

Questionnaire on scope and methodology of a global sustainable development report

Submission by ESCAP/Environment and Development Division

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Scope

1) In your view, what should be the scope of future editions of the Global Sustainable Development Report, in terms of issues, geographic coverage and time horizon, and scientific knowledge?

Further deliberation is needed to specifically define the value added that it brings to the target group. Is it sufficient to target the report only to policymakers – and if yes, how specifically are they expected to use the report? This will define the geographic coverage and time horizon.

Ideally, if the report is supporting the HLPF, it should be built around the post-2015 Development Agenda and reporting on the progress on the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This way it can play a key role in assessing progress and DESA would not have to split its efforts in producing two reports with possibly the same objectives.

It should be stressed that a global SD report should not only cover the environment alone but the integration of social, economic, and environment dimensions of SD. In line with the Rio+20 outcomes, emphasizing coherence and synergy should be ensured. National reports would be an important component of the global SD report as well as the several global assessments produced by various UN agencies. It would be important to build synergies between the UNEP GEO process, FAO assessments, and the global sustainable development report. There is a very high risk of duplication, and conflicting messages and communication of different priorities and trends – to the detriment of building global understanding and consensus on action. The frequency of the reports may need to be adjusted as the GEO report is produced every five years.

2) What are the key national, regional and global priority issues that you would like to see reflected in the global report?

For Asia and the Pacific region: Resource-intensity of economic growth patterns and resource constraints, jobless growth, inflation, income disparities and inequality, energy and food insecurity, rapid urbanization and the growth of slums, natural disasters. Please refer to paragraphs 7 to 26 of the paper prepared by the ESCAP secretariat for the third session of ESCAP's Committee on Environment and Development in October 2013: http://www.unescap.org/esd/CED/CED-3/documents/english/CED3_1E.PDF for a more detailed discussion of key sustainable development challenges in the region.

3) Should the report have a role in identifying new and emerging issues? If so, how to identify these issues?

Yes. This is an important function if the report is to serve as the main input to HLPF deliberations.

4) Should it report on past and future trends, report on policy lessons-learned, and/or report on scientific findings indicating potential areas for policy action?

Same answer as no. 3.

5) Should the report be part of the monitoring and accountability framework for sustainable development goals and the post-2015 development agenda?

Yes. As we stated above, it is important not to split efforts and split resources in producing two reports with possibly the same objectives.

6) What should be the periodicity of the report?

We recommend that it be produced every four years, in line with the HLPF schedule of meeting under the auspices of the GA. No significant differences in trends can be detected if the report is produced more frequently and it will lose its impact.

Methodology

7) How should the preparation of the global report be organized? How should the thematic focus of a given edition be decided? What would a preparation process look like? Who should be involved and how?

The UN system should make considerable effort, as requested, by Rio+20 to streamline its work. Governments, regional commissions and other entities are also called on to provide national reviews to be presented to the HLPF and similar reviews may also be required under the 10 year Framework for SCP and other processes: how will these relate to the national contributions to the global report. It is recommended that DESA instigate a process that will bring all these reports together. Inputs from the multilateral banks should be also mobilized.

It should be decided whether national contributions are needed – requiring a better understanding of the objectives of the report, and how/whether the emphasis on a science-policy interface can be supported through national (politically-vetted) contributions. National contributions may be organized by UNDP through the Resident Coordinator system but based on an agreed methodology. These reviews should ideally be government driven, but participated in and evaluated by civil society. They should not be confined to the environment ministries but should be part of a multi-stakeholder national development planning process.

The global report should take into account regional assessments of progress that are *likely* to be developed in line with the Regional Commission's role of supporting regional preparatory meetings to the HLPF, with DESA helping to guide the methodology of regional assessments of progress. The effectiveness of the CSD process and the validity of the regional perspectives provided by the RIMs was reduced because the regional assessments were additional to the national reports provided directly to the CSD secretariat, without being presented to, or considered by the RIM. The regional flavour would be added by the stakeholder involvement in evaluating the assessments, adding qualitative information, and highlighting emerging issues. Capacity development support to assist countries in developing national reports should be organized at the regional level, ideally through the Regional Commissions.

National, regional and subregional state of the environment reports are produced with the support of UNEP, and also in support of the process of preparing the Global Environment Outlook under UNEP. The global sustainable development report should also benefit from sub regional and regional inputs under other processes.

Existing reports should also be further examined for possible synergies – for example the periodic regional state of the environment and development report produced every five years for the ESCAP Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development. The reports are available online:

<http://www.unescap.org/esd/environment/regional-reports/index.asp> and the next edition is due in 2015. Another good example to consider is the ESCAP-ADB-UNDP partnership that has regularly produced reports tracking progress of the region towards the MDGs.

8) Which principles and scientific methods should be employed in preparation of future editions of the global report?

Capturing multi-stakeholder perspectives, including those from civil society organizations, should be one of the core principles. Data-based assessments of progress could be supported by qualitative assessments on the same goals by various stakeholders. This is important because as the experience of the MDG shows, the data often mask different realities.

Institutionalization of the reporting system is also important. The production of most sustainable development-related reports has been primarily driven by UN sustainable development conferences, as well as by reporting requirements of multilateral environmental agreements (MEAs). Although these processes receive some level of financial and technical support from the same UN agencies, reporting has been ad-hoc and there has been no continuity from one reporting period to the next. Databases are re-constituted every time a report needs to be produced and because environment ministries normally spearhead the reviews, SD remains an environment issue rather than as a fundamental development issue that should be the concern of the whole government. It is recommended that DESA establish linkages with UNEP Live and the statistical infrastructure maintained by the RCs to provide the data infrastructure for the report.

The production and presentation of the report should be *innovative* to the extent possible. It needs to align with the way that various stakeholders receive and use information and lends itself to a more dynamic and updating process (as necessary).

What happens in between reporting periods is also important. We suggest that issues within the scope of the report should be discussed via online platforms on an ongoing basis. This is something that ESCAP and DESA may pursue together.

9) What would be the best way to organize national and regional contributions to the global report? Would a network of national and regional focal points and regular consultations with them be useful?

It would be useful if DESA can organize a participatory process of defining a template for national reporting. The template should be agreed by countries and backed up by capacity building efforts which may be organized by RCs and other UN agencies in collaboration with DESA. On the part of ESCAP, its sub-regional offices should be also involved in defining the process of national SD reporting.

The national reports could be presented to the APFSD and other regional platforms organized by the RCs. ESCAP is interested in organizing a regional synthesis report based on the presentations of national reports. This process could take into account the lesson learned from the RIMS (please refer to our response to question 7). The RCs can also stimulate peer-to-peer competition to enhance the quality of national reports. Countries with substantial experience in reporting at the global forums could be tapped to share their experience with other countries as part of the capacity building efforts that the RCs could organize with DESA support. But additional resources have to be provided for capacity building support to national reporting.

On the question of focal points: National focal points tend to be useful in getting the reports done but there is also a danger that the reporting process gets too closely associated with specific personalities rather than being viewed as a product of a participatory process. Too often, this has been the tendency at

the national level with the reporting on multilateral environmental agreements. It would be more effective to form a multi-stakeholder committee to steer the preparation of national reports. Participation of stakeholders beyond government actors could be also enhanced by issuing guidelines on minimum standards of participation by civil society and other Major Groups. Periodic multi-stakeholder dialogues/consultations should be organized through online platforms.

10) What concrete steps do you propose to involve scientists from your country and region in the global report? Which institutions, communities or networks should be mobilized? Should a scientific advisory group be constituted?

The GEO process has long experience of trying to strengthen the science-policy interface, including involving modelling, which can be built on. Similarly, UNESCO should have a key role in producing the report, recognizing its role in relation to the scientific community. These organisations and processes should be strategically brought together to discuss how to build coherence between various reporting activities, in line with Rio+20 mandates to the UN system. Regional Commissions may be consulted to recommend institutions, communities or networks that they are already working with on sustainable development issues.

Existing institutions, communities or networks that may be mobilized for the report include:

- The IPCC model, and/or the UNEP model in which eminent expert panels are established on certain issues, can be examined – or ideally, these existing panels can be brought into the process directly without creating new bodies
- UNESCO's networks and communities should have a key role in producing the report, recognizing UNESCO's role in relation to the scientific community.
- University and civil society networks (global and regional networks) should be engaged
- The IPCC model, and/or the UNEP eminent expert can be brought into the process directly for strong UN system synergies and a credible process. (Ideally, DESA should create new networks and communities only in areas which are within its direct area of competence)

Mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the participation of scientific communities in developing countries.

In many countries, government consultation with civil society has increasingly become a widely- accepted practice over the years. A similar norm could be promoted to encourage policymakers to consult scientists in decision-making and to create scientific forums around specific policy questions.

11) Should all countries institute a national sustainable development report process? If so, how?

A national sustainable development report would be a valuable national exercise only if countries can use it as a genuine process for reflecting on their progress and drawbacks towards achieving SD rather than as a process for complying with international requirements. Hence further consultations with countries should be carried out to determine how a national sustainable development reporting process could support and align with their national efforts to mainstream sustainable development.

Countries may be requested to report on common indicators to allow comparison – and these should be supportive of the Sustainable Development Goals reporting. However, they should be also given enough room to define a national reporting process that would be useful for their own purposes. While we recognize that the capacity of a number of countries to report on a number of development indicators has been enhanced primarily through the MDG reporting process, it is important to recognize that the process

of national reporting should be accompanied by a thorough capacity building process, which would be led by DESA and the Regional Commissions. For example, requesting countries to report on common indicators should be accompanied by efforts to build the capacity of national statistical systems to respond. They should be part of the discussion from the outset in order to ensure that the country could produce the agreed common indicators and if not, their capacity building needs should be identified and addressed through regional/international cooperation.

Care should be taken to avoid creating multiple burdens on governments related to the same process. As the UNDAF process is well accepted at the national level, DESA may want to examine further how it would serve the purposes of mainstreaming SD and national contributions, if the process was strengthened/redesigned to meet more than one purpose.

In the long-term, the regional HLPF process should promote a culture of 'organically' linking any national SD report process to national development planning processes or other processes in which countries reflect on their national priorities and assess progress. For example, it could be carried out in conjunction with (or as a part of) the review of mid-term development plans that countries normally carry out on a regular basis as a component of the plan. The timeline of the development plans (3-5 year plans) more or less matches the frequency of the meeting of the high-level sessions of the HLPF.

It is assumed that when the SDGs are agreed, countries will be required to report on those goals. Any national report should be brought together with this. Initiating a sustainable development reporting process should be accompanied by a plan for involving the national statistical system actors (national statistical services and statistical desks of various ministries, academic institutions, research institutes), universities, research institutes/NGOs, in a more systematic way rather than as merely suppliers of information.

12) How should the report inform the work of the High-Level Political Forum? In agenda setting? In providing scientific analysis of issues on the HLPF agenda? In follow-up analysis of implementation of decisions taken?

If the report is accepted as the main input to the HLPF, then it should be multi-purpose to serve the functions listed above. As we also mentioned under Q1, it is recommended that DESA avoids splitting its efforts in producing various reports with possibly the same objectives (i.e. inform the HLPF discussions).