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An integrated approach to goal-setting for sustainable development

Background

The 2012 Rio+20 Conference was an important stocktaking of the world's progress towards sustainable development. One key Rio +20 outcome was the call for an intergovernmental working group to develop sustainable development goals (SDGs) with the technical support of the UN system. An important message was that this new set of goals should carefully consider and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development. Many diverse stakeholders have since then proposed different types of SDGs.

Recently, the Secretary-General issued a report to the 68th GA session, which emphasizes: "that a new post-2015 era demands a new vision and a responsive framework. Sustainable development — enabled by the integration of economic growth, social justice and environmental stewardship — must become our global guiding principle and operational standard." A single, balanced and comprehensive set of goals and agenda, universal to all nations, would aim to eradicate all forms of poverty and integrate sustainable development in all its dimensions, balancing the economic, social and environmental dimensions in a way which will be aspirational, transformational, inclusive and universal in nature.

With the decision of member states on a set of SDGs still at least a year away, the need for a systematic framework for deciding on such a set of integrated goals cannot be overemphasized. It is a complex undertaking on which little significant scientific work has been done.

As part of undertaking its role to promote a strong science-policy interface, a mandate that was reinforced at Rio+20, UNEP has been consulting with the scientific community, governments and other stakeholders on how a set of goals that balance social, economic and environmental dimensions and their interlinkages could be constructed for effective implementation and monitoring progress. One of the results of this effort is a discussion paper to stimulate debate on the conceptual framework both in the context of the ongoing intergovernmental and inter-agency processes on the Rio +20 outcome and the post-2015 agenda.

A Framework for Embedding Environmental Sustainability in the SDGs

Discussion Paper 1: *Embedding the Environment in Sustainable Development Goals* proposes an integrated approach to goal setting for sustainable development. It outlines the lessons from history on goal-setting, highlighting that particularly *successful* goals are: built on general support from society and a scientific consensus regarding the urgency of a 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; and linked to specific and measurable targets.

Building on lessons from existing goals, the integrated approach framework proposes:

A ***rational and overarching integrated vision for the SDGs***, which would be a narrative describing the basic principles that underlie the goals. Environment is a prerequisite for socio-economic development. Poverty eradication cannot be achieved without sustainable development, and sustainability cannot be achieved without poverty eradication. But the relationship between development and the environment has not been favourable up to now since the payment for a higher standard of living has been the steady depletion of natural

resources and increasing environmental impact. A key challenge for the SDGs, then, is how to “decouple” socio-economic development from this overuse of resources and growing environmental degradation.

An **integrated approach the SDGs**, which the following characteristics and type of goals and target:

- *Complementary set of goals and targets* – goals and targets should reinforce and complement each other by ensuring that they cover all of the main objectives of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development.
- *Integrated goals* – the top level of the SDGs should be filled with a limited number of integrated goals that are simple to understand, but not necessarily simple in nature. Such goals should embody all three aspects of sustainable development – environmental, social and economic.
- *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 framework proposes six **criteria** for assessing or proposing goals and target for the SDGs, which are that goals and targets should:

- i. Have a strong direct link to socio-economic issues leading to greater wellbeing and poverty eradication.
- ii. Be able to decouple socio-economic development from escalating resource use and environmental degradation, by encouraging resource efficiency and sustainable consumption and production.
- iii. Include environmental problems which are critical, growing in intensity, and/or cause irreversible changes in the global environment.
- iv. Take into account global environmental goals and targets already agreed internationally since we cannot afford to backtrack on current commitments.
- v. Be scientifically credible and verifiable.
- vi. Be “trackable” – progress towards achieving the goals should be measurable taking into consideration that some goals may require new indicators, and new data collection efforts.

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

Conclusion

Discussion Paper 1: *Embedding the Environment in Sustainable Development Goals* is available for comment at: <http://www.unep.org/pdf/embedding-environments-in-SDGs-v2.pdf>. It is the first of a limited number of similar papers on which UNEP is working in support of intergovernmental processes. The papers are a contribution towards meeting the decisions of the Rio +20 outcome to: promote the balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development; apply result-oriented approaches to all relevant cross-cutting issues, while considering the interlinkages among key issues and challenges, and to take a systematic approach at different relevant levels to address the challenges.