

## Thematic Reviews in the 2030 Agenda: the case for a review of natural resources

Ivonne Lobos Alva & Dr. Jes Weigelt, Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) in Potsdam, Germany\*

### **Follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda will be crucial to its success**

With the entry into force of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) on 1 January, 2016, the countdown to their achievement was also set in motion and one crucial element to determine the success of implementation will be the follow-up and review of the agenda. The envisioned effective, participatory and integrated follow-up and review framework will help countries *“maximize and track progress in implementing this Agenda in order to ensure that no one is left behind”* (UN GA A/RES/70/1 2015, Para 72). At the global level, the UN High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is expected to follow up on the implementation of sustainable development and discussions are underway to determine the best design for the HLPF to fulfil this role.

One main challenge ahead is managing to effectively take on an integrated approach for the implementation and review of the SDGs. In order to move beyond single views on goals and targets in the 2030 Agenda, there is a need for an integrated approach that looks in a cross-cutting way at the SDGs and ensures that advances in single goals do not hinder progress in others.

### **Interlinkages between the SDGs require an integrated approach**

Chapter 2 of the Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) 2015 presented the SDGs as an integrated system of goals. The chapter distinguished integration across the three

dimensions of sustainable development for any substantive issue; integration across substantive areas of what is to be developed or sustained; and integration across a wide range of geographic and time scales. The chapter presented the possibilities to look at the interlinkages between SDG topics from a scientific perspective and laid out the foundations that justify this approach based on sustainability negotiations had since the creation of the United Nations (UNDESA, 2015).

An analysis of the interlinkages between the SDGs needs to address not only the positive correlation between goal and targets but also potential conditionality and trade-offs. In 2015, the Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS) conducted research on the SDGs and related targets that depend on soil and land resources. This study looked at the expected and projected demand and available supply by contrasting required production of biomass with available total land resources (IASS, 2015).

The study revealed that available land resources, especially considering expected rises in demand and an intensified production, are not enough to achieve the SDGs. The relation of the SDGs to land allowed highlighting key interlinkages between the goals. For instance, achieving SDG 2 (food security) will require a major increase in food production in the near future, notwithstanding the fact that hunger and malnutrition are to a considerable degree problems of distribution and access, which also have to be accounted for. SDGs 7 on (energy) and 13 (climate change) imply a rising and

competing demand for soils in the context of its function to produce bioenergy and as a carbon sink. Along these lines, SDG 15 (protecting ecosystems) implies that land resources will be ever more crucial in the context of nature conservation (ibid).

UNEP's International Resource Panel and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) have come to similar conclusions with their research (UNEP, 2015a). An important issue resulting from all these studies is the need to account for interdependency dynamics that different sustainable development targets might entail. Tackling the SDGs, with 17 different goals and 169 targets, requires coordinated action that takes into account the co-benefits and trade-offs between the interlinked goals.

#### **Thematic reviews to address crosscutting issues in an integrated way**

Conducting thematic reviews follows the plan of action of the 2030 Agenda. It has been put forward to organize a “*systematic follow-up and review of implementation of this Agenda over the next fifteen years*” (A/RES/70/1 2015, Para 72). In particular, the Agenda 2030 calls for global thematic reviews to be conducted under the High Level Political Forum. Given the need for a more integrated approach, thematic reviews would allow for a crosscutting review of the goals and targets in order to achieve the 2030 Agenda as a package and not by looking at progress on individual goals. Designing the follow up and review mechanisms in a way that provides a platform for dialogue will facilitate the necessary learning processes in support of successful implementation of the 2030 Agenda. This highlights the importance of stakeholder involvement in order to carry out effective reviews and foster accountability practices. Holding thematic reviews would open new opportunities

for joint activities amongst UN Agencies, scientists and research institutions and civil society to strengthen alliances and foster collaboration. Thematic reviews would furthermore integrate co-production of knowledge in science for decision-making.

#### **A thematic review on natural resources (land and soil)**

A systematic follow-up and review of the SDGs will require the effective selection of topics for thematic reviews. Acknowledging that thematic reviews should be conducted for several key issues, this brief makes the concrete case for a thematic review of natural resources, more specifically soil and land, as they will underpin the achievement of several of the SDGs and are facing increasing and at times competing demands.

Soil and land resources, in particular, are the basis of many biological cycles and therefore indispensable for food production, for the global climate and for the ecologic vitality of many ecosystems and the services they are providing for all of us. Beyond their ecological function, soil and land play a key role from a social and governance perspective. As the source of food and income for millions around the world and especially for smallholders, the prevailing tenure regime strongly influences whether livelihoods are sustainable or vulnerable. The recent wave of land grabs and weak governance of tenure in many countries emphasizes the necessity to safeguard the legitimate rights of vulnerable and marginalized women and men around the globe. Soils require an integrated approach that addresses these intertwined ecological, social and economic challenges.

Links to soil and land can be found throughout the SDGs. Soil and land resources support the goals and targets related to poverty eradication, food

security, climate change, and the protection of terrestrial ecosystems – just to name a few. At the outset, it might seem that soil and land resources will be protected through the achievement of SDGs related to sustainable agricultural production or ecosystem conservation. However, as a whole, the SDGs will place increasing – and at times competing – demands on soils and land.

A thematic review for soil and land would need to include the linkages to other natural resources as well. The 2015 GSDR found that global assessments mostly address social, environmental and economic aspects of the SDGs to a different degree within the same assessment (UNDESA, 2015). There is a need for integrated assessments of crosscutting issues that relate to the achievement of several SDGs simultaneously.

Synthesizing relevant work on this topic, upcoming reports and assessments can contribute with information on some of the issues that would be relevant to a thematic review. For instance, upcoming reports include a global thematic assessment on land degradation and restoration by IPBES which is currently in the scoping phase and scheduled to be available by 2017 (IPBES, 2015); the upcoming study of the global initiative the Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity of Agriculture and Food, which's office is hosted by UNEP (UNEP, 2015b); the third edition of the World Atlas of Desertification which is being compiled by the Joint Research Centre of the European Commission, in partnership with UNEP (EC JRC, 2015); the Status of the World Soil Resources report, as one of the outputs of the Global Soil Partnership and of which the first edition was launched on 4 December 2015, with updates scheduled in 5-year intervals (FAO, 2015); UNCCD's Global Land Outlook report which is currently in the development phase (UNCCD, 2015); and the Economics of Land Degradation

assessments (ELD Initiative n.d.). All of these initiatives will help advance the knowledge on land and soil resources and if pulled together also with further partners and initiatives, they can make an even stronger contribution to a thematic review of soil and land.

#### **Issues for further consideration by policy makers**

The success of the 2030 Agenda will be built on its transformational character. Conducting thematic reviews is one step in the right direction. Please consider:

- Supporting thematic reviews under HLPF as a tool for an integrated approach to implementing and reviewing the SDGs.
- Supporting collaboration and cooperation between UN Agencies, scientific institutions and civil society to conduct thematic reviews.
- Supporting a thematic review for natural resources, more specifically soil and land, as crosscutting issue.

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