role in the G8 members' desire to keep up with their counterparts, as few countries want to be publically acknowledged as failing to deliver on their international commitments and obligations.

A further strength of the report is that it acknowledges its own limitations, the first being that of attribution. On most development-related initiatives, the G8 does not and cannot act alone, requiring partner organizations, NGOs, private foundations, civil society and the private sector to contribute to the successful outcome of the G8's development goals. G8 interventions are therefore clearly influenced by how all these partners and groups come together to ultimately deliver on results.

The second issue is that of data limitations. Many G8 activities are in sectors where data quality is poor and therefore activities are carried out without adequate attention to the need for baseline data or a consistent methodology that would allow for rigorous assessments.

The third limitation relates to the general lack of adequate monitoring systems on the ground that provide timely and reliable information for results-oriented reporting.

Given these limitations, the Accountability Working Group clearly recognized that a significant amount of work needs to be done in the future with respect to improving the overall quality of these evaluations.

Notwithstanding the reports' self-professed limitations, a number of other limitations exist in this type of reporting format.

First, the report fails to specify *why* these 56 commitments were selected and not other development commitments, and in so doing, fails to outline the selection criteria utilized in selecting the commitments reported on.

Second, there is a general lack of standard and quantifiable terms as well as a lack of common benchmarks and baselines. The lack of a clearly established set of interpretive guidelines results in a commitment selection process void of any standard terms and/or definitions.

Third, the report lacks a scoring methodology. Information is presented in the narrative, with some tables and graphs, but lacks an overall view of how the G8 countries stack up against each other. Without a comprehensive scorecard to outline overall achievements across the various issues areas, a comparative assessment of how the G8 have performed relative to each other becomes difficult to discern.

Tied into this point is that some country assessments are much more detail-rich than others. For example, information provision on Canada and the US is more robust than assessments for Italy and Russia.

Fourth, certain financial numbers include both bilateral aid as well as multilateral donations, making it difficult to distinguish if double-counting factored into the reporting process.

Fifth, the report draws its financial data from the OECD-DAC, of which Russia is not a member. How Russian data is treated and interpreted is therefore not clearly laid out.

Sixth, there is an acknowledgement regarding the importance of working with NGOs on the ground to implement G8 commitments, but the report fails to specify a clear path for NGO input into the framework process. A similar argument can be made for civil society and foundations, all of which are required to work collectively both in the boardroom and on the ground to delivery development results.

Seventh, there is no clear plan of action on how to rectify lagging progress on past commitments, nor is there a strategy to speed progress in areas deemed to be falling short, primarily, universal access targets for HIV/AIDS and the provision of sanitation, which the report acknowledges, is falling “dangerously behind”.

Recommendations for Future Reporting

Most of the reporting limitations outlined above also tie in as recommendations for future reporting – issues including the need for a clearer commitment

selection process, a more consistent methodology, the avoidance of double-counting, etc., but one last recommendation is worth noting.

The G8 has a number of expert working groups at its disposal, including those on Africa, health, education, water, sanitation, education and corruption. Reliance on these expert working groups is critical, but they should be mandated to seek and receive inputs from civil society and other international organizations in their reporting process.

To effectively execute their mandate, these expert working groups also require the capacity to evaluate results against a consistent and specific set of indicators; an issue critical to the evaluation process.

And finally, reports produced by these expert working groups need to include a systematic, reliable and consistent framework for on-the-ground monitoring and program implementation, as well as specific timetables and options for future action.

Notwithstanding its limitations, the first report of the Accountability Working Group is encouraging and “a step in the right direction”, marking an important shift in the G8’s commitment to open and transparent self-reporting. How the report is fine-tuned and how its current limitations are addressed, will undoubtedly be the subject of continued debate as France assumes the G8 presidency in 2011.

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