



## Comments by Switzerland on the possibility of holding a high level event on sustainable development

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The Swiss Government welcomes this opportunity to share its reflections on the possibility of a high-level event on sustainable development in response to the respective note by UNDESA referring to General Assembly Resolution 63/212. Switzerland attaches great importance to the concept and vision of sustainable development both at the national and the international level. Therefore, Switzerland profoundly appreciates the role that the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, the UN Summit on Environment and Development (UNCED) in Rio de Janeiro in 1992 and the UN World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) in Johannesburg in 2002 have played in the development of common responses of the international community to deal with the multiple challenges related to environmental degradation, economic development and social justice. In particular the Rio summit has yielded results on the normative and operational level which still provide the principle foundations for much of the efforts undertaken by governments and involved stakeholders to achieve a more sustainable development in all its dimensions. The UNCED has also played an important catalytic function in the development of international law, particularly in the environmental field.

### *General considerations*

Taking into account these precedents, **Switzerland generally believes that a new high level event on sustainable development** - taking place forty years after the Stockholm conference, twenty years after the Rio conference and ten years after the Johannesburg summit - **has the potential of catalyzing much needed progress in various fields** and on different levels. Such an event could be an opportunity to advance common approaches and solutions for addressing pressing ecological, economic and social challenges. **However, there is a considerable risk that such a high level event would fail to deliver tangible results** thereby having negative effects on the political level and causing opportunity costs in terms of time and financial resources invested. This risk can largely be reduced by defining a clear and shared vision on the scope and expected outcome of the event, a solid and constructive preparation process and, last but not least, a strong political leadership throughout the whole process. **Hence, it largely depends on the emergence of a shared vision on the scope and outcome of the event, the set-up of the preparation process and the governance structure for the process, whether Switzerland is in favour of convening a high level event on sustainable development in 2012.** In the following, the considerations of Switzerland on these issues are briefly outlined.



### *Scope of the possible high level event*

It is crucial that the high level event would be both backward and forward looking. It is important to **assess the implementation of all the outcomes of the three big UN conferences** in this area, in particular the Stockholm Principles contained in the Stockholm Declaration, the Rio Principles contained in the Rio Declaration, the policies and actions agreed upon in Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) as well as the three Rio conventions. However, by itself this would clearly not be sufficient. In order to be of true value and real political significance, the **high level event should also identify and address existing gaps** in the international regime with regard to environment and sustainable development in order to initiate actions to close these gaps and further reinforce the international normative system.

Since there is a need of more effective institutions and mechanisms in the area of sustainable development, the high level event would have to critically assess the existing governance structures. The event would have to look especially at the functioning and the effectiveness of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), which is the institution that was created to accompany the implementation of the UNCED outcomes, and it would also have to look at the functioning and effectiveness of the governance system in each of the three pillars of sustainable development. The high level event would have to aim at bringing about substantial decisions and measures necessary to improve governance of the environment system, of the development system and of the social system and the economic/finance system in order to put in place the governance system that can make sustainable development a reality.

### *Expected outcomes*

With regard to the specific outcomes of the high level event, the UNCED would again have to be regarded as a model: At the normative level, it produced a far reaching political declaration in which states agreed on important principles which guide their cooperation and actions in the field of environment and development. At the operational level, it produced a clearly structured action plan which identified policies, targets and measures as well as the actors, institutions and means to implement them. In addition, it produced several legal instruments which established international rules and measures for dealing with specific challenges and which closed important gaps in the international regulatory regime. The political declaration and principles resulted from the UN Conference on the Human Environment in Stockholm in 1972, the UNCED in 1992, and the WSSD in 2002 are still relevant today. A 2012 high level event should not reinvent or rewrite these results but would have to be set up in a way so that it is able to achieve a far similar reaching declaration targeted on specific key subjects strengthening **effectiveness, coherence** and **innovation** of a sustainable development worldwide.

### *Preparatory process*

As mentioned above, Switzerland considers the preparatory process to be decisive for the potential success of a 2012 high level event on sustainable development. The organisation of such an event is worth the effort, if its preparation is carefully planned, adequately tuned to the scope and expected outcomes of the event, transparent and inclusive. All involved partners should be ready to constructively engage in the preparatory process. In view of the experiences made with the Stockholm, Rio and Johannesburg conferences, there seem to be two possible models for preparing a possible new high level event:



1. Active role of the CSD: The preparations take place within the CSD, which means that the CSD serves as preparatory body for the high level event.
2. Establishment of a parallel structure: An ad hoc structure is established outside of the CSD in order to carry out the preparations for the high level event.

Given the circumstances, the Swiss Government is not in favour of using the CSD as a preparatory body for the high level event. The CSD already has an established multi-year work programme that was agreed upon by governments in 2003 at CSD 11. According to this programme, the CSD will deal with the important topics of transport, chemicals, waste management, mining as well as sustainable consumption and production. Experience has shown that governments and stakeholders need all the time available within each two-year cycle to share experiences and best practices and to come to an agreement upon policy recommendations and measures to speed up implementation in the areas under consideration. There are no reasons for assuming that this will be different when it comes to the topics of the current CSD implementation cycle. Transforming the CSD into a preparatory body for the possible high level event would therefore inevitably mean that the topics of the current CSD cycle would not get the time and attention they deserve. Consequently, Switzerland would not be favourable to a such an event without the creation of new structures with satisfactory governance arrangements for its preparation.

Switzerland will remain committed to the issue of sustainable development and is very much interested in continuing the dialogue with other interested governments and stakeholders on the best ways and means to advance the achievement of the vision of sustainable development. In conclusion, under the conditions mentioned above, Switzerland would welcome a high level event Rio +20.