



General Assembly
Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General

08 May 2013

Original: English

General Assembly
Sixty-eight session

Agenda item 19
Sustainable Development

Economic and Social Council
Substantive session of 2013
Geneva, 1 - 26 July 2013

Item 6 of the provisional agenda*
Implementation of and follow-up
to major United Nations
conferences and summits

Report of the Secretary-General on mainstreaming of the three dimensions of sustainable development throughout the United Nations system

Summary

This report analyzes efforts made by the UN system in mainstreaming the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in its work, as mandated at Rio+20.

It points to a range of initiatives in this regard, while also identifying challenges and gaps. It points to the following key building blocks for the further integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development:

- Commitment at the highest level of the UN system bolstered by clear and coherent intergovernmental guidance;
- Stronger coordination and policy coherence;
- An enabling culture of wider coordination both within the UN system and with external partners;
- Accountability and transparency;
- Adequate institutional support within the UN system;
- Building analytical capacities, new competencies and tools to support developing countries;
- A system of continuous learning and improvements in practice; and
- Mobilization and allocation of resources to drive sustainable development.

The report makes the case that more systematically integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development will enhance the UN system capacity to support Member States in taking forward the UN post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals (SDGs).

1. INTRODUCTION

1. One year ago, the Rio+20 Conference reaffirmed the commitment of the international community to sustainable development. Its vision is one where the pursuit of a more sustainable future for all pervades society and guides actions of governments and non-state actors.
2. The Rio+20 outcome document “acknowledge[s] the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels, including at sub-national/local level, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their inter-linkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions.”¹
3. The outcome document also called for “the further mainstreaming of the three dimensions of sustainable development throughout the United Nations system”^{2 3}. It asked the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly, through ECOSOC, on the progress made in this regard. The present report responds to this mandate.
4. The report takes stock of how the three dimensions of sustainable development - economic, social and environmental - have been integrated into the work of the UN system to date. It aims to learn from the successes and challenges encountered so far and identify lessons to strengthen UN system support to Member States. It serves as a preliminary stocktaking and highlights the work ahead.
5. Section 2 touches on the implications of the concept of sustainable development for integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions into the work of the UN system.
6. Section 3 examines briefly how individual UN entities are working to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in their work.
7. Section 4 takes stock of existing efforts by the UN system as a whole to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development across the national, regional and global levels of the UN system.

¹ The Future We Want, para. 3.

² The Future We Want, Para 93.

³ The Future We Want, Para 91. The document also emphasized the need “to further enhance the mainstreaming of sustainable development in the respective mandates, programmes, strategies and decision-making processes [of UN system organizations] in support of the efforts of all countries, in particular developing countries, in the achievement of sustainable development”.

8. Section 5 sheds light on the challenges, opportunities and lessons derived from experiences to date.
9. The report concludes with a few recommendations to inform future efforts.

SECTION 2: IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSLATING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INTO THE WORK OF THE UN SYSTEM

10. Sustainable development aims to ensure the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the planet and for present and future generations. Sustainable development emphasizes a holistic, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision-making at all levels. It rests on integration and a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental goals and objectives in both public and private decision-making. It emphasizes intragenerational and intergenerational equity.
11. A sustainable development approach broadens the frame of reference and community in which development issues are understood, decisions are taken, and implementation is executed and evaluated.
12. Poverty eradication is an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. Today, 20 years after UNCED, sustainable development has established itself, at least conceptually, as the overarching development framework for making this happen.
13. The Rio+20 outcome document includes a call to further system-wide coherence and coordination⁴, to strengthen operational activities for sustainable development⁵, as well as to look inward, to improve the management of facilities and operations, by taking into account sustainable development practices⁶.
14. It also contains a range of specific actions for governments to undertake with the support of the UN system. The UN system has developed a framework to share responsibilities among various organizations in supporting governments in implementing those mandates⁷.
15. The work of the UN includes support to the fora where the international community reflects on policy and agrees on norms and guides development cooperation. It thus has a unique role and responsibility to help in the pursuit of sustainable development through its analytic, normative, policy and operational work.
16. Individual UN system entities thus have to strengthen measures and efforts to ensure mainstreaming of economic, social and environmental dimensions at

⁴ para 78 of the Rio+20 outcome document

⁵ paras 94-95 of the Rio+20 outcome document

⁶ para 96 of the Rio+20 outcome document.

⁷ <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/followupbyunsystem.html>

the level of strategies/policies, programmes/projects, and administration/operations. They must also work collectively to support integrated policy making at national, regional and international levels. Sustainable development also requires new partnerships and a different way of monitoring and communicating results to governments and stakeholders.

17. Coherent guidance from UN Member States is important to steer efforts in this regard, particularly through UN system intergovernmental processes.
18. Sustainable development does not mean that all policies and programmes of the UN system have economic, social and environmental dimensions. Rather, it asks that the potential economic, social and environmental implications of policies and programmes be carefully considered. This is essential in order to avoid unintended impacts, conflicting policies or unsustainable outcomes. It also enables the UN system to identify synergies and possible triple win opportunities. At a time of dwindling resources for development cooperation, it is imperative to maximize the co-benefits of each action.
19. However, moving this concept into practice is not easy. It means transformational change that challenges the status quo and a system designed under a different development model. It requires a fundamental rethinking of the way the UN conceives its analytical, policy and operational work. With more than twenty years experience of sustainable development activities around the globe, the UN system and its partners are still learning how to consistently and effectively support integrated approaches and overcome structural and other challenges.

SECTION 3: MAINSTREAMING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT WITHIN UN SYSTEM ENTITIES

Building on the UN Environmental and Social Sustainability Framework

20. Efforts to gear the UN system towards sustainable development can take as a point of departure the Framework for Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the UN System⁸. This framework was developed in 2011 as an interagency initiative through the Environment Management Group (EMG). By better assessing the implications of the organization's choices and actions, it provides a platform from which to strengthen the sustainability of (i) strategies and policies, (ii) operational activities through programmes and projects and (iii) administrative decisions of the UN system such as facility management. The framework was conceived to help better understand how the complex array of UN undertakings influence one another in terms of

⁸<http://www.unemg.org/IssueManagementGroups/EnvironmentalandSocialSustainability/ESreport/tabid/102177/Default.aspx>

environmental and social impacts and outcomes⁹. It does not cover the economic dimension.

21. This report builds in part on the approach and entry points developed as part of this framework.
22. Since the first Rio conference in 1992, the UN system has endeavoured to evolve its support to policy development, its operational activities and its ways of working, so as to better help countries to move towards sustainable development paths.
23. Many UN system organizations have undertaken efforts to integrate sustainable development from their overarching multi-year strategic plans down to programme/project level. Others have employed “bottom-up” approaches with experience from national and subnational level informing wider strategic planning. Box 1 highlights the examples of the approach taken by UN-Habitat, UNDP, ILO and UNESCO.

Box 1: Integrating the three dimensions in strategic planning: examples

UN-Habitat took a bottom-up approach to mainstreaming sustainable development by starting at the sub-national level in 1992 with the Sustainable Cities programme. In 2002, UN-Habitat produced a paper on sustainable urbanization that was a turning point for the organization. Integrating the three dimension of sustainable development was extended up through planning and programme policies until sustainable development became the underlying principle of UN-Habitat’s 2008-2013 Medium-term Strategic and Institutional Plan (MTSIP) and again in the upcoming 2014-2019 MTSIP.

The ILO’s Strategic Policy Framework for 2010-2015 has Green Jobs and Decent Work as a cross-cutting theme. ILO is expected to be better able to advocate and advise on sustainable development, in areas such as:

- i). Assessing and realizing the potential for green and decent jobs in national and local policies and development strategies; and
- ii). Maximizing the employment effect and ensuring social protection for vulnerable groups targeted or affected by adaptation strategies in response to climate change.

UNESCO is currently in the process of defining its Medium Term Strategy to be adopted by Member States at UNESCO’s 37th General Conference in November 2013. Two overarching objectives are proposed: (1) Peace - Contributing to lasting sustainable development and (2) Contributing to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. All of UNESCO’s programme would thus be geared towards these objectives.

⁹ EMG environmental and social sustainability framework:
<http://www.unemg.org/IssueManagementGroups/EnvironmentalandSocialSustainability/ESreport/tabid/102177/Default.aspx>

In its Strategic Plan for 2008-2013, UNDP's goal in the area of environment and energy is the strengthening of national capacity to manage the environment in a sustainable manner while ensuring adequate protection of the poor. Specific results have been achieved notably in i) mainstreaming environmental and energy issues into development planning; and ii) building local capacity to better manage the environment and deliver services, especially water and energy.

24. At the same time, a review of the strategic plans of a few organizations shows that some make references to the importance of sustainable development in broad terms. Their objectives, expected results and reviews generally focus on the sectoral area of work of the organization without systematic reference to related dimensions of sustainable development. The on-going development of a new generation of strategic plans for funds and programmes and a few specialized agencies is the occasion for deeper, more systematic and more meaningful integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. This would also be consistent with the guidance of Rio+20 and the GA review of UN system operational activities for development (QCPR) on integrating sustainable development in UN operational activities.

Box 2: Understanding the interactions between the economy and the environment

The UN Statistical Commission adopted a **System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) Central Framework** in 2012. This is the first international standard for environmental-economic accounting. This standard and specific extension pertaining to energy, water, and land and ecosystems could be instrumental in addressing a number of Rio+20 outcomes.

The World Bank is working on a number of approaches that seek to strengthen sustainability at the country level by moving beyond GDP to evaluate economic performance, including genuine savings¹⁰ and wealth accounting. This effort is being bolstered by the WAVES (Wealth Accounting and Valuation of Ecosystem Services) Partnership¹¹.

25. The GA review of UN system operational activities for development (QCPR) has pointed to ways to use operational activities to help governments to embark on sustainable development paths. Implementation now has to follow (see section 4.A). To do so, however, organizations need to more systematically apply sustainability conditions such as safeguards and find triple win approaches that support progress across all three dimensions of sustainable development.
26. A number of organizations have made progress in developing tools such as environmental and social sustainability frameworks and assessment tools that

incorporate sustainable development considerations into their policies and programmes, such as FAO, IFAD, UNDP, UNEP and the World Bank (see Box 3).

27. However, an interagency review of UN practices related to environmental and social impact assessments¹² revealed that the lack of a system-wide standard has produced an ad hoc approach with varying levels of thoroughness and rigour. Further, there appears to be a varied understanding of the purpose and benefits of applying environmental and social sustainability measures as well as different expectations of what such measures can deliver.

Box 3: Integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions in programmes and projects

UNDP has updated its Programming and Operations Policies and Procedures to prevent and manage potential risks to the environment and people at the earliest possible planning stage and carried through implementation. The objective is also to identify opportunities to strengthen support to development planning processes.

FAO employs environmental impact assessment procedures to ensure that its field operations are consistent with its sixteen governing principles. These principles address various aspects of environmental and social impact, such as management of biological diversity for food and agriculture.

UNCTAD's BioTrade Initiative promotes production and trade in goods and services derived from native biodiversity. Over 19 countries are involved in the BioTrade initiative, which provides a potential source of jobs and income, export diversification and rural development and improved livelihoods of rural and local communities.

In its monitoring and evaluation of projects, the World Bank uses core sector indicators to measure a project's sustainability related to infrastructure, environmental resource management, urbanization, and social development. It is also reviewing its results measurement system for concessional financing.

28. Efforts have also been made to assess the environmental impact in UN system facilities and operations practices, including travel, procurement and use of information technology (see Box 4).
29. The UN Climate Neutral Strategy started and to some degree coordinated system-wide reporting and greening activities. It is still, however, largely up to individual agencies to implement significant greening schemes. The

¹² EMG sustainability framework:
<http://www.unemg.org/IssueManagementGroups/EnvironmentalandSocialSustainability/ESreport/tabid/102177/Default.aspx>

development of a system-wide Environmental Management System recently endorsed by the HLCM should help coordinate revisions of operational modalities that are required across the system (see Box 4).

Box 4: Reducing UN carbon footprint

Major efforts to reduce the UN's carbon footprint have been undertaken by UNEP's Sustainable UN (SUN) facility, which coordinates and supports the implementation of the UN's Climate Neutral Strategy.

To date, five UN organizations have achieved climate neutrality through a combination of emissions reduction and offsetting: UNFCCC, UNOPS, UNEP, UNDP headquarters, World Bank Group.

In April 2013, the CEB committed to the development and implementation of environmental management systems in each organization with a goal to further reduce the Organization's footprint (see para 74).

30. A thorough review of the internal structures and workflows of UN system organizations would be needed in order to better understand how to overcome the sectoral boundaries that hinder achieving a more integrated approach. Divisions or offices on sustainable development often exist in parallel to sectoral divisions. It is important to understand how such structures can best work together, along with strategic planning units, in ensuring that consideration of all three dimensions of sustainable development occurs throughout the organization.
31. Regardless of whether adequate structures are in place, staff at all levels often lack the capacity and resources to truly undertake integrated approaches in supporting analytical work, policy development and operations.
32. Overall, sustainable development is not only about ensuring economic, social and environmental perspectives are reflected in strategic planning process of UN organizations, but that these perspectives together form a holistic way of "doing business"; a process of thinking at all levels that guides the kind of strategic planning and operational choices that follow. Using an integrated and sustainable approach for decision-making in the UN system is currently unevenly applied, revealing an institutional gap between policy and practice.

SECTION 4: SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT AT COUNTRY, REGIONAL AND GLOBAL LEVELS

33. Rio+20 recognized that coordination among UN system entities in the economic, social and environmental areas can enhance UN system support to sustainable development. Numerous coordination mechanisms exist and a wealth of initiatives are undertaken at national, regional and global levels to integrate UN system's work on the three dimensions of sustainable

development. These can be built upon for accelerating the mainstreaming process.

A. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at the national and sub-national level

34. The UN system has an important role in helping countries define and implement their pathways towards sustainable development. In preparations for the Rio+20 Conference, governments identified five priority areas for advancing sustainable development: i) Strengthening institutions and governance systems and building capacities for collaboration and coordination; ii). Unpacking and operationalizing the “green economy” in the context of poverty eradication and sustainable development; iii). Reinforcing the connection between poverty eradication as an overarching objective and the sustainable development agenda; iv). Meaningfully engaging stakeholders; and v). Measuring progress in a way that looks across the three dimensions of sustainable development. The comparative advantage of the UN in norm-setting, capacity building, knowledge creation and sharing, and partnership building, makes it poised to address such priorities¹³ as well as many other areas where sustainable development can be supported and strengthened.
35. Governments attach great importance to UN support in the area of sustainable development. In a survey conducted for the QCPR in 2012, “environment and sustainable development” was ranked by governments as the most important area among the UN’s contributions at country level. For example, 93 (out of 111) governments were of the view that the UN was especially significant in this area. 80 per cent of the governments that responded to the same survey also singled out “environment and sustainable development” as the most critical area of the UN’s assistance in the next four years. As a result, both Rio+20 and the QCPR invite UN entities to further enhance the mainstreaming of sustainable development into their respective mandates, programmes, strategies and decision-making processes.
36. Nevertheless, governments’ requests for UN support in the area of sustainable development originated overwhelmingly from Ministries of Environment and Natural Resources. Some requests concerned support for green economy strategies, which were largely viewed as an environmental issue. A number of such requests also related to building national institutions able to pursue sustainable development¹⁴.
37. As a result, UN support focused predominantly on the environmental dimension of sustainable development. This emphasis on one dimension misses many potential benefits, such as integrated national planning, human resources development, education, labour/employment policies, among others.

¹³ Synthesis of National Reports for Rio+20: UNDESA and UNDP.

¹⁴ Draft Report of the findings from a survey of UN Country Teams on Rio+20 Themes: UNGD Task Team on Environmental Sustainability, Climate Change and Rio+20, 13 January 2012 - Revised

38. In the area of policy development, the UN development system has gained experience in supporting countries to develop nationally-owned strategies with clear goals and targets such as the MDGs, and other internationally agreed targets. These efforts - which have mainly been limited to social issues - provide useful experiences and lessons for the broader integration of all three dimensions of sustainable development. A 2012 survey of UN Country Teams on Rio+20 themes revealed that a number of country teams had successes in helping countries include some aspects of sustainable development dimensions in broader national planning effort¹⁵.

Box 5: The UNDP-UNEP Poverty Environment Initiative (PEI) shows how cooperation in support of governments helps make sustainable development happen in the context of national strategies. In Bangladesh, assisting the ministries of planning, environment, and finance since 2008 has had promising results: 1) poverty-environment-climate issues have been incorporated into key national and sectoral planning documents; 2) a Climate Public Expenditure and Institutional Review has allowed the government to ensure that money spent to adapt or mitigate climate change is allocated the best way; and 3) Proposals seeking public funding in Bangladesh must now demonstrate the percentage of poor people who will benefit, what the impact on natural resources will be, and the extent of resilience of new infrastructure to climate change.

39. In 2012, a significant number of governments reported greater alignment between country priorities and UN Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs). This shows a movement towards integrating priorities and objectives at country level that should aid in furthering sustainable development in countries where planning documents integrate sustainable development¹⁶.
40. In the area of programming, UNDG has defined environmental sustainability as one of the five programming principles to be applied by UN country teams in preparing and implementing UNDAFs. A peer review of UNDAFs signed in 2010 showed that work in this area is fairly narrowly focused on environmental issues/¹⁷. As UNDG is developing new guidelines for preparing UNDAFs, it will be important to ensure that sustainable development- and the need to address its three dimensions - is mainstreamed in all UNDAFs.

Box 6: UNDG

Various mechanisms of UNDG produce detailed operational guidance on specific themes for use across organizations in their country level work. The UNDG Task

¹⁶ Report on the outcome of the surveys conducted for QCPR preparations: (<http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/2012qcpr.htm>)

¹⁷ Synthesis of an interagency peer desk review of 2010 signed UNDAFs, UNDAF programming network, UNDG.

Team on Environmental Sustainability, Climate Change and Rio+20 developed the guidance note on “Mainstreaming Environmental Sustainability in Country Analysis and UNDAF” in 2009, responding to UN country team demand for such a tool. There are also guidelines on integrating climate change¹⁸ and indigenous people’s issues in country analysis and UNDAFs¹⁹. UNDG task teams provide periodic training on such guidance to ensure their effective use in planning and programming including integrated training on environmental sustainability, climate change and disaster risk reduction.

41. Going forward, gaps and challenges that hinder the UN development system to mainstream sustainable development at country level must be identified, addressed and regularly monitored and evaluated. Enhanced coordination within the UN Country Teams is critical in this regard. For example, in the surveys conducted for the 2012 QCPR, nearly 20 per cent of governments and UN Country Teams noted that sustainable development is among the areas that are most susceptible to competition among UN agencies for financial resources.
42. Cooperation of UN Country Teams with International Financial Institutions remains relatively weak. For example, only 5.5% and 3.6% of UN Country Teams members respectively perceived cooperation with the World Bank and Regional Development Banks to be “very effective”²⁰. It is worth noting that environmental protection is one of the areas where such cooperation is taking place and also seen as relatively effective.
43. To overcome fragmentation, the QCPR mandated several measures to improve country-level coordination, for example, strengthening the authority of the Resident Coordinator, harmonizing agency-specific programming instruments and processes in alignment with the UNDAF and better capturing the expertise of non resident agencies.
44. Beyond coordination, UN Country Teams identified others challenges and gaps²¹, including: limited financial and human resources, in both the government and UN Country Teams, and high turn-over in management and project staff; insufficient coordination in governments; lack of knowledge and reliable data/information; sustainable development themes being a low government priority, and the concepts not being well understood; and governments in process of significant change.
45. Correspondingly, a number of suggestions to improve country level service delivery were identified by UN Country Teams²², including: focus on national ownership and capacity enhancement; support greater coordination and information sharing; ensure adequate and predictable resources; establish

¹⁸ http://www.undg.org/docs/11473/UNDG-GuidanceNote_ClimateChange-July2011.pdf

¹⁹ <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=270>

²⁰ Survey of UN Country Teams for 2012 QCPR

²¹ Report of the Findings from a Survey of UN Country Teams on Rio+20 Themes, January 2012.

²² *ibid.*

capacity building programmes within government and the UN to better integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development; and simplify routine organizational procedures and norms for addressing emerging issues.

46. At sub-national level, effective approaches are important to engage people and communities together with local authorities, agencies, and other partners in sustainable development planning processes and implementation systems. This in turn contributes to informing national level strategies, policies and plans.

Box 7: Tools to help support countries in sustainable development

The African Development Bank (AfdB), UN, and World Bank developed a toolkit on inclusive green growth²³. The toolkit combines existing tools, such as environmental fiscal reform and social protection, from all three dimensions of sustainable development and assesses them accordingly.

On integrated water resource management, a global survey was conducted for the 2012 UN-Water report on integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources. It provides guidance for establishing a regular international monitoring and reporting framework to promote sustainable development and water resources management.

The joint UNIDO-UNEP Resource Efficient Cleaner Production programme promotes implementation of resource efficient practices and green technologies in the industrial sectors of developing countries. It operates National Cleaner Production Centres in 41 developing countries.

Box 8: Integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions in national policies

ILO and IMF have piloted the *Social* Protection Floor Initiative in three countries (Mozambique, Vietnam, and El Salvador). Further work is underway in other countries, including Benin, Nepal, and Cambodia.

The IMF helps to design fiscal policy to mitigate greenhouse gases and provides technical assistance to countries interested in environmental tax reform. Fiscal policies have a critical role to play in “getting the prices right” (i.e., incorporating environmental side effects into the prices firms and households pay for energy or transportation, etc.) to promote greener growth.

B. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at the regional and sub-regional level:

47. At the regional level, the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development into the work of the UN system occurs through: 1) intergovernmental meetings and processes of the five Regional Commissions;

²³ <http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/environment-energy/toolkit-inclusive-green-growth/>.

and 2) regional activities of the five UN Regional Commissions' secretariats as well as UN interagency support mechanisms, such as the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM) convened by Regional Commissions and UNDG Regional Teams.

48. Regional Commissions' intergovernmental meetings have an important role to relate international agreements on sustainable development to the regional and national levels. This role is likely to be enhanced by the decision of ECA at its last Regional Implementation Meeting (RIM) to replace the RIM with a "high-level regional political forum on sustainable development" in preparation for future sessions of the high-level political forum on sustainable development created at Rio+2024. Regional Conferences of Specialized Agencies have also proven to be effective in mainstreaming policy and programmes as they bring together cross-sectoral and multi-disciplinary actors under a government driven platform.
49. A study done in 2011 on regional dimensions of the UN25 found that the Regional Commission secretariats were seen as multidisciplinary knowledge hubs, making them well placed to support regional intergovernmental processes and actions, and to strengthen UN interagency cooperation and coordination at the regional and sub-regional level.
50. The RCM aims to develop a shared vision on sustainable development in the regions and promote joint implementation of sustainable development commitments and policies, including the Rio+20 outcome, by all UN entities active in the regions. The RCM, is also used to strengthen coordination among the work programmes of UN system organizations at regional level. UNDG Regional Teams provide leadership, strategic guidance and support to Resident Coordinators and UN Country Teams for the achievement of country level results. The GA has asked resident coordinators and UN Country Teams to draw from the normative support work and policy expertise that exists within the Regional Commissions, and requested the regional commissions to further develop their analytical capacities to support country-level development initiatives²⁶. This makes it all the more important that Regional Commission secretariats integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions - and their interactions - in their analytical work.
51. In recent years, work at the regional level has moved towards supporting a more integrated approach to development. Some Regional Commissions are coordinating around themes, including those directly related to sustainable development (e.g. ECLAC Joint Action Plan with UNASUR on social issues, energy infrastructure, and other issues). More integrated thinking is also being seen in some regional publications. Innovative tools are also being developed,

²⁴ (E/ECA/CFSSD/8/4/Rev. 1, para 12(a))

²⁵ *The Regional Dimension of Development and the UN System*, a study sponsored by the UN Regional Commissions, November 2011.

²⁶ A/res/67/226, op.150

such as ESCWA's indicators for sustainable development, used to gauge alignment with the three dimensions of sustainable development, or the joint ECE-Eurostat-OECD framework for the measurement of sustainable development.

52. All the Regional Commissions have been promoting the development of environmentally sustainable economic agendas as a path for development in their respective regions. Since the 2005 Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific, ESCAP has been promoting green growth, sustainable urbanization, energy security and water resources, and supports Asia-Pacific's sustainable and green future.
53. Regional Commission secretariats play an important role in the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development into the work of the UN. However, they currently maintain sectoral divisions and committees, making the integration of the three dimensions into their work challenging. There is an awareness of this obstacle and plans to evolve structures in at least the Asia Pacific region. Others, like ESCWA, are having sectoral divisions lead on multi-sectoral issues, such as its social division leading on SMEs and capacities to sustain rural livelihoods and employment. ESCWA's workplan for 2014-15 is more integrated than previous years because of increased inter-divisional consultations.
54. The 2011 study mentioned above identified a need for better integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. Its recommendations include: the need for a coherent regional strategy for development; further develop the RCMs as vehicles for policy and programme coordination at both the level of heads of agencies and at senior officials' level; and greater coherence and cohesiveness between the work of RCMs and Regional UNDG teams.
55. The 2011 study also²⁷ identified a significant degree of engagement by UN organizations with non-UN regional intergovernmental bodies and entities. This helps to inject a sustainable development approaches in other fora and enrich the UN's approach based on learning from other experiences.

C. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at the global level

1. Intergovernmental bodies

56. At the global level, the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development into the work of the UN system should be bolstered by the guidance of the General Assembly, ECOSOC and its subsidiary bodies, UN

²⁷ *The Regional Dimension of Development and the UN System*, a study sponsored by the UN Regional Commissions, November 2011.

Environment Assembly of UNEP and governing bodies of UN system organizations.

57. A cursory review of a few intergovernmental decisions in recent years however shows that consideration of sustainable and/or integrated development approaches has not been systematic.
58. The GA considers sustainable development issues in both its Second and Third Committees. The Second Committee considers the economic dimension of sustainable development. It has a dedicated item on sustainable development. The Third Committee focuses on the social dimension. Interaction between the two committees is however limited, which hinders the ability of the GA to give impetus to integrated policy making.
59. ECOSOC is the UN body where the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow up to major UN conferences in the economic, social and environmental fields occur. Yet it remains a challenge for the Council to look at the three dimensions of sustainable development in all its outcomes. The on-going consultations on ECOSOC strengthening are an opportunity to gear the Council and its subsidiary machinery towards “achieving a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development”²⁸.
60. Ensuring coherent intergovernmental guidance on sustainable development is complicated by each UN system organization having its own governing body. Decisions in executive boards of funds and programmes and governing bodies of specialized agencies also often do not systematically integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development
61. Such considerations led the Rio+20 Conference to launch a major change in the institutional framework for sustainable development. It emphasized the need to improve implementation, coordination, coherence and integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development.
62. A cornerstone of this reform was the decision to establish a high-level political forum (HLPF) on sustainable development. Intergovernmental negotiations are on-going on the format and organizational aspects of the work of the HLPF. Without prejudging their outcome, it is clear that the forum could give impetus to integrating sustainable development as an overarching framework to the work of all UN system intergovernmental bodies and organizations.
63. This would help Member States to send a unified message to UN system organizations, including through their respective governing bodies, on the need to take an integrated approach to economic, social and environmental policies and actions.

²⁸ Paragraph 83 of the Rio+20 outcome document

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64. The forum should also help to integrate the work of UN Environment Assembly of UNEP, which represents the environmental dimension of sustainable development, within its own work and other strands of intergovernmental work
65. There is also a need to find effective ways for the UN Secretariat and the whole UN system to support the work of the forum. Sustainable development should be consistently reflected in the analytical work of the UN in support of the HLPF. Disaggregated data collection and analysis is also needed to develop a better understanding of the trade-offs and synergies generated by an integrated approach.
66. Lessons from the past twenty years of inter-agency coordination, be it the IACSD or coordination around clusters of issues or the ECESA Plus model, could help design a new structure to support preparations, follow-up and implementation of the forum's work.
67. ECOSOC and the forum should also ensure appropriate accountability of the UN system to Member States on how it supports sustainable development²⁹ also reflecting the interaction between government priorities and UN support. While ECOSOC already has this role vis-à-vis the UN operational activities, the forum could also be the space for undertaking an overall review around specific themes or goals.
68. The work of the forum needs to be reinforced by ensuring that the GA and ECOSOC and its subsidiary machinery address sustainable development as an organizing principle of their work. Governments as members of the governing bodies of the UN system also committed to take measures to ensure that organizations mainstream the three dimensions of sustainable development in their operational work³⁰.
69. Ultimately, the success of a revamped intergovernmental framework for sustainable development will be measured by how well the sustainable development approach is integrated in UN support and national policies at the country level.

2. Interagency mechanisms

70. The Chief Executive Board for Coordination (CEB), which brings together the Executive Heads of 29 UN system organizations under the leadership of the UN Secretary-General, is taking specific actions towards integrating sustainable development dimensions within the UN system.
71. The contribution of the CEB and its subsidiary bodies, the High-level Committee on Programmes (HLCP), the High-Level Committee on Management (HLCM) and the UN Development Group (UNDG) can be

²⁹ Resolution 66/288 para 78.

³⁰ Para. 94 of the Rio+20 outcome document

manifold. It can mobilize the UN system's expertise or experience; enable synergies that result from aggregating and coordinating ongoing processes across the UN system; define a framework for addressing longer-term issues; or bring together the normative and operational aspects of sustainable development and help member states to combine them effectively in policy formulation.

72. In October 2012 and April 2013, HLCP addressed the issue of sustainable development in the context of the post-2015 development agenda. The Committee concluded that mainstreaming sustainable development into the work of the UN system would require greater cooperation and collaboration among UN organizations on sectoral, technical and programmatic issues in order for the member states to benefit from the combination of system-wide specialized knowledge and operational expertise.
73. HLCP selected a range of critical sustainable development issues that warrant consideration within the UN system over the next three to five years. Those include population dynamics; migration; land, food and nutrition security; energy, water, climate change and oceans.
74. Within CEB, UN-Energy, UN-Water, UN-Oceans, the High-level task Force on Food Security and the HLCP Working Group on Climate Change work to enhance coherence and coordination among a broad range of UN agencies and other stakeholders in response to specific global sustainable development challenges. UN-Water is in the process of finalizing a joint UN system position in support of possible water-related targets in the SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda. UN-Energy brings UN system organizations together in support of member states' actions by focusing on an integrated approach between energy and other sustainable development factors.
75. Concrete steps towards mainstreaming sustainability in the area of management are also being undertaken by HLCM. In 2013 the HLCM decided that all member organizations will move towards adopting and implementing Environmental Management Systems (EMS) through a gradual, voluntary and flexible process, starting with initiatives that carry low implementation cost. These actions will contribute towards reducing the UN system's environmental footprint through better management practices, improving efficiencies and reduction of operating costs. Significant further savings could be generated, including from integrated waste and wastewater management, construction and vehicle procurement/maintenance (see Box 4).
76. Other coordination mechanisms exist outside the CEB, such as the Environment Management Group (EMG) and ECESA Plus31 which helped to prepare Rio+20 and now works on its follow-up.

³¹ ECESA works through 10 clusters, including one on social development:
<http://www.un.org/en/development/other/ecesa/mission.shtml>

77. The UN also created a Task Team on the post 2015 development agenda and a Technical Support Team on SDGs to support intergovernmental processes in these areas.
78. Interagency structures have played an important role in specific endeavours of the UN system to mainstream major themes in its work (see Box 9), particularly climate change or gender equality. Lessons can be drawn from these experiences for mainstreaming sustainable development.
79. These various efforts have brought about the proliferation of interagency mechanisms and have occasionally posed difficulties in ensuring coherent guidance on integrating the three dimensions, while also limiting the effectiveness of interagency work at the level of individual agencies and in the countries.
80. There may be need for an overarching framework for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at all levels of the work of the UN system - be it policies, programmes or operations management - or analytical, normative, or operational. The sustainability framework developed by the EMG can serve as a basis for moving in this direction provided the economic dimension is integrated. The CEB can have an important role in guiding the development of such a framework.

Box 9: Mainstreaming thematic issues in the work of the UN system

Climate Change

Although often perceived as environmental in nature, the complex challenges of climate change also impact the social and economic sectors, requiring a multi-disciplinary solution speaking to all levels of development activities. From this, multiple points of coordination for mainstreaming climate change considerations have been engaged in the UN system.

The CEB Climate Action Framework endorsed in 2008 seeks to maximize synergies, eliminate duplication and overlap, and optimize the impact of the collective efforts of the UN system in supporting countries in implementing strategies to address climate change. HLCP's Working Group on Climate Change facilitates UN system follow-up to the Action Framework.

Many of the challenges faced at country level have a climate change component. This has become more widely understood through effort to mainstream climate change in country level planning, supported by guidance and training by the UNDG.

Gender

Strengthening gender mainstreaming came as a response to the series of UN conferences on women and gender equality. A UN System-Wide Policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women was endorsed by the CEB in 2006. In response, three inter-connecting and mutually reinforcing mechanisms

have been developed as an accountability framework for implementation:

- A System Wide Action Plan (SWAP) on corporate processes and institutional arrangements at the individual UN entity level. The SWAP was approved the CEB in 2012. Unified annual reporting for the SWAP began in 2013, the results of which will set a baseline for reporting to ensure UN system accountability,
- UN Country Teams Performance Indicators for Gender Equality and the Empowerment of Women, introduced in 2008. The Indicators focus on UN Country Teams performance as a whole, e.g. the quality of the UNDAF including its development and monitoring and evaluation; joint programmes and programming; and capacity development with counterparts.
- Accountability for the UN system's contributions to gender equality development results at country and normative levels. Whereas the SWAP and Performance Indicators focus mainly on processes, this mechanism focuses on actual development results to which the UN system contributes at country and normative levels.

SECTION 5: STRENGTHS, CHALLENGES, GAPS AND OPPORTUNITIES

81. Integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions together with the issues of coherence and coordination, need to be central to discussions of implementing sustainable development. The UN system has extensive knowledge of the three dimensions and a number of innovative collaborations exist. Guidance from coordination mechanisms is strengthening coherence across organizations. However, integrating the three dimension of sustainable development in the work of the UN system, and in its support of Member States and partners, is uneven, and remains hindered by key challenges and gaps.
82. Strengths: A number of broad institutional strengths and accomplishments in integrating sustainable development exist:
- There is a high-level of institutional awareness that an integrated approach to address inter-linkages in development is an important and necessary evolution of the development agenda, and that sustainable development is the overarching framework to make this happen;
 - A comprehensive array of knowledge and skills exist within the UN system that address all three dimensions of sustainable development, strengthened further by strategic partnerships;
 - A series of coordination mechanisms is in place at all levels to support policy coherence and multi-disciplinary approaches – two important building blocks of sustainable development, which should be further

strengthened;

- The UN system takes both a top-down (from strategic plans to programmes) and bottom-up (from country and programme realities to the strategic plans) approach to integrating social, economic and environmental dimensions into its work. Some innovative work has occurred from the bottom up, where the theory of sustainable development is put into practice and institutional learning occurs to continuously improve projects and programs that are driven by national and sub-national needs;
- There are examples of innovative programmes, some in place for over a decade, which integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development.

83. Challenges: Broad institutional challenges were found that limit integrating sustainable development dimensions, including:

- *Unclear and inconsistent terminology and understanding:* A broad common understanding of what it means to translate sustainable development in the work of the UN system is still needed. This would support the development of clear common objectives on sustainable development and help to determine in many cases what has been achieved on sustainable development.
- *Sectoral silos:* The overall institutional arrangements remain shaped along sectoral lines, hindering efforts for a more integrated approach to development. The same challenge persists at the national level with sectoral government ministries. There is a need to change sectoral thinking and pursue integrated practices in the UN system. This will also require a reassessment of needed staff competencies and regular training of staff to ensure that sustainable development translates into their work, be it analytical or operational.
- *Imbalances among the three dimensions:* Cooperation among UN entities in the economic, social and environmental pillars is increasing. But more efforts are needed to collectively help governments develop policies that pursue the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development together. Cooperation between the Bretton Woods Institutions and the rest of the UN system needs to be further deepened building on the good progress made in recent years and months.
- *No process to assess impact or measure progress.* While many processes and mechanisms are in place to help facilitate the integration of sustainable development, there is currently no common capability to assess impact or measure progress of the integration of sustainable development, including into programming and projects.

- *Successes hard to scale-up:* While a number of good examples of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development can be identified, the challenge remains how to scale up those successes.
 - *Knowledge:* Further analysis and guidance is needed for the UN system on how to mainstream sustainable development; this is needed not only at the policy level but also at the project/ programme level to help move policy to practice.
 - *Resource constraints:* Insufficient resources within governments or for the UN system, was an often cited as an obstacle to integrating the three dimensions, fostering coordination, and building capacity
 - *Partnership:* Sustainable development requires an enhanced level of engagement and a more inclusive approach to partnerships, such as including Major Groups³² and other stakeholders as part of the country-level planning process.
84. Overall, lessons can be learned from these various efforts to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development as well as from UN system experiences in mainstreaming other issues or thematic areas into the work do the UN system (see Box 9):
- *Ensure high-level support:* mainstreaming efforts have used entry points at headquarter or country levels. Either way an intergovernmental mandate or decision is needed at some juncture to enable the initiative to scale, sustain momentum, and help attract the resources it needs. It is important that a unified message comes from intergovernmental bodies.
 - *Engage Member States and the UN system with a common purpose at global, regional and country levels:* and work through the interagency machinery to translate that purpose into activities and policies.
 - *Develop a clear methodology, guidance, and/or tools, which includes a clear objective and how to reach it:* though some individual UN entities have developed tools and guidance to further sustainable development in their work, the UN system does not yet have a set of unified measurable objectives for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development. The development of the SDGs should help to address this.
 - *Capacity building* is needed to ensure effective understanding of how to use tools and report effectively. Enhanced analytical work is also needed on how to develop and implement integrated policies.
 - *Establish a common reporting mechanism:* this may be accompanied by a set of indicators to measure progress over time.

³² Major Groups, e.g. business and industry, children and youth, farmers, indigenous peoples, local authorities, NGOs, scientific and technological community, women, workers and trade unions.

5. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

85. Today's development realities challenge the UN system to work across its own structures and mandates and to better integrate economic, social and environmental concerns into its policy, programmatic and operational activities.
86. The report has shown that coordination mechanisms and policies are increasingly in place to support an integrated approach, but that in many cases much more needs to be achieved. Sustainable development has grown from theory to good practice, but the impact of the UN system's interventions have not been systematically captured to aid institutional learning. The breadth of what sustainable development means for the full range of UN system activities has not yet been fully grasped.
87. The development community is on the cusp of an historic opportunity, as a new overarching development agenda and sustainable development goals are being developed. These will play a critical role as guideposts for nationally owned policies, international cooperation and for the work of the UN system. The system has to be ready to support their implementation when they are agreed in 2015.
88. The high-level political forum created in Rio could have a key role in reviewing the SDGs and the post 2015 development agenda and in spurring integrated approach to economic, social and environmental dimensions throughout the UN system bodies and organizations. The UN system must mobilize to support its role in the most effective way.

Recommendations/Next Steps:

89. Within this broad context, a few steps could be taken in the future with guidance from Member States:
 - A roadmap for accelerating the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the UN system would provide a useful framework for action. This could involve recommendations for developing a framework based on the Environment and Social Sustainability framework initiated by the EMG.
 - The Secretary-General could report to the HLPF on progress by the UN system in integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in its work. In general, reporting could start in 2014 and include an account of how the UN system will help the Secretariat to support the high-level political forum and of progress on developing the above mentioned road map. A subsequent report in 2015 could outline a road map and framework for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the

UN system. Following this, the Secretary-General could report every two years on the topic.

- As Member States engage in the development of a new generation strategic plans for 2014-2017 for some of the funds, programmes and specialized agencies, it will be important to bear in mind the recommendations of Rio+20 that governing bodies of the "funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations development system consider appropriate measures for integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions across the operational activities of the United Nations system". The respective secretariats will provide the support needed by Member States to prepare strategic plans that address the three dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated fashion.
- The UN Country Teams have a wealth of guidance notes and related material to draw from in preparing the UNDAFs. As such, the main thematic elements of sustainable development are covered - what is missing is a clear direction emphasizing the integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. As part of its on-going review, UNDG should ensure that the guidelines for the preparation of UNDAFs are aligned with sustainable development principles and supportive of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development. A dialogue with partner governments will be important as UNDAFs are planning frameworks shared with governments and are developed in response to key development plans.