

UN SYSTEM TASK TEAM ON THE **POST-2015 UN DEVELOPMENT AGENDA**



**Building on the MDGs to bring
sustainable development to the
post-2015 development agenda**

Thematic Think Piece

ECE, ESCAP, UNDESA, UNEP, UNFCCC

The views expressed in this paper are those of the signing agencies and do not necessarily reflect the views of the United Nations.

May 2012



Following on the outcome of the 2010 High-level Plenary Meeting of the General Assembly on the Millennium Development Goals, the United Nations Secretary-General established the UN System Task Team in September 2011 to support UN system-wide preparations for the post-2015 UN development agenda, in consultation with all stakeholders. The Task Team is led by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and the United Nations Development Programme and brings together senior experts from over 50 UN entities and international organizations to provide system-wide support to the post-2015 consultation process, including analytical input, expertise and outreach.

Building on the MDGs to bring sustainable development to the post-2015 development agenda

1. Sustainable development as the foundation of the next development agenda?

The 2000 Millennium Declaration and the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals heralded unprecedented global efforts towards the reduction of poverty. Significant progress has been made in reducing hunger, maternal and child mortality as well as expanding education and providing water and sanitation. Less encouraging progress has been registered on the environmental front and, even on the social dimensions covered by the MDGs, there is still a long way to go to achieve social wellbeing for all.

Today's world risks exceeding the limits of the earth's capacity in several critical dimensions. Greenhouse gas emissions (GHG), biodiversity loss and ocean acidification are reaching alarming levels. These, together with decreasing availability of fresh water, land degradation and deforestation are undermining the livelihoods of many people, especially those living in absolute poverty. When the natural resource base is destroyed, sustaining economic and social development becomes increasingly difficult and inter-generational equity is compromised.

Sustainable development has been the mandate for the UN system since the 1992 Rio Summit decisions taken by the attending Heads of State/Government. The concept was unique in agreeing that development need not be at the expense of the environment, that environment can be protected via responsible economic development patterns and that this approach would ensure a healthier society in which human beings could fulfil their potential while living in harmony with nature and in relative prosperity. The Rio principles also affirmed the responsibility to ensure our decisions today do not reduce inter-generational equity in access to resources.

A realistic development agenda can no longer neglect the link among the economic, social and environmental dimensions of development. Long-term development will thus require integrated policy making, where social equity, economic growth and environmental protection are approached together.

Achieving this holistic approach will require a break away from business as usual in many fronts, including governance at all levels, policy making, implementation processes and accountability mechanisms. This think piece reviews the MDGs through a sustainability lens and proposes a monitoring framework for measuring and accelerating progress towards sustainable development.

2. Is the MDG framework promoting sustainable development?

The MDGs encapsulate social, economic and environmental aspects, but these three dimensions are represented in the framework in an unbalanced way and without strong linkages among them.

Most goals focus on the social dimension of development, particularly goals 2 to 6 and to a large extent goal 1, covering social issues such as hunger, education, gender equality, child and maternal health and combating major diseases. These Goals are evidently important, but they are also deeply linked with environmental and economic factors, a relation which the MDG framework does not fully reflect. While some linkages are recognized, like the importance of clean drinking water to health, other important health-environment links, such as through the quality of air people breathe, are not. Reducing hunger and ensuring long-term food security is also dependent on maintaining environmental resources – land, water, etc – through sustainable agricultural practices and sound water management, as well as keeping food waste to a minimum. Education is also a crucial vehicle to foster the changes of lifestyles needed to achieve the sustainable patterns of consumption and other behaviour required to ensure the needs of future generations will also be met.

Environmental aspects are addressed under Goal 7 – Ensure Environmental Sustainability – but only a small subset of issues is covered, omitting key issues for sustainable development such as desertification and land degradation, management of natural resources, etc. The targets are on the loose side and not well grounded in a scientific assessment of environmental constraints, even for indicators for which data are available such as those on fish stocks, protected areas, water resources and carbon emissions (and other GHGs).

Goal 8 addresses key instruments in the implementation of sustainable development, such as finance and technology and partnerships for development. Key instruments not covered include innovative forms of financing, technology goals beyond ICT and capacity building. The MDG framework triggered successes in specific areas. However, by neglecting interlinkages and synergies, it promoted development efforts implemented in isolation with inadequate consideration of the potential impacts on ecosystems and on other environmental, social and economic dimensions.

Furthermore, the MDG framework was explicitly designed as a framework to support human development in developing countries and in particular among the poor. Apart from providing a framework for mobilizing resources from the international community and donor countries – as reflected in Goal 8 – the goals are by and large not applicable to developed countries (apart from indicators for energy efficiency and CO₂ emissions under Goal 7 Target 7.A). However, the explicit responsibilities of developed countries, in particular in relation to consumption and production patterns, and its consequences for intra- and inter-generational equity are central to sustainable development.

3. How to bring sustainable development to the post-2015 development agenda?

While there is need to continue to strive for a complete success in achieving MDGs, there is also an urgency to turn the vision for sustainable development into a set of goals for global action after 2015. The world community must avoid repeating the mistake of presenting sustainable development mainly as an environmental issue.

A future development agenda will have to address the complexity of sustainable development and the linkages among its multiple dimensions, while recognizing that human development and a healthy planet go hand in hand. Thus three criteria should guide the integration of sustainable development in the post-2015 development framework:

- Aim at universal and equitable human development (minimum social thresholds) while staying within a safe operating space of the planet (ecological ceiling);
- Balance and integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions to promote synergies and avoid trade-offs favouring one dimension over the others;
- Reflect the complexity of sustainable development in its multiple dimensions while keeping a concise, simple, focused monitoring framework.

A possible monitoring framework

Taking the MDG framework as a basis, points 1-3 above could be addressed by the following two options, which can be combined together as illustrated in Figure 1:

- Option A: To select summary measures to monitor progress in the economic, social and environmental dimensions

Summary measures can be used to provide an overall picture of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. By combining several aspects into a single measure, certain of these measures better reflect the multidimensional character of sustainable development than simple indicators, and the combination of them can provide a more complete picture of trends in all three dimensions of sustainable development. It will then be possible to assess which policies promote synergies better, i.e. those leading to improvements across the three measures.

Summary measures giving a full picture of each of the dimensions are not readily available. For instance, measures like GDP per capita focus on some economic

aspects, the human development index (HDI)¹ provides a socio-economic summary, and the ecological footprint² provides a partial picture of natural resources use.³

Future work would need to identify the best indices to better measure each dimension, economic, social and environmental. For illustration purposes, Figure 2 shows HDI versus the ecological footprint. Countries with low HDI but within the sustainable ecological footprint values need to improve social development, whereas countries with high HDI values but with high ecological footprint need to reduce their environmental impact. This chart makes it clear that sustainable development will require efforts by all countries, by all countries, taking into account different national realities.

- Option B: To integrate the MDGs (or an updated version) into a larger sustainable development framework, reflecting economic, social and environmental dimensions MDGs 1-6 may be updated and reorganized around poverty reduction and the social pillar, consolidated into fewer goals and targets reflecting access to education, employment, health, food, shelter, water and sanitation. This initial set can then be complemented with goals/targets on: (i) key priority areas reflecting economic/environmental dimensions essential for the achievement of these updated MDGs; (ii) key areas not covered by the MDGs. In the selection of the goals/targets, the aim is not to be exhaustive (the measures of option A should already be comprehensive) but rather to select high priority areas in need of urgent action or areas which can trigger improvements in a wide number of areas (e.g. measles vaccination usually leads to increased immunization also for other diseases). Cross-cutting issues such as equity/equality, gender equality and

1 Since 2011, its calculation uses life expectancy, years of schooling and income per capita, using a geometric mean which values progress across the three factors and penalizes success in only of the factors at the cost of the others.

2 Measures the human demand on the biosphere using indicators on natural resource use (crops, fish for food, timber, grass for livestock feed, CO2 emissions).

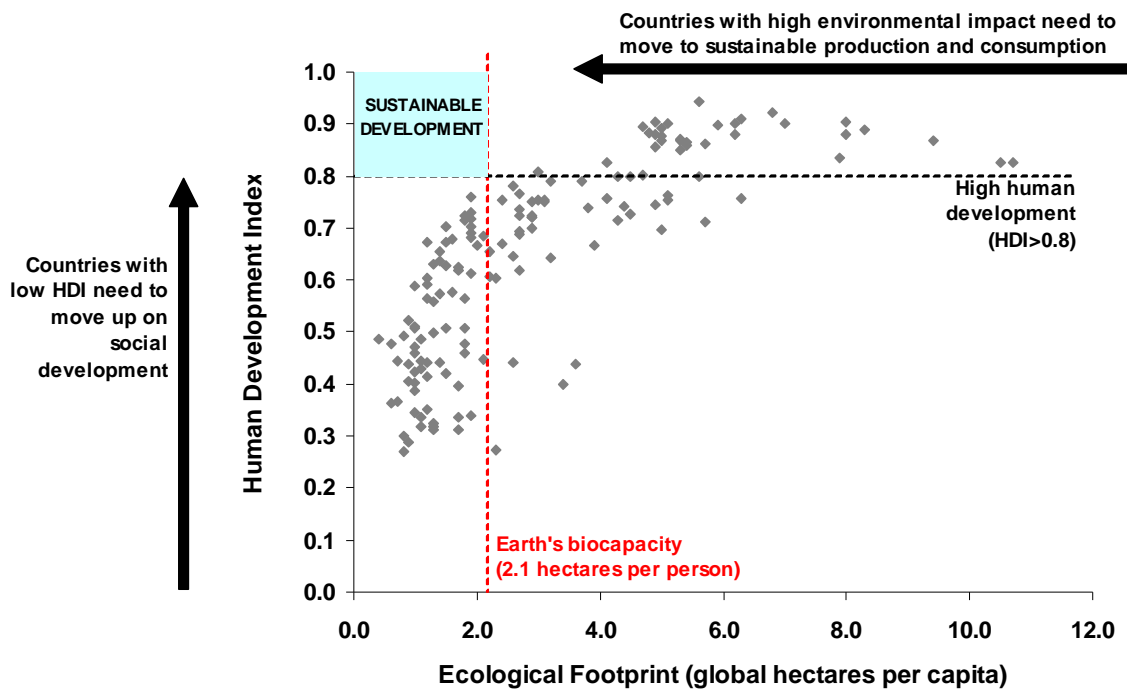
3 There's a plethora of measures which have been suggested to monitor social development and environmental protection/impact on the environment, like the Better Life Index, Living Planet index, Environmental Performance Index, etc. The HDI and the ecological footprint are included here for illustrative purposes. A careful study will be necessary to identify the best measures which provide a comprehensive summary of each dimension. Even the well accepted GDP, does not reflect aspects like debt and inflation are absent from GDP. The HDI and the ecological footprint are even less comprehensive, covering only a few aspects of respectively social and environmental dimensions, omitting issues like e.g. access to shelter or biodiversity.

women’s empowerment, climate change adaptation and sustainable consumption and production (SCP) may be reflected across goals and targets.

Figure 1. Options for a monitoring framework

Social development measure	Economic development measure	Environmental impact and management measure
↓ Cross-cutting issues	Goals and targets addressing all dimensions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • updated and reorganized MDGs • key economic and environmental areas linked to the MDGs • other key areas not covered in the MDGs 	

Figure 2. HDI versus Ecological footprint, 2007⁴



Themes for the goals

During the preparatory process for Rio+20 and in the submissions to the zero draft of Rio+20, eight priority areas have been highlighted for sustainable development goals (SDGs): sustainable consumption and production patterns; food security and sustainable agriculture; sustainable energy for all; water access and efficiency; oceans; sustainable

⁴ Data accessed on 5/3/2012 from: <http://hdr.undp.org>

cities; green jobs, decent work and social inclusion; and disaster risk reduction and resilience. Apart from these themes, the report of the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability also suggested climate change and biodiversity.

The SG's Sustainable Energy for All initiative with its targets on energy access, energy efficiency and share of renewable energy has also been attracting increasing attention as a successful integration of the economic, social and environmental aspects.

To the extent that achieving sustainable development goals requires incurring additional costs, at least during an initial period, a development agenda may also need to address the equitable distribution of those costs.

Integrating and balancing the social, economic and environmental dimensions

The three dimensions can be reflected across goals or within the same goal. For example, a goal for eradicating hunger could consider under the same goal food security (social), efficient use of water and land (economic) and decreased environmental degradation and waste in food production and consumption (environmental). In the same way, a goal on sustainable energy for all might encompass the three dimensions of sustainable development by considering targets for energy access (social), energy efficiency (economic), and use of renewable sources (environmental). Alternatively, an overarching goal on sustainable management of natural resources could encompass targets on water efficiency and energy efficiency (economic), clean energy and use of non-renewable sources (environmental), land use and soil fertility, sustainable management of forests (reflecting multidimensional aspects). Some themes, like energy, disaster risk reduction and resilience, or adaptation to climate change, are naturally linked to several dimensions. Other goals may be purely on one of the dimensions, like goals on health or education which address social issues.

Defining targets

Targets should be realistic and yet ambitious to move the development agenda forward:

- Social targets: Aiming at universal access to basic human needs – food, water and sanitation, shelter, sustainable energy, education and health – appropriate timeframes should be identified to meet social targets.
- Environmental targets: There is a body of research on environmental constraints which could inform the identification of necessary environmental targets.
- Economic targets: Economic targets on the efficient use of resources will have to be balanced by targets aiming at containing the rebound effect, i.e. an increase in consumption due to lower prices resulting from increased efficiency.
- Equality/equity targets: Inequality can be addressed by targets on universal access (equal access to all) where appropriate (e.g. access to sanitation, education, health). Access targets could also be set for specific groups (gender, urban/rural, wealth quintile). Summary measures of inequality could also be used to monitor progress towards equality.⁵

The identification of targets should take into consideration the inter-linkages among the economic, social and environmental dimensions. In other words, the targets should be balanced to avoid trade-offs and promote synergies across the three dimensions. For example, a target on universal access to energy should be balanced by a target promoting clean energies so that the social and economic gains of energy access are not achieved at the detriment of the environment. Similarly, targets promoting clean energy may lead to an initial increase in energy prices – such targets should then be complemented by targets which promote access to affordable energy by all.

4. Key intergovernmental processes and milestones

Two parallel processes currently exist, one discussing sustainable development goals (SDGs); another on the post-2015 development agenda which is trying to identify a suitable agenda for after 2015. The idea of SDGs has been discussed within the Rio+20 process and addressed by the UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability; some member States have suggested the creation of expert groups after Rio+20 to define the

⁵ Measures like the share of the poorest quintile in national consumption or the Gini coefficient have been used to measure income inequalities. Other more comprehensive summary measures have also been suggested, like the human opportunity index developed by the World Bank or the Gender Inequality Index developed by UNDP.

goals. The post-2015 development agenda is being discussed within the UN system Task Team which is expected to produce a report by May 2012; the UN SG High-Level Panel on the Post-2015 Agenda will pick this process up from July 2012 onward; and the discussion may be part of the 2013 MDG Review.

Key inputs, processes and milestones until 2015:

- UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability: Produced a report on January 2012 calling for the development of sustainable development goals.
- Rio+20 Conference 20-22 June 2012: The preparatory process has been discussing a possible set of goals to monitor and accelerate sustainable development.
- UN System Task Team on the post-2015 development agenda: Established in December 2011; a report is expected by May 2012.
- UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on the post-2015 development agenda: Expected to be established after Rio+20.
- UNDP national consultations on 2015 development agenda: expected to start in 2012.
- UNGA 2013 MDG Review
- UNGA 2015 MDG review

Member States have repeatedly called for a single process. Indeed, one single development agenda is essential to ensure focus on the MDGs till 2015 and optimal coordination around one agenda after 2015. With the forthcoming Rio+20 Conference which may advance recommendations on SDGs, the convergence of the two processes faces some challenges – in particular, if any themes/goals are agreed upon at Rio+20:

- What will be the role of these new themes till 2015? Will they divert attention from the MDGs?
- Without the whole picture of the post-2015 development agenda, is there a risk to get stuck with themes/goals which may not to be the best ones to include in a post-2015 development agenda?

There have been calls to limit the agreement in Rio+20 to a process to define the goals without touching on the themes themselves. Another option would be to agree on a set of tentative sustainable development themes/goals for further consideration after Rio+20 and within the post-2015 development agenda. In particular, themes which have wide support

could be advanced. This pre-selection of themes could also indicate those themes for which further studies on feasible goals/targets and associated costs will be needed.

The several inputs of the different post-2015 processes (see box above) will also need to be coordinated and brought together possibly by an appointed body. This coordination will be essential to avoid the risk that a post-2015 framework becomes too diffuse with a multiplication of goals and targets, contrary to the perceived conciseness of the MDGs and to ensure the social and poverty eradication agenda continues to feature centrally in a broadened post-2015 sustainable development framework.

UN System Task Team on the Post-2015 UN Development Agenda

Membership

Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA), Co-Chair

United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Co-Chair

Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD)

Department of Public Information (DPI)

Economic Commission for Africa (ECA)

Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)

Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)

Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP)

Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA)

Executive Office of the Secretary-General (EOSG)

Food and Agricultural Organization of the United Nations (FAO)

Global Environment Facility (GEF)

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

International Civil Aviation Organization (ICAO)

International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD)

International Labour Organization (ILO)

International Maritime Organization (IMO)

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

International Organization for Migration (IOM)

International Telecommunication Union (ITU)

Joint United Nations Programme on HIV/AIDS (UNAIDS)

Non-Governmental Liaison Service (NGLS)

Office of the Deputy Secretary-General (ODSG)

Office of the High Commission for Human Rights (OHCHR)

Office of the High Representative for the Least Developed Countries, Landlocked Developing Countries and Small Island Developing States (OHRLLS)

Office of the Special Advisor on Africa (OSAA)

Peace building Support Office (PBSO)

United Nations Children's Fund (UNICEF)

United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD)

United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD)
United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO)
United Nations Entity for Gender Equality and Empowerment of Women (UN Women)
United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP)
United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC)
United Nations Fund for International Partnerships (UNFIP)
United Nations Global Compact Office
United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR)
United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-HABITAT)
United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)
United Nations International Strategy for Disaster Reduction (UNISDR)
United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)
United Nations Millennium Campaign
United Nations Office for Outer Space Affairs (UNOOSA)
United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS)
United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC)
United Nations Population Fund (UNFPA)
United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)
United Nations Research Institute for Social Development (UNRISD)
United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination Secretariat (CEB)
United Nations University (UNU)
United Nations Volunteers (UNV)
United Nations World Tourism Organization (UNWTO)
Universal Postal Union (UPU)
World Bank
World Food Programme (WFP)
World Health Organization (WHO)
World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO)
World Meteorological Organization (WMO)
World Trade Organization (WTO)