

**Summary of the Expert Group Meeting:
Adapting the UN System to Better Support Sustainable Development
UN Headquarters, New York, 3-4 December 2013**

The Division for Sustainable Development (DSD), Department of Economic and Social Affairs, organized a two-day expert group meeting in early December 2013 to deepen the understanding of how the UN system can best support sustainable development. The meeting was attended by a mix of, policy experts, planners, and evaluators representing more than 35 UN entities plus three outside experts. Its discussions focused on:

- Taking stock of progress made, including in the context of the SG's report on sustainable development, the "Framework for Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN System", and existing inter-agency coordination mechanisms;
- Exploring how the UN system can further adapt to support the post 2015 sustainable development agenda;

At the end of each session a list of actions was agreed upon. The summary below captures a few critical ones.

The meeting began with opening remarks from Nikhil Seth, Director of DSD. He noted that the post-2015 agenda and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are a tremendous opportunity to work together and to build on what has been learned to date. The UN system's greatest strength in this regard is its collective experience.

Also speaking as part of the opening session was Professor Thomas Weiss of the City University of New York, who shared research of how the UN system is viewed from the outside, and what he viewed as the main challenges ahead for strengthening support for sustainable development.

Prof. Weiss's public opinion polling found that people feel the UN needs to be more coordinated in its actions and more efficient in its delivery; and that it is perceived as most relevant in the areas of health, human rights and education and least skilled in the area of economic management. He noted that for the system to become more "fit for purpose" it would need to face four challenges: competition from others who work in the development space, greater coherence, building capacity for a more integrated approach, and recognizing that fundamental reforms are needed rather than tinkering at the margin.

Attendees noted that many governments and global institutions faced similar needs to evolve their structures to support more integrated approaches. While better coordination was needed, specialization was a big part of what made the UN effective, and allowed for economies of scale and a skill. The challenge however is getting the specialists to talk to and better understand each other.

Session 1: How far has the United Nation system advanced with mainstreaming sustainable development? This session provided an overview of progress on adopting sustainable development as the framework for the work of the UN system. Moderated by Nikhil Seth, the session included presentations by Elliott Harris, Director UNEP NY Office; Simona Petrova, Director, Secretariat of the UN Chief Executives Board (CEB); Marion Barthelemy, Chief Intergovernmental and Interagency Branch, DSD/DESA; Anne Marie Sloth Carlsen, Senior Adviser, UNDP; and Lucien Back, consultant and lead author of the evaluation of the “Delivering as One” UN system initiative.

Key themes for the session included: a) a need for a more unified understanding of sustainable development before it can be further operationalized; b) that transformational shifts are needed in order to successfully implement sustainable development. For example the new sustainable development agenda beyond 2015 will be universal and not just focused on a subset of countries or populations (though major inequities still need to be part of the discussion); and c) the critical role of good governance and social justice that must be present alongside development gains.

The UN system is not starting from scratch to respond to these challenges and efforts are already underway to explore appropriate mechanisms and policies. There is much to be learned, for example, from the success and lessons of Delivering as One. However, such initiatives were conceived in the context of the MDG agenda and may not prove fully suitable to address sustainable development.

As regards the future role of the United Nations system, the issue of governance was central. The UN system needed to preserve and enhance its strength as a forum for universal dialogue, for setting norms and standards for international cooperation, and for developing an integrated approach to the challenges of human rights, peace and development. In this context, advocacy and leadership are critical for the UN to help shaping systems that can underpin the transformative agenda. Looking ahead, the UN system must be unbiased, flexible, transformational, a knowledge hub, and able to adapt to the changing needs of countries.

The UN’s mandate to convene across institutions and levels can also help showcase and support Member States on how to do the same for sustainable development. The “Framework on Environmental and Social Sustainability for the UN System” was discussed as an important tool that can be applied to all types of UN activities as a way of advancing a systemic approach to enhancing the sustainability of the UN’s work. It was noted that efforts continue to move the framework from policy to an operational tool that will aid in decision making, evaluation and reporting and that due account should be taken of the economic dimension.

In addition, it was noted that UN Country Teams (UNCT) will need to be better equipped to deliver coordinated support, but also that funding cutbacks, largely because of the economic crisis, have eroded some of the momentum for the UN system Delivering as One initiative and for self-starter countries. At the same time, the lack of a global compliance mechanism for sustainable development means that countries will need to see furthering an integrated approach in their own self-interest. The UN system has an important role to play in this effort by providing ways of learning from each other and using a multi-lateral approach. The issue of competition for funding was viewed as a hindrance to effective cooperation.

Actionable points:

1. Mobilize champions for mainstreaming sustainable development in organizations' work as well as coalitions of UN system entities around specific aspects of sustainable development
2. Use the Environment and Social Sustainability Framework to guide UN system in adapting its efforts to support sustainable development, including a) completing the interim guide for implementing the framework; b) developing principals and indicators for the framework); c)Further develop social and economic dimensions in the framework.
3. Initiate an inventory of existing sustainable development mandates, tools, main activities and funding modalities among UN system entities to gain an overview what is already being done and where gaps and obstacles are and allow institutional learning.

Session 2: From the Global to the National: mainstreaming sustainable development in the strategic plans of UN system entities. This session shared experiences about how sustainable development concerns have been taken into account in the design of new organizational strategies. The session was chaired by Ndey-Isatou Njie, Chief, Water, Energy and Capacity Development Branch, DSD/DESA, and offered presentations by: Alex Heikens, Senior Adviser, Climate and Environment, Division of Policy and Strategy, UNICEF; Amr Nour, Director, Regional Commissions NY Office; and Ana Persic, Science Specialist, UNESCO NY Office.

The session noted that while the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) were relatively easy to be mainstreamed into national policies, doing the same for sustainable development will require strong leadership and new tools and approaches at national level that are not currently available in countries. Key issues for governments include: having a full understanding of what an integrated approach entails; employing useful tools and examples as guidance; being supported to facilitate public private partnerships around sustainable development issues; and knowing how to monitor and reporting results.

For one UN entity that is beginning to think about strengthening its sustainability approach, questions were raised as to how to widely engage other colleagues in the

effort, and how could the organization be more accountable and improve communication and reporting on the topic. For another organization that was further along in using a sustainability approach, the issue was raised of how to integrate social sustainability better, such as social inclusion, as the environmental dimension tended to play a more recognized and understood role. It was noted that part of the same challenge is for social ministries to see themselves as playing a key role in sustainable development, which was shown to be significantly lacking in a recent UNCT survey.

One entity underscored the importance of the opportunities presented by the willingness of countries, including the LDCs, to better integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development at the regional and national levels and the need for the UN system to better integrate the implementation of global programmes like the Istanbul POA for LDCs with the sustainable development agenda. It was also recalled that the UN system could undertake a comprehensive study of the implementation of the global sustainable development agenda of specific groups of countries, such as the SIDS , to better understand how the sustainable development agenda can be approached by the UN system.

A number of issues were identified as working against an integrated approach. Significant divisions remain between policies and practice, between headquarters substantive work and headquarters management, and between a drive for innovation and the difficulties sometimes faced by the Secretariat to change its rules and regulations to accommodate such innovation. Another challenge is that the UN is between development agendas, ensuing a climate of waiting for key decisions and guidance by Member States to provide a new framework for post 2015. Others were the need to radically change the mindset of the organization about how it works, and optimizing even more the use of limited resources to deliver common polices and activities.

Reflections on the regional level provided examples of how sustainable development is being integrated, including: ECA has fully mainstreamed sustainable development into its restructuring, thereby ensuring its consideration in all of its work; Regional Commissions will be convening regional sustainable development forums, with increased participation of the private sector; At ESCWA capacity building efforts are coming under one office, allowing the Commission to put forth an integrated mission to a country. ESCWA has adopted the singular institutional goal of equitable and sustainable development, with three strategic pillars and 11 priority areas. To maximize resources, 25-30% of all programmes will now be integrated across subject areas with at least two to four different sub-programmes working together, and by early 2016 nearly 80% of ESCWA's programs will be integrated.

Actionable points:

1. Identify how the institutional structure of UN system organizations and their governing bodies should adapt their efforts to support sustainable development and assure more integrated policies and actions, and better engage stakeholders
2. Develop or update guidance on how strategic plans can promote a sustainable development approach.
 - a. This includes developing the ability to identify and report on joint outputs and define adequate indicators,
 - b. Engage governments and governing bodies so as to get a mandate;
 - c. Ensure that, as more UN entities further harmonize their strategic planning cycles, this also harmonizes sustainable development in our work.
3. Deliver integrated missions to provide assistance to specific countries at their request

Session 3: Learning from Experience: mainstreaming specific issues across the UN system. This session showcased the system-wide processes undertaken to mainstream specific issues/issues-driven approaches. The session was moderated by John Hendra, Assistant Secretary-General, UN-Women, and provided presentations about System-wide Action Plan on gender (UN-SWAP): Moez Doraïd UN Women; Disaster and Risk Reduction: John Harding, Head of the Policy and Practice Unit, UNISDR; Environment regarding a mandate from Rio+20 to develop system-wide environmental strategies: Elliot Harris, Director, UNEP NY Office; Sustainable United Nations facility (SUN): Julie MacKenzie, Senior Advisor, Sustainability, UN Secretariat.

The UN-SWAP, developed to ensure gender considerations across the UN system, is one of the UN instruments furthest along in its ability to mainstream an issue. It is an accountability framework for performance composed of 15 indicators in six broad areas. All UN entities have agreed to report annually on these indicators, with the first round of reporting setting a baseline for the system. A key lesson from the UN-SWAP process is ensuring buy-in, ownership, across the system. UN Women spent eight months engaging over 40 UN entities and piloted the process with eight of them. The UN-SWAP is now mandatory yet allows flexibility for adoption through its implementation timeline.

Disaster Risk Reduction (DRR) has been associated with the UN's humanitarian work although it is actually more aligned with sustainable development. It has been recognized as a cross-cutting UN issue since the 1990s. However it did not initially receive much attention as a primary issue, even though many countries identified it as a strategic priority. At present DRR is recognized as a strategic issue and it appears in many more strategic plans and work programmes. However challenges to further mainstreaming include: DRR does not receive integrated support from HQs; there is a need to align better UN-ISDR's normative work with the gaps in

country-level work; Resident Coordinators are not sufficiently resourced to address the topic; and it is not clear how DRR is recognized in the UNDAF.

For environment, much has been achieved with environmental strategies, such as through the coordination of the Environmental Management Group (EMG), but there is no common environmental strategy for the UN system. One way forward is to enable system-wide consultations to learn how environmental issues are currently being approached and mainstreamed. UNEP plans to develop a proposed outline for a system-wide environmental strategy- as mandated by Rio+20, in early 2014, so that it may be ready by the end of 2014. Such strategy will need to be sufficiently flexible to let each entity deliver its mandate within a unified position on environmental issues.

The internal environmental management work of the Sustainable United Nations (SUN) facility could be viewed as a precursor to thinking through an environmental strategy for the UN system. SUN's work started as a CEB-endorsed initiative to measure, reduce and offset greenhouse gas emissions from the UN's premises and travel. It then added communication and advocacy components and provided tools like a GHG emissions inventory calculator and guidelines for standard UN activities with environmental impacts. It was found, however, that member state support was also necessary. In 2012, at Rio+20, Member States called on UN organizations to practice environmental sustainability in the management of their facilities and operations and in 2013 HLCM and CEB decided that UN organizations should develop environmental management systems through a flexible, voluntary process. Today, the annual report on the UN system's GHG inventory is preparing the way for reporting on a more comprehensive set of environmental indicators.

Additional key points from the discussion included: that strategies akin to environment strategies may not be applicable to the area of sustainable development as it is an overarching principle, not an issue, and has to be approached in a different way; sustainable development is not a hierarchy and issues should not be seen to be in competition (e.g: sustainable development as better than human rights); there is value for mainstreaming in getting an issue reflected in a system-wide reporting mechanism; and it is important to prove relevance to others, such as being seen to be doing what you are promoting.

Actionable points:

1. Develop a UN system-wide environmental strategy, from administrative processes through projects/programs and monitoring and evaluating.
2. Share costs: for example , when conducting a training, partner with agencies that can bring a financial or in-kind contribution
3. Consider employing innovative financing approaches adopted by other UN entities: i.e. UNEP and UNDP have a carbon tax on travel; WFP runs an energy efficiency fund, funding its country offices.

4. Consider developing an integrated system-wide strategy to mainstream sustainable development at various levels of the organization, together with an accountability framework as was done on gender.
5. Tap into an established or close-knit community of practitioners, often with some established interagency processes, as a resource

Session 4: Enhancing Sustainability in Programmes and Projects: quality assurance and safeguards and beyond. This session reviewed examples, lessons and challenges identified by three organizations. The session was chaired by Thomas Gass, Assistant Secretary-General, DESA and speakers for the session included: Steven Lintner, Senior Technical Adviser, World Bank on World Bank safeguards; Andrew Velthaus, Senior Policy Officer, Operations and Business Strategy, GEF Secretariat; and Holly Mergler, Programme Specialist, Environmental Mainstreaming, UNDP on Quality Assurance.

The discussion examined how environmental and social safeguards support the promotion of sustainable development. The World Bank Group, as well as other Multi-lateral development banks, view safeguards as a mandatory framework for assessing its work and something that represents a minimum standard by which to operate. Safeguards complement national policies. The objectives of safeguard policies are to: a) inform decision-making, b) be a mechanism to integrate environmental and social considerations into project design; c) be a mechanism to support public consultation and disclosure. The Bank cautioned against placing too many requirements into such policies, rather than seeing them as one of many complementary tools.

The Global Environmental Fund (GEF) recently developed minimum standards and safeguards based on those of the World Bank, with some changes, to be met by its grantees in order to receive funding. Such safeguards are required to ensure proper use of funds. Among the core safeguard standards are: the need to have in place environmental and social impact assessment systems, and a system for accountability and grievance. Non-core standards, such as policies for indigenous peoples, pest management, and resettlement, are engaged depending on if and how they apply to the implementing agency's work.

UNDP is also quite advanced in the UN system in developing its own environmental and social quality standards and a Quality and Grievance Mechanism. This new approach is helping them link national development results and UNDP organizational effectiveness results, which were previously not correlated. The goal of the standards is to prevent and mitigate inadvertent harm to people and their environment, but also to ensure better development.

Key drivers for this work were: a) increasing requirements from donors for access to finance, and the need to show that UNDP is meeting those requirements: (e.g. GEF, Forest Carbon Partnership Facility); b) becoming engaged in more complex,

higher risk project, like working with extractive industries; c) development of a new Strategic Plan and the need to look at UNDP's organizational effectiveness, including accountability, transparency; d) responding to evaluation findings; and e) seeing such standards as part of larger Quality Assurance Framework.

Types of institutional challenges faced in this process included: engaging commitment and leadership, including finding an institutional home for the initiative; a more sustainable approach to ensuring financial and human resources for the longer term; internal and external outreach for engagement and awareness raising; and strengthening capacities, training, monitoring and evaluation and tracking.

It was anticipated that a number of additional global funds, such as the Green Climate Fund, would also require some form of fiduciary standards and/or safeguards in place for their grantees. There is a movement towards efforts to harmonize some of the reporting and policies around safeguards, but there is also significant differentiation to how they are applied that requires a varied approach to implementation and reporting. It was noted that promoting more harmonization of procedures would increase efficiency and cost savings.

Actionable points:

1. Evolve progressively towards a common system of environmental and social standards for the UN system that would be mandatory and go together with an accountability/grievance mechanism.
2. Only adopt environmental and social policies that UN entities and their partners can implement; e.g. the level of analysis needs to be appropriate for the level of risk.
3. Ensure that environmental and social safeguards and quality assurance mechanisms complement and build on national policies and priorities.
4. Designate leadership / champions / an adequate mechanism for a safeguards/ sustainability approach, and determine a permanent place to house the process within the UN system.
5. Explore establishing a common repository of shared environmental and social assessments and assessment on use of country systems. Also make available to the UN system lessons and examples of UN safeguards, sustainability approach and quality assurance initiatives.

Session 5: Mainstreaming and UN inter-agency mechanisms. This session took stock of how various inter-agency mechanisms work towards supporting mainstreaming sustainable development approaches in their respective fields. The session was moderated by Nikhil Seth, Director DSD/DESA, and presentations were provided by: The CEB Secretariat: Xenia Von Lilien, Programme Officer; UN Office for Development Operation Coordination (DOCO) (on the UNDAF): Saraswathi Menon, Director, Policy Division, UN Women; DESA as co-chair of the Technical Support Team (TST) on SDGs and ECESA Plus; and Michelle Fanzo, Consultant on

TST on SDGs: taking stock of mainstreaming/integration in the issues briefs prepared for the Open Working Group.

While tools like the five programmatic UNDAF principles have helped to focus support on implementing key policies, translating the UN vision into quality programs at country level remains a challenge and produces uneven results. Sustainable development will be even more complex to operationalize – hence the UN needs to support sectoral specialists to talk to each other, and how to do this must be shared with country level staff. There was a sense that if the UN is not supporting transformation, it is supporting the status quo.

An assessment of the 28 issues briefs produced by the Technical Support Team of the Open Working Group found that inequality was the central theme that was reflected in the majority of briefs. However the briefs themselves discussed many of the issues from a donor-recipient country perspective, rather than from a universal perspective of how all countries are impacted. At the same time there was concern that the most vulnerable would be forgotten in a more holistic approach.

Though difficult to assess the balance of the three dimensions of sustainable development in an issue, it was clear from the briefs that social issues were the dominant dimension discussed. Some briefs advocated for more of a nexus approach to issues to reinforce how they must be better integrated, such as energy-land-food-water.

A few of the key areas where UN support was identified across the briefs included: better collection and analysis of data; technical support and expertise; develop a global platform for reporting and review, with a strong accountability and monitoring framework; foster greater multi-sector, integrated strategies, policies, and national planning documents at country level; communities/ CSOs should be engaged as active participants, ensure accountability, and have access to information; better awareness raising and participation, especially by vulnerable groups; facilitate technology transfer; and foster innovative public-private partnerships around SDGs.

When explaining a sustainable development approach, it was suggested to use issues that affect all countries, such as the impact of chemicals on health or taxation issues, so all participants can see themselves as part of the conversation. There was a sense that a significant break with how issues were addressed in the past is needed, and that the UN can no longer see development through the lens of getting things right in the developing world.

Actionable points:

1. Ensure better support to operationalize normative work on sustainable development; strategies, policies and guidelines must be effective at country level and, increasingly, across countries.

2. Better communicate as to why sustainable development is important. A critical element to the transformation sustainable development seeks is raising consciousness, helping people feel something about the issues not just think about them.
3. Assess whether the work of UN country teams are consistent with the objectives of sustainable development

Session 6: How can inspections and independent evaluations help the UN system move forward to become more 'fit for purpose' to support integrated approaches including through the use of the Sustainability Framework?. This session focused on how inspections and evaluations can help the UN to become equipped and fit to support Member States as they move towards a post-2015 sustainable development agenda. The session was moderated by Lucien Back and presenters included: Alan Fox, Evaluation Adviser, UNDP Evaluation Office; Sukai Prom Jackson, Joint Inspection Unit (JIU) Inspector, Susanne Frueh, Executive Secretary, JIU, and Deborah Rugg, Director of Inspection and Evaluation Division in Office of Internal Oversight Services and Chair of UN Evaluation Group (UNEG).

Evaluation processes have moved from an internal focus to examining the impact on an organization, then looking at impact outside an organization and with its partners. It was found that evaluation processes spur a learning organization, as it allows more ideas and inputs from the bottom-up. In a recent study the JIU found that UN organizations are starting to respond to the need to be more flexible and decentralizing, and are placing more emphasis on learning functions.

It is possible for evaluation entities to assess how a system responds to change, hence they could help set up a system to determine progress on sustainable development or to further refine the Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework. The JIU could, for example, look at innovative systems and be formative in conveying positive experiences of other UN entities for those who are formulating their own quality standards or safeguards.

It was noted that there are three potential types of Independent System-Wide Inspection: a) benchmarking exercises of achievements to date by the UN system in line with agreed-to performance indicators / frameworks; b) inspection of sustainable development mainstreaming in UN organizations; and c) good practice reviews. Independent system-wide evaluations could carry out: a) synthesis evaluations; b) evaluation of cross-cutting issues; and c) comprehensive joint evaluations.

Evaluators advocated being part of the project design and planning phase, as opposed to only being part of the end assessment. This allows the shaping of indicators and evaluation methods early on to help ensure the project is designed to do what it set out to accomplish. For example, are the types of indicators being chosen actually able to be evaluated? Showing that indicators have been pre-evaluated can also help the project get funding. Also noted was that joint

programmes should be evaluated jointly; evaluations should include how we work at country level and with partners; and there is a need to strengthen country level analysis to allow for better evaluation of projects and programmes.

It was noted that, if it is expected to have an evaluation of UN system progress in adopting sustainable development approaches in five or ten years, objectives and indicators should be defined now with the evaluation community. The Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework could provide a framework for doing this kind of exercise.

Actionable points:

1. There is a need to evaluate the UN system's progressive compliance with safeguard standards and procedures required by the GEF from implementing agencies. This implies action a) in individual UN organizations (including screening of programmes and projects, development of confidential grievance and follow-up systems etc); and b) jointly as exemplified by the UN-REDD safeguards policy.
2. The UNDG needs to further strengthen the UNDAF evaluation system, including through measures to strengthen compliance with existing guidance how to evaluate social and environmental safeguard systems at country level.
3. Social and environmental safeguard standards should also become part of Evaluation Capacity Development in programme countries, which is an important function of the UN system.

The **Closing session** was led by Thomas Gass, Assistant Secretary-General, DESA, and summarized the findings of the workshop. It was decided that a set of recommendations for further action should be developed as a roadmap as a main outcome of the two-day meeting. In addition to recommendations already noted, the following were put forth in the closing session:

1. Identify elements for the development of a roadmap for integration of sustainable development in the UN system
2. Strengthen coordination and cohesive communications/ messages throughout UN system. Need to ensure all parts of system speak to Member States with one voice.
