Embedding the Environment in Sustainable Development Goals

Executive Summary

World leaders at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable development which embraces economic progress, social development, and environmental protection for the benefit of all. One of the principal outcomes of Rio+20 was the call to develop a set of universally applicable sustainable development goals (SDGs) that carefully balance the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. This Paper provides advice and guidance on how environmental sustainability can be incorporated in the SDGs. It is intended to stimulate a dialogue on environmental sustainability and the SDGs rather than be the last word on the subject.

Lessons Learned from Current Goals and Targets

While countries recommended that the SDGs take a forward-looking approach, they also suggested that the new goals be based on experiences from current international goals and targets. With that in mind, it has been observed that particularly successful goals are ...

- built on general support from society and a scientific consensus regarding the urgency of the problem;
- embedded in effective institutional and political frameworks and governance regimes that ensure implementation and compliance;
- made easier to implement because of the availability of solutions; linked to specific and measurable targets.

On the negative side, a major barrier to their success has been fragmentation with respect to design (by neglecting the interconnectedness of goals, especially the linkages between their environmental, social and economic aspects) and the lack of coordination between design, implementation and monitoring.

Other lessons coming from experience with MDG 7 and other goals suggest that new goals and targets should cover a wider range of important environmental sustainability topics than currently covered, and that these topics should be closely linked with socio-economic developmental goals. In addition, it might be more effective in some cases to devise goals that target the core driving forces behind a problem rather than the problem itself.
A Framework for Embedding Environmental Sustainability in the SDGs

Building on lessons from existing goals, a framework is suggested for embedding environmental sustain-ability into SDGs. This framework includes the following:

The first part of the framework is the rationale and overarching vision for the SDGs, which is a narrative describing the basis for including environmental sustainability in SDGs.

The second part is an integrated approach for embedding the environment in goals and targets. This approach includes:

1. A complementary set of goals and targets – An important principle for selecting goals and targets is that they should reinforce and complement each other, firstly, by ensuring that they cover all of the main objectives of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development; and secondly, by ensuring that they work together to maintain and restore the biological diversity and ecosystem services necessary to meet social and economic objectives.

2. Integrated goals – It is suggested to fill the top level of the SDGs with a limited number of integrated goals that are simple to understand, but not necessarily simple in nature. The goals would be “integrated” in the sense that they embody all three aspects of sustainable development – environmental, social and economic.

3. A mix of targets – Each of the integrated goals should be underpinned by a mix of targets – some integrated, and some “non-integrated” (in the sense that they concentrate on either environmental, social or economic objectives). The preference is for integrated targets because they can incorporate the interlinkages between environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development, and have other strengths. However, targets must also be specific and measurable. If integrated targets cannot meet these criteria then “non-integrated” targets may be more appropriate. Hence, a mix of targets.

The third part of the framework is a set of criteria for embedding environmental sustainability in SDGs. The criteria can be used to assess goals and targets already proposed in the SDG discussion process, or to formulate new goals and targets that can be put into the SDG discussion process.

The six criteria are:

Criterion 1. Strong linkage with developmental goals. Within the SDGs environmental issues should be strongly linked to socio-economic developmental issues. The SDGs should “incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their interlinkages” (Rio+20 Outcome Document). Perhaps the most fruitful way to couple environment and socio-
economic development within the SDGs is to formulate integrated goals and targets, as previously described.

Criterion 2. Decoupling of socio-economic development from escalating resource use and environmental degradation. Goals and targets should be formulated to promote the decoupling of socio-economic development from unsustainable depletion of resources and increasing environmental impact. They should encourage and support steadily improving resource efficiency through more efficient production and recycling, reducing waste, and modifying unsustainable consumption patterns.

Criterion 3. Coverage of critical issues of environmental sustainability such as important irreversible changes in the global environment. The final set of selected goals and targets should cover as many critical environmental sustainability issues (current and imminent) as possible. Priority should be given to objectives that help avoid critical “irreversible” changes of the global environment.

Criterion 4. Take into account current global environmental goals and targets. This can be done by: (a) using current goals and targets as a “ground floor” for new goals and targets; (b) incorporating a small number of important current goals and targets whose implementation can be accelerated if they are included in the SDGs

Criterion 5. Scientifically credible and verifiable. Goals and targets should be based on best scientific understanding, and support should be available from the scientific community to monitor and implement them.

Criterion 6. Progress must be “trackable”. All goals should be backed by specific and measurable targets and indicators.

The final part of the framework is advice on best practices for selecting indicators to support SDG goals and targets. This advice includes recommended characteristics of indicators, such as:

- The set of indicators for monitoring SDGs should be limited in number and coherent, i.e. consistent and complementary to each other within and in between goals.
- They should be understandable, clear and unambiguous in their interpretation.
- They should be specific and measurable.
- They should be clearly linked to the target and be robust in providing measures of progress towards targets.
- They should be relevant to policy making and should change in response to policy interventions.
- Where possible, they should be linked to recognized cost-effective tracking and monitoring systems to establish their credibility and comparability.
- They could include both absolute and relative changes in order to give a more complete picture of performance.
Strengths of the framework

In sum, the framework proposed for embedding environment in the SDGs brings the following benefits:

Integrated goals, as opposed to single dimensional goals, achieve a higher level of integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. They will help ensure that all dimensions of sustainable development are well represented in the set of SDGs.

Integrated goals, with at least some integrated targets, will encourage governments and other institutions to move away from the silo approach to solving challenges of sustainable development.

Giving the environment an equal footing to social and economic considerations within the framework shows that environmental sustainability is a foundation for socio-economic development. It encourages a type of development that minimizes unintended environmental consequences and strengthens adaptation and resilience to environmental and other changes.

It is hoped that this framework and other ideas presented in the Paper will promote a fruitful collaboration between the environmental community and the many other constituencies working to develop SDGs.