

**Summary of the special event of the Second Committee of the UN General Assembly
Conceptualizing a Set of Sustainable Development Goals**

The first in a series of six special events was held in the Second Committee on Tuesday, 16 October 2012, featuring a panel discussion on “Conceptualizing a Set of Sustainable Development Goals” (SDGs). The event was organized by the Division for Sustainable Development/DESA, and provided the first opportunity since the Rio+20 Conference for member States to envision the substantive aspects of a potential set of SDGs.

Three key questions outlined in the concept paper provided focus for the panellists’ presentations and the ensuing discussion: 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 take into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development. Remarking that the SDG concept prescribes infinite aspirations to be defined within a finite plan, the moderator recommended a resilient and adaptive approach going forward that could accommodate changes, mistakes and lessons learned.

The Chair of the Second Committee, H.E. Mr. George Wilfred Talbot of Guyana, opened the event by recalling that, at the Rio+20 Conference, member States decided on the guidelines for the SDGs and now must begin to focus on their substance. He expressed hope that the issue of seat allocation within the Open Working Group (OWG) would be resolved soon so that the group could convene its first meeting and begin deliberating the substance of the SDGs.

The event was moderated by Mr. Andrew Revkin, Senior Fellow at the Pace Academy for Applied Environmental Studies and writer of the *Dot Earth* blog for the New York Times. Mr. Revkin began by inviting participants to produce some actionable points, and asked member States to recognise that there is no perfect path forward and therefore a resilient, flexible and adaptive approach is needed. Noting divergences between the world of diplomacy and the reality of the world outside the United Nations, he expressed optimism that member States would be able to come up with an outcome that would be both diplomatically agreeable and effective on the ground.

The first panellist, **H.E. Mr. Mootaz Ahmadein Khalil, Permanent Representative of Egypt to the United Nations**, provided perspectives on the SDGs’ context, content and process. Regarding their context, he observed that the SDGs will require more complexity than the MDGs since they mandate incorporation of the three dimensions of sustainable development, and must be both universal in nature and relevant for all countries. He contrasted the current economic and political context with that within which the MDGs were developed, noting among other differences that the SDGs are being developed and agreed by an intergovernmental process.

Considering the content of the SDGs, H.E. Mr. Khalil emphasized that measuring progress in achieving the MDGs should inform the SDG process, so that the post-2015 agenda could carry over and incorporate unmet MDG targets, while adding the necessary levels of complexity. He

suggested that goals on climate change mitigation and prevention of biodiversity loss could be incorporated. He stressed the need to generalize the costing of different targets and goals, identify the means of implementation, stick to the Rio+20 principle of common but differentiated responsibility, establish a Monitoring, Reporting and Verifying (MRV) mechanism, avoid deviating from previous agreements, and establish concrete partnerships. He suggested that developed and developing countries might “adopt” each other with regard to specific shared goals, and noted that progress in Africa has the potential to lift the entire global economy.

Regarding process, H.E. Mr. Khalil underlined the need for coherence, coordination and convergence among the SG’s High-level Panel, the OWG, and the Expert Group on means of implementation and finance. Further, he proposed that, while the issue of seat distribution within the OWG remains under discussion, the substantive work should proceed.

Mr. Manish Bapna, Executive Vice President and Managing Director of the World Resources Institute, offered five propositions with regard to the SDGs. First, he said they should be forward-looking, accommodating a world that is in a constant state of flux where the geography of poverty is shifting, where water is increasingly scarce and environmental thresholds are being violated, and where inequality is on the rise. Second, he suggested that the SDGs should be multi-dimensional goals that equally address all three aspects of sustainable development, include social and equity considerations that are tied with economic and environmental considerations, and focus on global collective actions problems such as climate change and forests. Third, he recommended that the SDGs be simple and few in number, recognizing that tough choices will need to be made to limit the goals. Fourth, he suggested the goals should be universal, engage not just governments but multiple actors and ensure coherence of their actions. Lastly, Mr. Bapna called for an open and inclusive process, which should also include participation by and consultation of the poor.

Ms. Kate Raworth, Senior Researcher at Oxfam Great Britain, presented her paper entitled “A Safe and Just Space for Humanity”, which takes a long view of the evolutionary history of mankind on earth, noting that humans have evolved and progressed due to the stable and conducive environmental conditions on the planet during the Holocene. She referred to research positing nine planetary boundaries, involving land use change, climate change, freshwater use, nitrogen and phosphorous use, chemical pollution, aerosol loading, ozone depletion, biodiversity loss and ocean acidification, and stressed that human well-being will be under increasing threat as these boundaries are breached. She observed that the sustainable development agenda is not an environmentalist one, but rather a human-centered one, highlighting 11 social dimensions that form the basic support for human life: health, water, food, income, energy, education, resilience, voice, jobs, social equity, and gender equality. Positing the planetary boundaries as the outer edge and the social development threshold as the inner edge of a “doughnut”, her paper refers to the doughnut proper as a safe and just operating space for humanity, where people live healthy, decent lives while respecting nature’s limits. She asserted that no country has managed to balance equally the three dimensions of sustainable development; therefore a change in production and consumption patterns as well as increased cooperation among countries is required in order to achieve a truly sustainable world. Lastly, with regard to defining the SDGs, she suggested that member States form only one set of goals that balance the three dimensions

and include cross-cutting targets, with different targets for different countries that reflect their capabilities and realities.

Mr. Charles Kenny, Senior Fellow at the Center for Global Development, offered his perspective on the MDGs, stating that they were successful because they moved the development dialogue forward; they increased aid and had an impact on prioritization and resource allocation in developing countries; and they were numerical, simple, time-bound and effective. On the other hand, they had a narrow focus on aid rather than on the environment or global governance. In conceptualizing the SDGs, Mr. Kenny called for member States to think about where such a set of goals might be aimed for the highest impact, and whether an aspirational statement without quantified goals or targets might make a difference. He suggested that reaching zero absolute poverty (below USD1.25 per day) by 2030, achieving universal basic literacy and numeracy, and universal access to energy were plausible goals that could be achieved. He advised incorporation of goals related to biodiversity and climate change from those respective processes. He proposed consideration of governance (perhaps a guarantee of legal identity), security (perhaps relating to domestic violence), and equity that would not necessarily be time-bound.

Ms. Shamshad Akhtar, Assistant Secretary-General for Economic Development at DESA, wrapped up the panel presentations by noting that the focus on human development and well-being has expanded over the past 40 years, is now more informed about planetary stressors, and highlighted the need to envision the road ahead, strategize, plan effectively and implement decisions to ensure a sustainable world. She noted the inclusive nature of the SDG processes in terms of the work streams of the High-level Panel, the OWG at center stage, and support from the UN Technical Task Team, which includes almost 60 UN agencies. She agreed that member States should heed the lessons learned from the MDGs, move beyond aid and focus on increased market access, debt relief for poor countries, and macroeconomic stability. In envisioning the way forward, Ms. Akhtar said member States should utilize their experiences with Rio+20 as a guide and engage multiple stakeholders in creating a new development agenda. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities should be recognised, and countries should set national targets from which regulatory frameworks could be constructed, to empower all countries to decide what they consider to be attainable on which timeframe.

The **ensuing discussion** among participants was truly interactive, highlighting diverse views and priorities among member States and representatives of Major Groups.

Many ideas were presented on how to develop universally applicable goals that at the same time reflect national realities and capacities. One country wondered whether two sets of goals might emerge instead of one set, with several countries suggesting that the SDGs should not only learn from the MDG process but also keep an open mind and not start from pre-conceived ideas. Other participants reacted with pleas to stick to one set of goals that would be universally recognized yet could allow for differentiated approaches for all countries, and agreed with the need to connect the MDGs to the SDGs.

The possibility of different sets of goals or targets for different groups of countries was subsequently debated. The principle of common but differentiated responsibilities was highlighted by many, and some further suggested that different goals and targets should be set

for different countries or regions based on development indices or historical and economic experiences. One country stressed the sovereign right of states over their natural resources, noting that no single development model is applicable to all. Another referred to nationally adopted targets that could contribute to global goals. The concept of “partnership goals” that could link groups of developed and developing countries was mentioned, and the need for collaboration with civil society and the private sector was widely emphasized. In this context, the need for strengthening mechanisms for financing, monitoring and evaluation were discussed, as was the importance of scientific research and data collection for accurately assessing potential goals, targets and indicators. On the other hand, it was noted that existing data or lack thereof should not drive or restrict the process of SDG development, since it is possible for the process to stimulate and improve data collection (the example of the MDG on maternal mortality was mentioned). Examples of innovative goals outside traditional thinking, such as the right to national identity papers, were also suggested.

A number of speakers agreed that the challenges are all interlinked, and that the SDGs should enable countries to address them using a cross-cutting approach. One group advocated an inter-generational approach. Many stressed that poverty eradication must be at the center of the post-2015 agenda, and cannot be achieved without integrating all three dimensions of sustainable development. Eradication of extreme poverty was cited as the most important goal and one that could realistically be achieved within the next generation. Critical issues of water, air, land, energy, food, and managing waste were also highlighted as essential elements of a balanced set of SDGs. Gender equality was mentioned as not only a cross-cutting issue, but also a stand-alone issue, and some highlighted the importance of addressing cross-cutting issues such as peace and security, governance and voice, equity, inequality and gender empowerment in the post-2015 agenda.

A number of speakers agreed that it is impossible to address poverty without also addressing the environmental problems that poor people face, and stressed that some goals will require global collective action to achieve, not only by governments but by many other actors. Such goals would need to encompass actions by developed countries as well. A number of participants stated that the SDGs must not only set goals for improving the welfare of the bottom billion but also apply to the top billion. Without the latter, it was suggested, one cannot speak of *sustainable development* goals.

There were reminders that the reality of challenges on the ground such as governance, political conflict, and private sector accountability would need to be addressed in order for some goals to be feasible. The need for increased financing, means of evaluation, and reform of global institutions were also cited as essential to the process. One speaker highlighted the importance of establishing baselines to measure progress and of mobilising and channelling resources more cost-effectively.

The concept of inclusivity generated dialogue on how to ensure that the poor are part of the conversation. The need for collaboration with civil society and the private sector was referenced repeatedly. Several countries agreed with the need to include the poor in the consultative process, but raised the question of how best to undertake this and what types of indicators would be necessary.

Finally, several speakers drew attention to the fact that the relationship of the work of the High-level Panel and the UN Task Team on post-2015 to that of the OWG is still unclear. Some member States wondered what elements, apart from the SDGs, would be included in the post-2015 agenda.