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Development

Current Ideas on Sustainable Development Goals and Indicators

1. Introduction

This information note provides summary information on the measurement of sustainable development. The focus of the note is on the current suggestions on Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). It brings together proposals and ideas in this regard, especially those, which have been made in the regional, nationally led as well as other contributions to Rio+20.

2. The call to measure and monitor sustainable development

Sustainable development indicators¹ and composite indicators² are considered to be a good vehicle in helping to measure sustainable development and progress achieved in it. Such indicators are meant to present complex data and trends in simplified form to policy makers. They can help to share policy on the basis of information which is transparent and evidence-based.

Currently there is no single, universally accepted definition or assessment metrics for sustainable development. There are no internationally agreed sustainable development indicators that would help monitor progress.

The World Commission on Environment and Development called³ for the development of new ways to measure and assess progress. This need was echoed in Agenda 21⁴ which calls on countries and the international community to develop indicators of sustainable development. The Johannesburg Plan of Implementation⁵ and the UN Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)⁶ encouraged further work on indicators for sustainable development by countries, in line with their specific conditions and priorities⁷.

¹ A statistical measure that gives an indication on the sustainability of social, environmental and economic development.

² A composite indicator is the compilation of individual indicators into a single index, on the basis of an underlying model of the multi-dimensional concept that is being measured.

³ United Nations General Assembly (1987), Our Common Future. Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development, Published as Annex to General Assembly document A/42/427 - Development and International Co-operation: Environment.

⁴ Chapter 40 "Information for Decision-Making"

⁵ Chapter X

⁶ CSD-11, CSD-13.

⁷ CSD-13 invited the international community to support efforts of developing countries in this regard.

The Bellagio Principles for Sustainable Development⁸, developed by a group of experts, discuss the basic principles of monitoring sustainable development. Also the Stiglitz-Sen-Fitoussi-report⁹, an initiative by the French Government, recommends that the international community expedite the development of measurement systems of sustainable development and welfare.

3. Sustainable Development Goals suggestions by member states and other stakeholders

On the substantive issues of Rio+20, several focus areas for priority attention are emerging from member states and other stakeholders in the pre-negotiation phase. Table 1 provides an indicative list based on the first two Preparatory Committee meetings, but member States' and other stakeholders' submissions to the compilation text suggest others.

There is also growing support for the elaboration of a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) at Rio+20, or at least for beginning a process to define with a view to endorsing such goals – possibly as part of the General Assembly-mandated work on a post-2015 development agenda. The SDGs could also become the new basis for redefining the MDGs, building on the experience with the MDGs. Others have suggested that the SDGs could be seen as complementary to the MDGs.

UN Secretary-General Ban Ki-Moon has called for a set of sustainable development goals. In his words, "Let us develop a new generation of sustainable development goals to pick up where the MDGs leave off. Let us agree on the means to achieve them"¹⁰.

The Governments of Colombia and Guatemala¹¹ and the world's civil society organisations (CSOs) have suggested¹² that a key

⁸ Hodge, R.A. and Hardi, P. (1997) The need for guidelines: the rationale underlying the Bellagio principles for assessment. In Hardi, P. and Zdan, T. (editors), Assessing Sustainable Development: Principles in Practice, International Institute for Sustainable Development, Winnipeg, pp 7-20

⁹ The Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress (2009), Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress.

¹⁰ The Secretary General's Report to the General Assembly – "We the Peoples". Speech as delivered, New York, 21 September 2011.

¹¹ Ministerio de Relaciones Exteriores. Republica de Colombia (2011), Rio+20: Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A Proposal from the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala.

¹² Declaration of the 64th Annual UN DPI/NGO Conference (2011), Chair's Text. Sustainable Societies; Responsive Citizens.

**Table 1. Focus areas for priority attention at Rio+20
as articulated by member states and major groups in the PrepComs**

Focus areas for priority attention
1. Green jobs, youth employment and social inclusion
2. Energy access, efficiency, sustainability
3. Food security and sustainable agriculture
4. Water
5. Sustainable cities
6. Management of the oceans, fisheries and other marine resources
7. Improved resilience and disaster preparedness

Table 2. Suggestions of themes for Sustainable Development Goals

The Governments of Colombia and Guatemala	CSOs
Combating Poverty	SDG1 Sustainable Consumption and Production
Changing Consumption Patterns	SDG2 Sustainable livelihoods, youth & education
Promoting Sustainable Human Settlement Development	SDG3 Climate sustainability
Biodiversity and Forests	SDG4 Clean energy
Oceans	SDG5 Biodiversity
Water Resources	SDG6 Water
Advancing Food Security	SDG7 Healthy seas and oceans
Energy, including from renewable sources	SDG8 Healthy forests
	SDG9 Sustainable agriculture
	SDG10 Green cities
	SDG11 Subsidies and investment
	SDG12 New Indicators of progress
	SDG13 Access to information
	SDG14 Public participation
	SDG15 Access to redress and remedy
	SDG16 Environmental justice for the poor and marginalized
	SDG17 Basic health

outcome of the Rio+20-process be the definition and agreement of a suite of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) (*Table 2*). Also, numerous member States and other stakeholders have referred positively to the development of SDGs in their submissions for the Rio+20 compilation text.¹⁴

3.1 The proposal of the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala

In their proposal the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala suggest that Rio+20 should bring an agreement on a set of aspirational sustainable development goals, or objectives, at a broad level. Priority should be given to themes and issues that are considered critical factors in moving forward the sustainable development agenda. This could be based on the assessment of gaps in implementation and of the emerging issues identified in the Rio+20 preparatory process. The result of the conference

¹⁴ To see all the current suggestions on SDGs please see the inputs to the UNCSD compilation document, available at:
<http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=115>.

would be twofold: 1) a definition of the thematic objectives and, 2) an agreement on a mandate to define subsequently (post-Rio) how these goals, or objectives, would be further developed, and on a process that could converge with the revision of the MDGs.

3.2 The proposal of world Civil Society Organisations

The common proposal of world CSOs includes a draft set of 17 SDGs. The set was prepared by a team of experts from 25 organisations¹⁵, and is supported by 1,400 CSOs. Some of the SDGs suggested are based on commitments already made by governments and other stakeholders; others are newly proposed by the CSOs. Each goal includes sub-goals, reasoning and clarifications.

4. Examples of existing sustainable development indicators

Even though there is no universally accepted definition or assessment metrics for sustainable development, indicators and indices for this purpose have been suggested by various stakeholders. These existing sustainable development indicators measure the state of sustainable development at local, regional or national level. Some indicators have been developed to measure whether the goals of strategies or policies are being reached. Some are based on a capital-approach. Satellite-based remote sensing techniques have also been applied¹⁶.

In 1995, in response to the call of CSD, the Division for Sustainable Development and the Statistics Division, both of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs, in close collaboration with experts from international organisations and UN member states, developed a set of 134 national Indicators of Sustainable Development (CSD Indicators)¹⁷. The CSD Indicators and their methodology¹⁸ have since been revised twice, in 2001 and in 2006¹⁹. The indicators reflect the chapters of Agenda 21 and were originally developed on the basis of the

¹⁵ 10 organisations from North, and 15 organisations from South.

¹⁶ For example The Group on Earth Observations (GEO) coordinates efforts to build a Global Earth Observation System of Systems (GEOSS). GEO was launched in response to calls for action by the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development and by the G8 leading industrialized countries.

¹⁷ From 1996 to 1999, 22 countries from across the world voluntarily pilot-tested the indicator set. In order to facilitate this process, the DSD developed guidelines for the implementation of the CSD indicators, initiated a series of regional briefing and training workshops, and encouraged the organization of national workshops and twinning arrangements between testing countries.

¹⁸ UNDESA (2007) Indicators of Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Methodologies. Third Edition.

¹⁹ The current CSD indicators contain a core set of 50 indicators, and these core indicators are part of a larger set of 96 indicators of sustainable development.

pressure-state-response-model²⁰. In 2006 they were modified to reflect themes and sub-themes.

The CSD Indicators are voluntary, and are meant to assist member states in their work of reviewing their existing indicators or developing new indicators to measure progress towards nationally defined goals for sustainable development.

Other UN-entities have also developed national indicators that are directly or indirectly related to sustainable development. For example, UNDP has developed the Human Development Index²¹, UNECA is developing its Sustainable Development Indicator Framework for Africa²², the Joint UNECE/OECD/Eurostat Task Force for Measuring Sustainable Development is finalizing its report²³, UNEP is preparing a measurement framework for its Green Economy initiative²⁴, and the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) is consulting on the indicators for the Aichi Biodiversity Targets of its Strategic Plan²⁵. IAEA in collaboration with other international organisations²⁶, the UN Secretary-General's strategy on Sustainable Energy for All²⁷ and the Global Bioenergy Partnership²⁸ concentrate on goals and indicators that focus on energy.

The OECD recently launched its national Your Better Life Index and a set of indicators for its Green Growth Strategy²⁹. Eurostat

²⁰ Pressure-State-Response-model was developed by the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD). It was first used in the organisation's preliminary set of environmental indicators in 1991. It is based on the fact that humans exert pressures on the ecosystem and the society, which alter their state and call for certain responses. Its primary focus is on ecological aspects although socioeconomic indicators are also of interest.

²¹ The Human Development Index (HDI) is a summary composite index that measures a country's average achievements in three basic aspects of human development: health, knowledge, and income.

²² UNECA (2011) Workshop on Sustainable Development Indicator Framework for Africa, 10 to 11 March 2011 Addis Ababa, Ethiopia. Provisional Agenda.

²³ Due to be released in June 2012.

²⁴ UNEP (2011) Towards a Green Economy: Pathways to Sustainable Development and Poverty Eradication.

²⁵ CBD (2011) Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020. Decision X/2, COP10.

²⁶ IAEA (2005) Energy Indicators for Sustainable Development: Guidelines and Methodologies. Vienna, Austria.

²⁷ The strategy engages governments, the private sector, and civil society partners to achieve three major goals by 2030: achieving universal access to modern energy services; improving energy efficiency; and increasing the share of energy generated from renewable resources.

²⁸ In the 2005 Gleneagles Plan of Action, the G8 +5 (Brazil, China, India, Mexico and South Africa) agreed to launch a Global Bioenergy Partnership to support wider, cost effective, biomass and biofuels deployment, particularly in developing countries where biomass use is prevalent.

²⁹ OECD (2011) Towards Green Growth - Monitoring Progress: OECD Indicators.

uses a set of sustainable development indicators to monitor the EU Sustainable Development Strategy and currently also works in the context of the European Commission's 'GDP and beyond, measuring progress in a changing world' initiative.

Foundations and civil society organisations have developed national indexes such as the Ecological Footprint and Sustainable Society Index. Academia has developed the Sustainability Assessment by Fuzzy Evaluation (SAFE), Happy Planet Index, Environmental Sustainability Index (now the Environmental Performance Index), Genuine Progress Indicator and the Index of Sustainable Economic Welfare. Bhutan developed a Gross National Happiness Index to measure the well being of its citizens.

5. Conclusions, challenges

Sustainable development goals could assist in focusing the broad international sustainable development agenda at a practical level. They could serve as a tool for countries to measure their progress as well as further cooperation between countries. According to the proposal of the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala, Rio+20 could serve as a platform for the international community to identify broad sustainable development objectives and to begin a process of defining concrete goals. This could help in identifying gaps and needs and aid the structured implementation of the principles and goals that were agreed in Rio in 1992.

The international community may also wish to consider including in this SDG discussion the development of a possible set of indicators to measure progress on the SDGs. Indicators have proven useful in measuring progress on the MDGs, for example.

The development of SDGs and indicators is likely to have the best development impact and ownership if they emerge from a transparent, participatory, and consultative process. The development of methodological guidance on the indicators, implementation guidelines on indicators, baselines and an effective reporting framework is equally important. There is merit in using an internationally agreed statistical framework, such as the SEEA³⁰, as the basis for indicators.

Thought must be given to the relationship between SDGs and MDGs in the post-2015 development agenda. The Millennium Declaration will still be relevant beyond 2015³¹. The MDGs have been successful in communicating a complex development

problem to a wider audience and focusing energies and resources. At the same time, sustainable development requires additional efforts in all areas, including those not adequately reflected in the original MDGs.

It has been suggested by many stakeholders that sustainable consumption and production related goals and targets be considered in a set of SDGs – indeed, "changing consumption patterns" is mentioned as a theme in the proposal of the Governments of Colombia and Guatemala. The developed countries' ecological footprints continue to expand, suggesting little tendency so far for delinking of economic activity from environmental degradation.³² While the MDGs applied only to the developing world, the SDGs could build up on the success of the MDG-framework and would apply to the whole world.

The challenge is to develop sustainable development goals that have a wide political and policy appeal and will help focus attention, particularly in the post Rio+20 phase, on monitoring the implementation of Rio+20 outcomes. At the same time these goals need to be sufficiently rigorous to provide a valuable basis for decision making, especially at the national level, and be of use to the national policy community.

The purpose of the Rio 2012 Issues Briefs is to provide a channel for policymakers and other interested stakeholders to discuss and review issues relevant to the objective and themes of the conference, including a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, as well as the institutional framework for sustainable development.

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³⁰ SEEA is developed by the UN Committee of Experts on Environmental-Economic Accounting.

³¹ United Nations General Assembly (2011) Accelerating Progress towards the Millennium Development Goals: options for sustained and inclusive growth and issues for advancing the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015. Annual report of the Secretary-General. A/66/126.

³² UNDESA (2010) Trends in Sustainable Development – Towards Sustainable Consumption and Production: 2010-2011.