



UN-DESA Division for Sustainable Development

Sustainable Development Goal 15: Progress and Prospects

*An Expert Group Meeting in preparation for HLPF 2018:
Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies*

14-15 May 2018

Conference Room 9, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Concept Note

Introduction

The theme of the High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2018 is *transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies*, and it will maintain a special focus on SDGs 6 (water and sanitation), 7 (energy), 11 (cities), 12 (sustainable consumption and production), and 15 (terrestrial ecosystems), in addition to SDG 17, which is considered each year. The SDGs under review will be examined in terms of progress made and challenges encountered in their implementation, as well as in terms of their relationships with the rest of Agenda 2030.

In preparation for the 2018 HLPF, the Division for Sustainable Development of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DSD/DESA), together with partners, is organizing an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) on SDG 15 and its role in advancing sustainable development through implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

The objective of the meeting will be to take stock of where we are in terms of progress towards SDG 15; share knowledge as to success stories, good practices and challenges; identify particular areas of concern; and suggest ways forward in terms of policies, partnerships and coordinated actions at all levels. These messages will help inform the HLPF, assist in planning its sessions, and serve to influence collaborations and programmes of work going forward from 2018.

SDG 15

The 2030 Agenda calls for a world in which “humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other species are protected.” SDG 15 specifically calls on the international community to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”. It covers an enormous range of issues, with nine substantive targets, and three addressing means of implementation.



Five of the substantive targets are aligned with the Aichi Biodiversity Targets¹ and must be met by 2020: ensure the conservation, restoration and sustainable use of terrestrial and inland freshwater ecosystems and their services, in particular forests, wetlands, mountains and drylands (15.1); promote the implementation of sustainable management of all types of forests, halt deforestation, restore degraded forests and substantially increase afforestation and reforestation globally (15.2); protect and prevent the extinction of threatened species (15.5); introduce measures to prevent the introduction and significantly reduce the impact of invasive alien species on land and water ecosystems, and control or eradicate the priority species (15.8); and integrate ecosystem and biodiversity values into national and local planning, development processes, poverty reduction strategies and accounts (15.9).

Promoted with the tagline “Life on Land,” SDG 15 also addresses the need to achieve, by 2030, a land degradation-neutral world (15.3); conserve mountain ecosystems including their biodiversity (15.4); and promote the fair and equitable sharing of benefits arising from the utilization of genetic resources and appropriate access to such resources (15.6). There was in addition a call for “urgent action” with regard to ending poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna (15.7).

Targets associated with the means of implementation include the mobilization and significant increase of financial resources from all sources to: conserve and sustainably use biodiversity and ecosystems (15.a), and to finance sustainable forest management with adequate incentives to developing countries for advancing such management including through conservation and reforestation (15.b). A third such target requires enhancing the global support for combatting poaching and trafficking of protected species including through increasing the capacity of local communities to pursue sustainable livelihood opportunities (15.c).

A number of UN conventions and fora (created prior to the adoption of the 2030 Agenda) provide direct support for the achievement of SDG 15, including: the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF); the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and its Cartagena Protocol on Biosafety, Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization, and Aichi Biodiversity Targets; the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD); the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands; the UN Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora (CITES); the Convention on Migratory Species (CMS); the World Heritage Convention (WHC); and the International Treaty on Plant Genetic Resources for Food and Agriculture (ITPGR). In addition, three General Assembly Resolutions have been passed with regard to the illegal wildlife trade since 2015 and a

¹ In [decision X/2](#), the tenth meeting of the Conference of the Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) adopted a revised and updated Strategic Plan for Biodiversity, including the Aichi Biodiversity Targets, for the 2011-2020 period. This Plan provides an overarching framework on biodiversity, not only for the biodiversity-related conventions, but also for the entire United Nations system and all other partners engaged in biodiversity management and policy development.



number of international conferences held on this issue with the next one due to take place in London this October. Various international agreements and partnerships related to climate change, freshwater ecosystems, mountains, agriculture, and oceans also support the implementation of SDG 15 targets.

According to the UN Secretary-General's *Sustainable Development Goals Report 2017*, progress in preserving and sustainably using the Earth's terrestrial species and ecosystems is uneven both across targets and regions. Although the pace of forest loss has slowed, and improvements continue to be made in managing forests sustainably and protecting areas important for biodiversity, biodiversity loss continues at an alarming rate, with corals and amphibians especially experiencing high and rapidly increasing risk of extinction. Wildlife poaching and trafficking continue to thwart conservation efforts, and land degradation is leading to desertification in dryland areas, particularly in grasslands and rangelands. At the same time, the global monitoring framework assigns a number of the indicators against the substantive targets to Tier II/III status, meaning that regular reporting against these indicators is not yet fully developed.

Approach and key questions

Although SDG 15 can be narrowly perceived as primarily environmental, it is in fact a critical measure of overall progress against the 2030 Agenda, as well as a key enabler of many other goals and targets. Importantly, it is also central to the lives and well-being of many indigenous communities, pastoralists and others traditionally viewed as excluded, marginalized or at 'risk of being left behind.' It is also central to providing environmental support services critical to ensuring, amongst others, safe and sustainable water supplies and mitigating climate change. As such, meeting its various targets will be central to realizing the aspirations of the SDGs. Indeed, if the 2030 Agenda and the 17 SDGs are to be achieved in just 12 years, there is an urgent need to identify targets that can accelerate progress and integrate the activities planned for multiple goals².

To illustrate the broader social dimensions of SDG 15, it is widely recognized that there are occasions when the depletion of natural resources, extinction of species, and degradation of ecosystems also contributes to and/or is associated with various forms of conflict, political instability, violence, and violation of human rights, as well as other illegal activities. Poaching and trafficking illegal wildlife products are often closely tied to global criminal networks that rely on economic desperation to motivate the destruction and depletion of threatened species, highlighting the need for more holistic approaches to poverty eradication, sustainable livelihoods and conservation of natural resources.

²For instance, the General Assembly, in its resolution 71/229 observed that achieving land degradation neutrality would 'serve as an accelerator to ending poverty and hunger, tackling inequality, empowering women and stimulating economic growth.' Further, 72/220 affirmed that achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN) will act as an accelerator for achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals.



Climate change threatens all terrestrial ecosystems and makes meeting the targets in SDG 15 more difficult across the board. Climate change mitigation and adaptation measures will thus be critical components of any effective intervention—for forests, wetlands, drylands, mountains and on behalf of threatened species around the world. Progress toward achieving diverse and healthy ecosystems can contribute cost-effective solutions to climate change adaptation and mitigation, and in turn ecosystem-based approaches to climate change adaptation and mitigation can also promote progress toward SDG 15. Such synergistic advances can generate additional benefits in other areas, such as resilience building and reducing vulnerabilities in society.

Given this far-reaching scope of SDG 15, and keeping in mind the theme of the 2018 HLPF—*transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies*—the EGM will undertake an examination of the progress towards its individual targets that is data driven and focused, but also takes into account obstacles, challenges, enablers and interlinkages through various cross-cutting lenses deriving from social and economic dimensions such as sustainable livelihoods, migration, land tenure, empowerment of rural women and smallholder producers, urban-rural linkages, climate change, valuation of biodiversity and ecosystem services, the rights and knowledge of indigenous peoples, insecurity and governance, as well as the 2030 Agenda principles of inclusion, interdependence and leaving no one behind.

Practitioners in the field are generally already aware of the multiple and complex interlinkages of terrestrial and freshwater ecosystems, in their efforts to implement effective and equitable protected area establishment and management, invasive species eradication and management, sustainable use of species and ecosystems, and ex situ conservation, reintroduction, and restoration. To advance implementation, local and indigenous communities must be regarded as custodians of the local environment. Key conditions need to be in place to ensure participatory planning, governance, land tenure, landscape approaches, land use planning, multi-stakeholder dialogues for capacity building, valuation of ecosystem services, cost-benefit analyses that include nature, and broad utilization of rapidly advancing GIS technologies. Beyond the local level, ecosystem-based approaches must include integrated thinking and spatial planning, and increased access to public finance and mobilization of private finance, including through new financial instruments.

In 2015, bilateral ODA in support of biodiversity amounted to \$8.8 billion, an increase of 39 per cent in real terms over 2014. However, governments and other actors seeking to implement the SDG 15 targets, especially those with 2020 deadlines, will need accelerators—including in the realms of public and private finance, capacity, science and technology—in order to be successful. For instance, the Impact Investment Fund for Land Degradation Neutrality (LDN Fund) is a first-of-its-kind investment vehicle leveraging public money to raise private capital for sustainable land management and land restoration projects worldwide.



Key questions that could be considered by the EGM include:

- How can the true value of nature, including its public good and non-market attributes, become more adequately recognized and integrated into development strategies and planning processes, including through the establishment of national natural capital accounting systems, ecosystem accounts, and the use of data in decision making?
- What can be done to establish governance structures that are effective in supporting change?
- What types of fiscal policy changes and financial innovations could help incentivize biodiversity conservation, and attract private investments?
- How can progress towards national biodiversity targets established in accordance with the Aichi Biodiversity Target 2 be linked with the post-2020 Strategic Plan for Biodiversity currently being developed by the Convention on Biological Diversity?
- How can SDG accelerators and integrators within SDG 15, such as that of achieving land degradation neutrality (LDN) as identified by General Assembly resolution 72/220, act as accelerators for achieving multiple Sustainable Development Goals and various other aspects of the 2030 Agenda?
- How can efforts to halt and reverse deforestation be accelerated by examining the multiple links between agriculture and forests and field experiences with trees in different agricultural production systems and regions?
- What are the evidence-based conservation solutions – including recent scientific and technological advances as well as effective community management and partnerships – that deliver genuine impact and can be scaled up or replicated for success?
- How can an enabling environment be created to support inclusion, resilience and sustainability for the achievement of SDG 15?
- How can narratives of biodiversity conservation and ecosystem management be strengthened to influence development and sector decision-making and cause necessary changes in planning and practice?

Contribution to HLPF 2018

The knowledge and insights of experts—both practitioners and academics—from across the world will be crucial to addressing these questions. The EGM will serve to bring together a cross-section of such expertise from a diversity of countries and regions to help:

- Provide substantive inputs into the thematic reviews at the HLPF and help inform its outcomes;
- Identify cases from regions and specific countries (including those that are conducting or have conducted Voluntary National Reviews) that illustrate challenges or highlight innovative practices;
- Suggest effective presenters for the specific sessions at the HLPF, as well as contributors to blog posts, e-discussions and other activities leading up to the HLPF, and;



- Influence collaborations and programmes of work going forward from 2018.

Participation and organization

Participation at the EGM will be by invitation. A small number of experts from think tanks, academia, NGOs, the private sector and Governments will be invited by UN-DESA/DSD, with financial support provided on a case-by-case basis. Experts from the UN system and other international organizations will also be invited to participate.

DESA/DSD will seek to partner with the Secretariat of the Convention on Biodiversity (and RAMSAR), CITES, UNCCD, UNDP, UNEP, FAO, the Secretariat of the UN Forum on Forests, and others including the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS) .

Individual sessions at the EGM will run sequentially, and will address specific themes. The mode will be interactive, with short presentations from a panel serving to initiate discussion. This is a working-level meeting, with all participants encouraged to speak openly and informally.

The EGM will be conducted in English. All presentations/papers/remarks will be made available online. Arrangements will be made to brief member States on the outcomes prior to the HLPF, based on a document to be prepared following the EGM.