

**Concept note for the Expert Group Meeting on the science-policy interface
New York, 5 September 2013**

Background

A major outcome of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (or Rio+20) was the decision to establish a universal, intergovernmental high-level political forum (HLPF). This forum is to build on the strengths, experiences, resources and inclusive participation modalities of the Commission on Sustainable Development, and subsequently replace the Commission. According to the Rio +20 outcome document¹, the high-level political forum shall follow up on the implementation of sustainable development. It should avoid overlap with existing structures, bodies and entities in a cost-effective manner.

The outcome document also stipulates that the forum could, as one of its functions, “strengthen the science-policy interface through review of documentation bringing together dispersed information and assessments, including in the form of a global sustainable development report, building on existing assessments” as well as to enhance evidence-based decision-making at all levels.

The Secretary-General provided further details in a report issued in November 2012² on what the Division for Sustainable Development in the Department of Economic and Social Affairs will do to support the above intergovernmentally agreed decisions. He indicated that the Division will undertake “in-depth analysis and evaluation of trends and scientific analysis in the implementation of sustainable development, including lessons learned, best practices and new challenges, and cross-sectoral analysis of sustainable development issues”.

The final report of the Secretary General’s High-level Panel on Global Sustainability³, detailed the importance of basing sustainable development policy-making on the best and most up-to-date evidence. In this regard it also elaborates on “Global Sustainable Development Outlook”, which would bring together assessments across sectors.

A UN Task Team has been formed to reach out to scientific communities across the world and to prepare a first edition of the Global Sustainable Development Report in time for the first High-level Political Forum in September 2013. By the time the present expert group meeting is held, the Report will be issued.

¹ A/RES/66/288

² A/67/591 of 27 November 2012 “Revised estimates resulting from the decisions contained in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, entitled ‘The future we want’”² within the agenda item of Programme budget for the biennium 2012-2013, which was endorsed by the General Assembly last year.

³ Resilient People, Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing,
http://www.un.org/gsp/sites/default/files/attachments/GSP_Report_web_final.pdf

Objective

This expert group meeting aims to bring together scientific community and policy-makers to discuss what would be the best ways to strengthen the science-policy interface in order to make policy decision-making more evidence-based and how best to cooperate in this regard.

Programme of the EGM

The EGM will last for one day. It will consist of four sessions and of opening and closing sessions. In each session, interactive discussion among participants will be kick-started by panelists.

Participants

Representatives of Member States, UN system organizations, major groups including the scientific community and academia, and other relevant stakeholders.

Outline of topics to be discussed during individual sessions

The programme will cover the various aspects related to facilitating the interface between the scientific and policy communities. It has been perceived that the way scientific research and data are presented to policy makers is sometimes not easily converted into policy decisions and may not be always relevant to make informed and evidence-based decisions. In order for policy-makers to be able to use scientific research and data in a meaningful way to inform their decisions, there needs to be a two-way communication and interface between the two communities.

This meeting will try to discuss how both communities can better communicate with the ultimate goals to advance sustainable development based on evidence-based policies that can be easily implemented.

Topic 1: Stocktaking of science-policy interface for sustainable development

The Rio outcome document as well as the resolution on the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development specifies that the high-level political forum should strengthen the science-policy interface in order to enhance evidence-based decision making at all levels. The discussion should focus on what the situation is now and what are strengths and challenges in the current situation..

Topic 2: Strengthening the interface between science and policy communities

Scientific communities are large and diverse and they pursue a range of important research as well as develop scenarios. They generate and analyse information and data in different forms and formats and they are not only useful but also essential when making policy decisions. At the same time this information might not be always presented in the best way to be instantly useful for policy makers. Equally scientific communities do not always know what would be most useful for policy makers. The discussion should focus on whether and how scientific communities can analyze policy implications of their findings, how they can present their findings to the policy

communities so that they are digestible and at the same time useful to them in their decision-making. The session could also discuss expectations of the scientific community vis-à-vis policy makers (eg. regarding follow-up and guidance on scientific analysis) and also how policy makers could best articulate what they need from the scientific communities and what would be the most useful way to present the resulting findings and analysis to the policy makers.

Topic 3: Global Sustainable Development Report as an option to strengthen science-policy interface

The resolution on the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum on sustainable development specifies that the forum will strengthen the science-policy interface including in the form of a global sustainable development report and requests the Forum to consider, in 2014, the scope and methodology of a global sustainable development report, based on a proposal of the Secretary General reflecting the views and recommendations from Member States, as well as from relevant UN entities, including the Committee on Development Policy. The discussion should focus on the scope and methodology of a global sustainable development report.

Topic 4: Options for the way forward

Scientific and policy communities do not always communicate with each other and it might happen that they go on parallel tracks on certain issues. Yet scientific knowledge and policy decisions need to work in tandem to find the best solution to current challenges. The discussion should focus on how to improve communication between the two communities so that there is awareness in each community on key current challenges and how scientific knowledge can best support policy responses and how to keep the scientific community engaged.