

Conceptualizing a Set of Sustainable Development Goals
A Special Event of the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly
organized by UNDESA/DSD
Tuesday 16 October 2012
10:00 a.m. – 1:00 p.m.

I. BACKGROUND

One of the main outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference was the agreement by member States to launch a process to develop a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs) that could be a useful tool for pursuing focused and coherent action on sustainable development.¹ Member States resolved to establish an “inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly.” In launching this process, member States outlined a number of criteria that the SDGs should meet. They also specified the nature and broad composition of the body to be tasked with developing a proposal to the UNGA, as well as a timeline for completing its work.

A geographically-balanced Open Working Group (OWG) comprising 30 representatives nominated by Member States from the five United Nations regional groups² will prepare a report to the 68th session of the General Assembly, containing a proposal for SDGs for consideration and appropriate action. The working group is to ensure the full involvement of relevant stakeholders and expertise from civil society, the scientific community and the United Nations system.

II. OBJECTIVE

This special event will provide an initial opportunity for all member States and other participants to engage in discussions on how to develop the SDGs, in light of the relevant terms agreed within the Rio+20 outcome document. The discussions will be moderated and led by a panel of speakers from the fields of scientific research and policymaking who will contribute their perspectives and analyses in three main areas: 1) how the SDGs could complement the MDGs and be integrated into the post-2015 agenda; 2) how the SDGs could balance the economic, social and environmental pillars of sustainable development; and 3) how to develop universally applicable goals that at the same time take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development. It is expected that this event will inform the initial discussions of the OWG and set a fruitful direction for future discussions on the development of the SDGs.

III. KEY QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION

How can the SDGs build on the MDGs and integrate sustainable development into the post-2015 development framework?

The Rio+20 outcome document states that the development of the SDGs should not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the MDGs, and also directs the SDG development process to be “coordinated and coherent with the processes to consider the post-2015 development agenda.” During both the Rio+20 and post-2015 consultations (formal and informal), member States, civil society, and UN stakeholders consistently and overwhelmingly expressed their desire for a *single* set of development goals to replace the MDGs. To that end, it is critical to ensure that the SDG process and the post-2015 process come

¹ United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development Outcome Document: The Future We Want. A/CONF.216/L.1 of 19 June 2012, para 246.

² Africa, Asia-Pacific, Eastern Europe, Latin America & the Caribbean, and Western European & Others.

together in a manner that capitalizes on synergies while avoiding the deficiencies of having multiple, uncoordinated processes.

From the outset, the SDGs can build upon the lessons learned in the MDG process. Like the MDGs, the SDGs are to be action-oriented, concise, easy to communicate, and limited in number. At the same time, member States expect that the SDGs will be derived through a more inclusive approach, within an intergovernmental process.

It is widely recognized that the MDGs succeeded in focusing efforts and mobilizing resources towards achieving a number of priority goals and targets that advance poverty eradication and social development. It is recognized that, even if the MDGs are fully achieved, this would not mean that poverty had been eradicated or other desirable social goals fully attained by 2015. Thus, there will be a need to continue progress on social development post-2015 even as the economic and environmental pillars of sustainable development are strengthened.

How can the SDGs integrate the three dimensions (social, economic and environmental) of sustainable development?

The Rio+20 outcome document states that the SDGs “should address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages.” While reflecting the social development concerns so well captured by the MDGs, the SDGs must also address economic and environmental concerns in a balanced manner. How can this balance be achieved?

Opinions may differ on how the SDGs could balance the three dimensions, and a number of options may exist. Social, economic and environmental dimensions could be reflected within each SDG, possibly through the associated targets; the overall balance of the three dimensions could be achieved through goals and targets that each address and emphasize different dimensions of sustainable development: or the SDGs could be built upon modified and updated MDGs that would fit into a larger sustainable development framework.

The SDGs should integrate all three dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced and holistic manner. How do we ensure that they take into consideration the interlinkages, synergies and possible trade-offs across the different dimensions as well as different goals?

How to develop universally applicable goals that at the same time take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development?

The MDGs may enjoy universal support, but they do not enjoy “ownership” by all countries. They are often perceived as goals mostly for developing countries, with the exception of MDG8 (global partnership) which contains targets for developed countries. Sustainable development is a universal undertaking whose achievement calls for actions, including domestic actions, by all countries, developed and developing. The SDGs offer a unique opportunity to set goals and targets that all the member States can strive towards together. The challenge is to define goals that have universal ownership but can be suitably tailored to differing national circumstances, including different levels of development. What approaches to such differentiation could be workable?