United Nations A/68/79–E/2013/69

General Assembly
Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
9 May 2013

Original: English

General Assembly
Sixty-eighth session
Item 19 of the preliminary list*
Sustainable development

Economic and Social Council
Substantive session of 2013
Geneva, 1-26 July 2013
Item 6 of the provisional agenda**
Implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences and summits

Mainstreaming of the three dimensions of sustainable development throughout the United Nations system

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The present report analyses efforts made by the United Nations system in mainstreaming the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in its work, as mandated in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex). It points to a range of initiatives in that regard, while also identifying challenges and gaps. The report points to the following key building blocks for the further integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development:

- Commitment at the highest level of the United Nations system bolstered by clear and coherent intergovernmental guidance
- Stronger coordination and policy coherence
- Enabling culture of wider coordination both within the United Nations system and with external partners
- Accountability and transparency
- Adequate institutional support within the United Nations system
- Building analytical capacities, new competencies and tools to support developing countries
- System of continuous learning and improvements in practice

* A/68/50.
** E/2013/100.

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• Mobilization and allocation of resources to drive sustainable development.

The report makes the case that integrating the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development more systematically will enhance the capacity of the United Nations system to support Member States in taking forward the United Nations post-2015 development agenda and sustainable development goals.

I. Introduction

1. At the Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil in June 2012, the Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives reaffirmed the commitment of the international community to sustainable development. Their vision is one where the pursuit of a more sustainable future for all guides the actions of Governments and non-State actors and engages all members of society.

2. In paragraph 3 of the Rio+20 outcome document (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex), the Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives acknowledged the need to further mainstream sustainable development at all levels, integrating economic, social and environmental aspects and recognizing their interlinkages, so as to achieve sustainable development in all its dimensions.

3. In paragraph 93 of the outcome document, the Heads of State and Government and high-level representatives called for the further mainstreaming of the three dimensions of sustainable development throughout the United Nations system and requested the Secretary-General to report to the General Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council, on the progress made in that regard.[1] The present report responds to that mandate.

4. The report takes stock of how the three dimensions of sustainable development — economic, social and environmental — have been integrated in the work of the United Nations system to date. It highlights the successes and challenges encountered so far, with a view to identifying lessons to strengthen United Nations system support to Member States. It serves as a preliminary stocktaking and highlights the work ahead.

5. Section II of the report touches on the implications of the concept of sustainable development for integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations system. Section III briefly examines how individual United Nations entities are working to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development in their work. Section IV takes stock of existing efforts by the United Nations system as a whole to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development across the national, regional and global levels of the system. Section V sheds light on the strengths of the United Nations system, future challenges and lessons derived from experiences to date. Section VI sets out a few recommendations to inform future efforts.

II. Implications of translating sustainable development into the work of the United Nations system

6. The goal of sustainable development is to ensure the promotion of an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable future for the planet and for present and future generations. Sustainable development emphasizes a holistic, equitable and far-sighted approach to decision-making at all levels. It rests on

[1] In paragraph 91, they also emphasized the need to further enhance the mainstreaming of sustainable development in the respective mandates, programmes, strategies and decision-making processes [of United Nations system organizations] in support of the efforts of all countries, in particular developing countries, in the achievement of sustainable development.

integration and a balanced consideration of social, economic and environmental goals and objectives in both public and private decision-making. It emphasizes intragenerational and intergenerational equity.

7. A sustainable development approach broadens the frame of reference and community in which development issues are understood, decisions are taken, and implementation is executed and evaluated.

8. Poverty eradication is an indispensable requirement for sustainable development. Today, 20 years after the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, sustainable development has established itself, at least conceptually, as the overarching development framework for making that happen.

9. The Rio+20 outcome document includes a call to further system-wide coherence and coordination (para. 78); strengthen operational activities for sustainable development (paras. 94 and 95); and looks inward, to improve the management of facilities and operations, by taking into account sustainable development practices (para. 96).

10. The outcome document contains a range of specific actions for Governments to undertake with the support of the United Nations system. The United Nations system has developed a framework to share responsibilities among various organizations in supporting Governments in implementing those mandates.[2]

11. The work of the United Nations includes support to the forums where the international community reflects on policy, agrees on norms and guides development cooperation. The United Nations thus has a unique role and responsibility to help in the pursuit of sustainable development through its analytic, normative, policy and operational work.

12. Individual United Nations system entities must therefore strengthen measures and efforts to ensure the mainstreaming of economic, social and environmental dimensions at the level of strategies/policies, programmes/projects and administration/operations. They must also work collectively to support integrated policymaking at the national, regional and international levels. Sustainable development also requires new partnerships and a different way of monitoring and communicating results to Governments and stakeholders. Coherent guidance from Member States is important to steer efforts in that regard, particularly through United Nations system intergovernmental processes.

13. Not all United Nations system policies and programmes have economic, social and environmental dimensions; however, it is important that the potential economic, social and environmental implications of policies and programmes be carefully considered. This is essential in order to avoid unintended impacts, conflicting policies or unsustainable outcomes. It also enables the United Nations system to identify synergies and possible triple-win opportunities. At a time of dwindling resources for development cooperation, it is imperative to maximize the co-benefits of each action.

14. However, moving this concept into practice is not easy. It means transformational change that challenges the status quo and a system designed under a different development model. It requires a fundamental rethinking of the way the

[2] See http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/followupbyunsystem.html.

United Nations conceives its analytical, policy and operational work. With more than 20 years of experience in sustainable development activities around the globe, the United Nations system and its partners are still learning how to consistently and effectively support integrated approaches and overcome structural and other challenges.

III. Mainstreaming sustainable development within United Nations system entities

Building on the United Nations environmental and social sustainability framework

15. Efforts to gear the United Nations system towards sustainable development can take as a point of departure the framework for advancing environmental and social sustainability in the United Nations system.[3] This framework was developed in 2011 as an inter-agency initiative through the Environment Management Group. By better assessing the implications of the Organization's choices and actions, it provides a platform from which to strengthen the sustainability of (a) strategies and policies; (b) operational activities through programmes and projects; and (c) administrative decisions of the United Nations system, such as facility management. The framework was conceived to help better understand how the complex array of United Nations undertakings influence one another in terms of environmental and social impacts and outcomes.[3] It does not cover the economic dimension. The present report builds in part on the approach and entry points developed as part of this framework.

16. Since the first Rio Conference in 1992, the United Nations system has endeavoured to evolve its support to policy development, its operational activities and its ways of working, so as to better help countries to move towards sustainable development paths.

17. Many United Nations system organizations have undertaken efforts to integrate sustainable development from their overarching multi-year strategic plans down to the programme/project level. Others have employed bottom-up approaches, with experience from the national and subnational levels informing wider strategic planning. Box 1 below highlights examples of the approach taken by the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat), the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), the International Labour Organization (ILO) and the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO).

Box 1
Examples of the approach taken in integrating the three dimensions in strategic planning

UN-Habitat took a bottom-up approach to mainstreaming sustainable development by starting at the subnational level in 1992 with the Sustainable Cities Programme. In 2002, it produced a paper on sustainable urbanization that was a turning point for the organization. Integrating the

[3] See http://www.unemg.org/IssueManagementGroups/EnvironmentalandSocialSustainability/ESreport/tabid/102177/Default.aspx.

three dimensions of sustainable development was extended up through planning and programme policies until sustainable development became the underlying principle of the UN-Habitat medium-term strategic and institutional plan for the period 2008-2013 and again in the upcoming plan for the period 2014-2019.

The ILO Strategic Policy Framework for 2010-2015 has green jobs and decent work as a cross-cutting theme. ILO is expected to be better able to advocate and advise on sustainable development in such areas as:

(a) Assessing and realizing the potential for green and decent jobs in national and local policies and development strategies; and

(b) Maximizing the employment effect and enhancing the coverage and effectiveness of social protection for all.

UNESCO is currently in the process of defining its next medium-term strategy, to be adopted by member States at the thirty-seventh session of the General Conference in November 2013. Two overarching objectives are proposed: (a) Peace: contributing to lasting sustainable development; and (b) Contributing to sustainable development and the eradication of poverty. UNESCO's entire programme would thus be geared towards those objectives.

In its strategic plan for 2008-2013, the goal of UNDP in the area of environment and energy is the strengthening of national capacity to manage the environment in a sustainable manner while ensuring adequate protection of the poor. Specific results have been achieved, notably in (a) mainstreaming environmental and energy issues in development planning; and (b) building local capacity to better manage the environment and deliver services, especially water and energy.

18. At the same time, a review of the strategic plans of a few organizations shows that some make references to the importance of sustainable development in broad terms. Their objectives, expected results and reviews generally focus on the sectoral area of work of the organization without systematic reference to related dimensions of sustainable development. The ongoing development of a new generation of strategic plans for funds and programmes and a few specialized agencies is the occasion for deeper, more systematic and more meaningful integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. This would also be consistent with the guidance of Rio+20 and the General Assembly quadrennial comprehensive policy review of United Nations system operational activities for development on integrating sustainable development in United Nations operational activities.

Box 2
Understanding the interactions between the economy and the environment

In 2012, the Statistical Commission adopted a System of Environmental-Economic Accounting Central Framework. This is the first international standard for environmental-economic accounting. This

standard, specific extension pertaining to energy, water, and land and ecosystems could be instrumental in addressing a number of Rio+20 outcomes.

The World Bank is working on several approaches that seek to strengthen sustainability at the country level by moving beyond gross domestic product (GDP) to evaluate economic performance, including genuine savings and wealth accounting. This effort is being bolstered by the Wealth Accounting and Valuation of Ecosystem Services (WAVES) Partnership.

19. The General Assembly quadrennial comprehensive policy review of United Nations system operational activities for development has pointed to ways of using operational activities to help Governments to embark on sustainable development paths. The next step is implementation (see section IV.A below). To do so, however, organizations need to more systematically apply sustainability conditions such as safeguards and find triple-win approaches that support progress across all three dimensions of sustainable development.

20. A number of organizations, including the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), the International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD), UNDP, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the World Bank, have made progress in developing tools such as environmental and social sustainability frameworks and assessment tools that incorporate sustainable development considerations into their policies and programmes (see box 3 below).

21. However, an inter-agency review of United Nations practices related to environmental and social impact assessments[3] revealed that the lack of a system-wide standard has produced an ad hoc approach with varying levels of thoroughness and rigour. Further, there appears to be a varied understanding of the purpose and benefits of applying environmental and social sustainability measures as well as different expectations of what such measures can deliver.

Box 3
Integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions in programmes and projects

UNDP has updated its Programme and Operations Policies and Procedures in order to prevent and manage potential risks to the environment and people at the earliest possible planning stage. The objective is also to identify opportunities to strengthen support to development planning processes.

FAO employs environmental impact assessment procedures to ensure that its field operations are consistent with its 16 governing principles. These principles address various aspects of environmental and social impact, such as the management of biological diversity for food and agriculture.

The BioTrade Initiative of the United Nations Conference on Trade and Development (UNCTAD) promotes production and trade in goods

and services derived from native biodiversity. Over 19 countries are involved in the BioTrade Initiative, which provides a potential source of jobs and income, export diversification, and rural development and improved livelihoods of rural and local communities.

In its monitoring and evaluation of projects, the World Bank uses core sector indicators to measure a project's sustainability with respect to infrastructure, environmental resource management, urbanization and social development. It is also reviewing its results measurement system for concessional financing.

22. Efforts have also been made to assess the environmental impact in United Nations system facilities and operations practices, including travel, procurement and the use of information technology (see box 4 below).

23. The United Nations climate neutrality strategy initiated and, to some degree, coordinated system-wide reporting and greening activities. However, it is still largely up to individual agencies to implement significant greening schemes. The development of a system-wide environmental management system, recently endorsed by the High-level Committee on Management, should help to coordinate revisions of operational modalities that are required across the system (see box 4 below).

Box 4
Reducing the carbon footprint of the United Nations

Major efforts to reduce the carbon footprint of the United Nations have been undertaken by the UNEP Sustainable United Nations facility, which coordinates and supports the implementation of the United Nations climate neutrality strategy.

To date, five United Nations organizations have achieved climate neutrality through a combination of emissions reduction and offsetting: the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (Climate Change Secretariat), the United Nations Office for Project Services (UNOPS), UNEP, UNDP headquarters and the World Bank Group.

In April 2013, the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) committed to the development and implementation of environmental management systems in each organization with a goal to further reduce the Organization's footprint (see para. 67 below).

24. A thorough review of the internal structures and workflows of United Nations system organizations would be needed in order to better understand how to overcome the sectoral boundaries that hinder achieving a more integrated approach. Divisions or offices on sustainable development often exist in parallel to sectoral divisions. It is important to understand how such structures can best work together, along with strategic planning units, in ensuring that consideration of all three dimensions of sustainable development takes place throughout the organization.

25. Regardless of whether adequate structures are in place, staff at all levels often lack the capacity and resources to truly undertake integrated approaches in supporting analytical work, policy development and operations.

26. Overall, sustainable development is not only about ensuring that economic, social and environmental perspectives are reflected in the strategic planning process of United Nations organizations but that together, these perspectives form a holistic way of "doing business", a process of thinking at all levels that guides the kind of strategic planning and operational choices that follow. The application of an integrated and sustainable approach for decision-making in the United Nations system is currently uneven, revealing an institutional gap between policy and practice.

IV. Sustainable development at the country, regional and global levels

27. At the Rio+20 Conference, it was recognized that coordination among United Nations system entities in the economic, social and environmental areas can enhance United Nations system support to sustainable development. Numerous coordination mechanisms exist and a wealth of initiatives have been undertaken at the national, regional and global levels to integrate the United Nations system's work on the three dimensions of sustainable development. These can be built upon to accelerate the mainstreaming process.

A. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at the national and subnational levels

28. The United Nations system plays an important role in helping countries to define and implement their pathways towards sustainable development. In preparation for the Rio+20 Conference, Governments identified five priority areas for advancing sustainable development: (a) strengthening institutions and governance systems and building capacities for collaboration and coordination; (b) unpacking and operationalizing the green economy in the context of poverty eradication and sustainable development; (c) reinforcing the connection between poverty eradication as an overarching objective and the sustainable development agenda; (d) engaging stakeholders in a meaningful manner; and (e) measuring progress in a way that looks across the three dimensions of sustainable development. Owing to its comparative advantage in norm-setting, capacity-building, knowledge creation and sharing, and partnership-building, the United Nations is poised to address such priorities [4] as well as many other areas where sustainable development can be supported and strengthened.

29. Governments attach great importance to United Nations support in the area of sustainable development. In a survey conducted for the quadrennial comprehensive policy review in 2012, "environment and sustainable development" was ranked by Governments as the most important area among the Organization's contributions at the country level. For example, 93 out of 111 Governments were of the view that the

[4] See Department of Economic and Social Affairs and UNDP, Synthesis of National Reports for Rio+20, 2012.

United Nations was especially significant in this area. A total of 80 per cent of the Governments that responded to the same survey also singled out environment and sustainable development as the most critical area of United Nations assistance in the next four years. As a result, both the Rio+20 outcome document and the quadrennial comprehensive policy review invite United Nations entities to further enhance the mainstreaming of sustainable development in their respective mandates, programmes, strategies and decision-making processes.

30. Nevertheless, requests by Governments for United Nations support in the area of sustainable development originated overwhelmingly from the Ministries of Environment and Natural Resources. Some requests concerned support for green economy strategies, which were largely viewed as an environmental issue. A number also related to building national institutions able to pursue sustainable development.[5]

31. As a result, United Nations support focused predominantly on the environmental dimension of sustainable development. This emphasis on one dimension misses many potential benefits, such as integrated national planning, human resources development, education and labour/employment policies.

32. In the area of policy development, the United Nations development system has gained experience in supporting countries to develop nationally owned strategies with clear goals and targets such as the Millennium Development Goals and other internationally agreed targets. These efforts, which have been limited mainly to social issues, provide useful experiences and lessons for the broader integration of all three dimensions of sustainable development. A 2012 survey of United Nations country teams on Rio+20 themes revealed that a number of country teams had successes in helping countries to include some aspects of sustainable development dimensions in broader national planning efforts.[5]

Box 5
UNDP/UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative

The UNDP/UNEP Poverty-Environment Initiative shows how cooperation in support of Governments helps to make sustainable development happen in the context of national strategies. In Bangladesh, assistance to the Ministries of Planning, Environment and Finance since 2008 has had promising results: (a) poverty-environment-climate issues have been incorporated into key national and sectoral planning documents; (b) a climate public expenditure and institutional review has allowed the Government to ensure that funds for adapting or mitigating climate change are allocated the best way; and (c) proposals seeking public funding in Bangladesh must now demonstrate the percentage of poor people who will benefit, what the impact on natural resources will be, and the extent of resilience of new infrastructure to climate change.

[5] See United Nations Development Group Task Team on Environmental Sustainability, Climate Change and Rio+20, Report of Findings from a Survey of United Nations Country Teams on Rio+20 Themes, 19 March 2012.

33. In 2012, a significant number of Governments reported greater alignment between country priorities and United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks. This shows a movement towards integrating priorities and objectives at the country level that should aid in furthering sustainable development in countries where planning documents integrate sustainable development.[6]

34. In the area of programming, the United Nations Development Group has defined environmental sustainability as one of the five programming principles to be applied by United Nations country teams in preparing and implementing the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks. A peer review of the Frameworks signed in 2010 showed that work in this area is somewhat narrowly focused on environmental issues.[7] Since the United Nations Development Group is developing new guidelines for preparing the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks, it will be important to ensure that sustainable development and the need to address its three dimensions are mainstreamed in all such Frameworks.

Box 6
United Nations Development Group

Various United Nations Development Group mechanisms produce detailed operational guidance on specific themes for use across organizations in their country-level work. In 2009, the United Nations Development Group Task Team on Environmental Sustainability, Climate Change and Rio+20 developed a guidance note on mainstreaming environmental sustainability in country analysis and the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, responding to demands by United Nations country teams for such a tool. There are also guidelines on integrating climate change[a] and indigenous people's issues in country analysis and United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks.[b] United Nations Development Group task teams provide periodic training on such guidance to ensure their effective use in planning and programming, including integrated training on environmental sustainability, climate change and disaster risk reduction.

[a] http://www.undg.org/docs/11473/UNDG-GuidanceNote_ClimateChange-July2011.pdf.
[b] http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=270.

35. Going forward, gaps and challenges that hinder the United Nations development system in mainstreaming sustainable development at the country level must be identified, addressed and regularly monitored and evaluated. Enhanced coordination within the United Nations country teams is critical in that regard. For example, in the surveys conducted for the 2012 quadrennial comprehensive policy

[6] See report entitled "Results of survey of UN Resident Coordinators and members of UN country teams: Preparation for the 2012 Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review of Operational Activities for Development of the United Nations System", available from http://www.un.org/esa/coordination/2012qcpr.htm.
[7] See United Nations Development Assistance Framework Programming Network, United Nations Development Group, Synthesis of an inter-agency peer desk review of 2010 signed UNDAFs.

review, nearly 20 per cent of Governments and United Nations country teams noted that sustainable development is among the areas most susceptible to competition among United Nations agencies for financial resources.

36. Cooperation between United Nations country teams and international financial institutions remains relatively weak. For example, only 5.5 per cent of United Nations country team members perceived cooperation with the World Bank to be "very effective"; in the case of the regional development banks, the percentage was 3.6.[6] It is worth noting that environmental protection is one of the areas where such cooperation is taking place and seen as relatively effective.

37. To overcome fragmentation, the quadrennial comprehensive policy review mandated several measures to improve country-level coordination, for example, strengthening the authority of the resident coordinator, harmonizing agency-specific programming instruments and processes in alignment with the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and better capturing the expertise of non-resident agencies.

38. Beyond coordination, United Nations country teams identified other challenges and gaps,[5] including limited financial and human resources, in both Governments and United Nations country teams, and high turnover in management and project staff; insufficient coordination in Governments; lack of knowledge and reliable data and information; sustainable development themes being a low government priority and the concepts not being well-understood; and Governments being in the process of significant change.

39. Correspondingly, a number of suggestions to improve country-level service delivery were identified by United Nations country teams.[5] These included focusing on national ownership and capacity enhancement; supporting greater coordination and information-sharing; ensuring adequate and predictable resources; establishing capacity-building programmes within Government and the United Nations to better integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development; and simplifying routine organizational procedures and norms for addressing emerging issues.

40. At the subnational level, effective approaches are important to engage people and communities together with local authorities, agencies and other partners in sustainable development planning processes and implementation systems. This in turn contributes to informing national-level strategies, policies and plans.

Box 7
Tools to help support countries in sustainable development

The African Development Bank (AfdB), the United Nations, the World Bank and the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) developed a toolkit of policy options to support inclusive green growth.[a] The toolkit combines existing tools, such as environmental fiscal reform and social protection, from all three dimensions of sustainable development and assesses them accordingly.

A global survey on integrated approaches to the development, management and use of water resources was conducted for the 2012 UN-Water report "UN-Water Global Analysis and Assessment of Sanitation and Drinking Water: The Challenge of Extending and Sustaining

Services". It provides guidance for establishing a regular international monitoring and reporting framework to promote sustainable development and water resources management.

The Joint United Nations Industrial Development Organization (UNIDO)-UNEP Programme on Resource Efficiency and Cleaner Production promotes the implementation of resource-efficient practices and green technologies in the industrial sectors of developing countries. It operates national cleaner production centres in 41 developing countries.

[a] Available from http://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/librarypage/environment-energy/toolkit-inclusive-green-growth/.

Box 8
Integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions in national policies

ILO and the International Monetary Fund (IMF) conducted joint assessments on costing of social protection floors in El Salvador, Mozambique and Viet Nam. Further work is under way in other countries, including Benin, Cambodia and Nepal.

IMF helps to design fiscal policy to mitigate greenhouse gases and provides technical assistance to countries interested in environmental tax reform. Fiscal policies have a critical role to play in "getting the prices right" (incorporating environmental side effects into the prices firms and households pay for energy or transportation) to promote greener growth.

B. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at the regional and subregional levels

41. At the regional level, the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system takes place through: (a) intergovernmental meetings and processes of the five regional commissions; and (b) regional activities of the secretariats of the five regional commissions and United Nations inter-agency support mechanisms, such as the regional coordination mechanism, convened by regional commissions and United Nations Development Group regional teams.

42. The intergovernmental meetings of the regional commissions play an important role in relating international agreements on sustainable development to the regional and national levels. This role is likely to be enhanced by the decision of the Economic Commission for Africa (ECA) at its last regional implementation meeting to replace the meeting with a high-level regional political forum on sustainable development, in preparation for future sessions of the high-level political forum on

sustainable development created at Rio+20.[8] Regional conferences of specialized agencies have also proved to be effective in mainstreaming policy and programmes since they bring together cross-sectoral and multidisciplinary actors under a government-driven platform.

43. A study done in 2011 on regional dimensions of the United Nations[9] found that the secretariats of the regional commissions were seen as multidisciplinary knowledge hubs and thus well-placed to support regional intergovernmental processes and actions and to strengthen United Nations inter-agency cooperation and coordination at the regional and subregional levels.

44. The regional coordination mechanism aims to develop a shared vision on sustainable development in the regions and promote the joint implementation of sustainable development commitments and policies, including the Rio+20 outcome, by all United Nations entities active in the regions. The mechanism is also used to strengthen coordination among the work programmes of United Nations system organizations at the regional level. United Nations Development Group regional teams provide leadership, strategic guidance and support to resident coordinators and United Nations country teams for the achievement of country-level results. In its resolution 67/226, the General Assembly asked resident coordinators and United Nations country teams to draw more upon the normative support work and policy expertise that exists within the regional commissions and requested the regional commissions to further develop their analytical capacities to support country-level development initiatives (see para. 150 of the resolution). This makes it all the more important for the secretariats of the regional commissions to integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions, and their interactions, in their analytical work.

45. In recent years, work at the regional level has moved towards supporting a more integrated approach to development. Some regional commissions are coordinating around themes, including those directly related to sustainable development (for example, the Economic Commission for Latin America and the Caribbean (ECLAC)/Union of South American Nations joint action plan on social issues, energy infrastructure and other issues). More integrated thinking is also being seen in some regional publications. Innovative tools are also being developed, such as the Economic and Social Commission for Western Asia (ESCWA) indicators for sustainable development, used to gauge alignment with the three dimensions of sustainable development, or the joint Economic Commission for Europe (ECE)-Eurostat-OECD framework for the measurement of sustainable development.

46. All the regional commissions have been promoting the development of environmentally sustainable economic agendas as a path for development in their respective regions. Since the Fifth Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific, held in 2005, the Economic and Social Commission for Asia and the Pacific (ESCAP) has been promoting green growth, sustainable urbanization, energy security and water resources management and has supported a sustainable and green future for the Asia-Pacific region.

47. The secretariats of the regional commissions play an important role in the integration of the three pillars of sustainable development in the work of the United

[8] See E/ECA/CFSSD/8/4/Rev.1, para. 12 (a).

[9] *The Regional Dimension of Development and the UN System*, a study sponsored by the United Nations regional commissions, November 2011.

Nations. However, they currently maintain sectoral divisions and committees, making the integration of the three dimensions in their work challenging. There is an awareness of this obstacle and plans to evolve structures in at least the Asia-Pacific region have been made. Some regional commissions, such as ESCWA, are having sectoral divisions lead on multisectoral issues; for example, its Social Development Division is leading on small and medium-sized enterprises and capacities to sustain rural livelihoods and employment. ESCWA's workplan for 2014/15 is more integrated than those of previous years because of increased inter-divisional consultations.

48. The 2011 study mentioned in paragraph 43 above identified a need for better integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. Its recommendations include the need for a coherent regional strategy for development; further development of the regional coordination mechanisms as vehicles for policy and programme coordination at the levels of heads of agencies and senior officials; and greater coherence and cohesiveness between the work of regional coordination mechanisms and regional United Nations Development Group teams.

49. The 2011 study also identified a significant degree of engagement by United Nations organizations with non-United Nations regional intergovernmental bodies and entities. This helps to inject sustainable development approaches in other forums and enrich the United Nations approach through learning from other experiences.

C. Integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at the global level

Intergovernmental bodies

50. At the global level, the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system should be bolstered by the guidance of the General Assembly, the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary bodies, the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP and the governing bodies of United Nations system organizations.

51. A cursory review of a few intergovernmental decisions in recent years shows that consideration of sustainable and/or integrated development approaches has not been systematic.

52. The General Assembly considers sustainable development issues in both its Second and Third Committees. The Second Committee has a dedicated item on sustainable development. The Second Committee considers the economic dimension while the Third Committee focuses on the social dimension. Interaction between the two Committees is nevertheless limited, which hinders the ability of the Assembly to give impetus to integrated policymaking.

53. The Economic and Social Council is the United Nations body that deals with the integrated and coordinated implementation of and follow-up to major United Nations conferences in the economic, social and environmental fields. Yet, it remains a challenge for the Council to look at the three dimensions of sustainable development in all its outcomes. The ongoing consultations on the strengthening of the Council are an opportunity to gear the Council and its subsidiary machinery towards achieving a balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development (see General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex, para. 83).

54. Ensuring coherent intergovernmental guidance on sustainable development is complicated by each United Nations system organization having its own governing body. Decisions by executive boards of funds and programmes and governing bodies of specialized agencies also often do not systematically integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development.

55. Such considerations led the Rio+20 Conference to launch a major change in the institutional framework for sustainable development. It emphasized the need to improve implementation, coordination, coherence and integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development.

56. A cornerstone of this reform was the decision to establish a high-level political forum on sustainable development. Intergovernmental negotiations on the format and organizational aspects of the forum's work are ongoing. Without prejudging their outcome, it is clear that the forum could give impetus to integrating sustainable development as an overarching framework to the work of all United Nations system intergovernmental bodies and organizations. This would help Member States to send a unified message to United Nations system organizations, including through their respective governing bodies, on the need to take an integrated approach to economic, social and environmental policies and actions.

57. The forum should also help to integrate the work of the United Nations Environment Assembly of UNEP, which represents the environmental dimension of sustainable development, within its own work and other strands of intergovernmental work.

58. There is also a need to find effective ways for the United Nations Secretariat and the entire United Nations system to support the work of the forum. Sustainable development should be consistently reflected in the analytical work of the United Nations in support of the high-level political forum. Disaggregated data collection and analysis are also needed to develop a better understanding of the trade-offs and synergies generated by an integrated approach.

59. Lessons from the past 20 years of inter-agency coordination, be it the Inter-Agency Committee on Sustainable Development, coordination around clusters of issues or the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs plus model, could help to design a new structure to support preparations, follow-up and implementation of the forum's work.

60. The Economic and Social Council and the forum should ensure appropriate accountability of the United Nations system to Member States on how it supports sustainable development (see General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex, para. 78) and also reflect the interaction between government priorities and United Nations support. While the Council already has this role vis-à-vis United Nations operational activities, the forum could be the space for undertaking an overall review around specific themes or goals.

61. The work of the forum needs to be reinforced by ensuring that the General Assembly and the Economic and Social Council and its subsidiary machinery address sustainable development as an organizing principle of their work. As members of the governing bodies of the United Nations system organizations, Governments have also committed to take measures to ensure that organizations mainstream the three dimensions of sustainable development in their operational work (see General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex, para. 94).

62. Ultimately, the success of a revamped intergovernmental framework for sustainable development will be measured by how well the sustainable development approach is integrated in United Nations support and national policies at the country level.

Inter-agency mechanisms

63. The United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), which brings together the executive heads of 29 United Nations system organizations under the leadership of the Secretary-General, is taking specific actions towards integrating sustainable development dimensions within the United Nations system.

64. The contribution of CEB and its subsidiary bodies, the High-level Committee on Programmes, the High-level Committee on Management and the United Nations Development Group can be manifold. It can mobilize the United Nations system's expertise or experience; enable synergies that result from aggregating and coordinating ongoing processes across the United Nations system; define a framework for addressing longer-term issues; or bring together the normative and operational aspects of sustainable development and help Member States to combine them effectively in policy formulation.

65. In October 2012 and April 2013, the High-level Committee on Programmes addressed the issue of sustainable development in the context of the post-2015 development agenda. The Committee concluded that mainstreaming sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system requires greater cooperation and collaboration among United Nations organizations on sectoral, technical and programmatic issues in order for the Member States to benefit from the combination of system-wide specialized knowledge and operational expertise.

66. The High-level Committee on Programmes selected a range of critical sustainable development issues that warrant consideration within the United Nations system over the next three to five years. These include population dynamics; migration; land, food and nutrition security; and energy, water, climate change and oceans.

67. Within CEB, UN-Energy, UN-Water, UN-Oceans, the High-level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis and the High-level Committee on Programmes Working Group on Climate Change work to enhance coherence and coordination among a broad range of United Nations agencies and other stakeholders in response to specific global sustainable development challenges. UN-Water is in the process of finalizing a joint United Nations system position in support of possible water-related targets in the sustainable development goals and the post-2015 development agenda. UN-Energy brings United Nations system organizations together in support of Member States' actions by focusing on an integrated approach between energy and other sustainable development factors.

68. Concrete steps towards mainstreaming sustainability in the area of management are also being undertaken by the High-level Committee on Management. In 2013 the Committee decided that all member organizations will move towards adopting and implementing environmental management systems through a gradual, voluntary and flexible process, starting with initiatives that carry a low implementation cost. These actions will contribute to reducing the United Nations system's environmental footprint through better management practices, improved efficiencies and a reduction

in operating costs. Significant additional savings could be generated, including from integrated waste and wastewater management, construction and vehicle procurement/ maintenance (see box 4 above).

69. Other coordination mechanisms exist outside CEB, such as the Environment Management Group and the Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs plus,[10] which helped to prepare Rio+20 and now works on its follow-up.

70. The United Nations also created a task team on the post-2015 development agenda and a technical support team on sustainable development goals to support intergovernmental processes in those areas.

71. Inter-agency structures have played an important role in specific endeavours of the United Nations system to mainstream major themes in its work (see box 9 below), particularly climate change and gender equality. Lessons can be drawn from these experiences for mainstreaming sustainable development.

72. These various efforts have brought about a proliferation of inter-agency mechanisms and have occasionally posed difficulties in ensuring coherent guidance on integrating the three dimensions, while also limiting the effectiveness of inter-agency work at the level of individual agencies and in countries.

73. There may be a need for an overarching framework for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development at all levels of the work of the United Nations system, be it policies, programmes or operations management, or analytical, normative or operational work. The sustainability framework developed by the Environment Management Group can serve as a basis for moving in that direction, provided the economic dimension is integrated. CEB can play an important role in guiding the development of such a framework.

Box 9
Mainstreaming thematic issues in the work of the United Nations system

Climate change

Although often perceived as environmental in nature, the complex challenges of climate change also affect the social and economic sectors, requiring a multidisciplinary solution that speaks to all levels of development activities. From this, multiple points of coordination for mainstreaming climate change considerations have been engaged in the United Nations system.

The CEB framework for action on climate change endorsed in 2008 seeks to maximize synergies, eliminate duplication and overlap, and optimize the impact of the collective efforts of the United Nations system in supporting countries in implementing strategies to address climate change. The High-level Committee on Programmes Working Group on Climate Change facilitates United Nations system follow-up to the framework for action.

[10] The Executive Committee on Economic and Social Affairs works through 10 clusters, including 1 on social development; see http://www.un.org/en/development/other/ecesa/mission.shtml.

Many of the challenges faced at the country level have a climate change component. This has become more widely understood through efforts to mainstream climate change in country-level planning, supported by guidance and training by the United Nations Development Group.

Gender

Strengthening gender mainstreaming came as a response to the series of United Nations conferences on women and gender equality. A United Nations system-wide policy on gender equality and the empowerment of women was endorsed by CEB in 2006. In response, two of potentially three interconnecting and mutually reinforcing mechanisms have been developed as an accountability framework for implementation:

(a) A system-wide action plan on corporate processes and institutional arrangements at the individual United Nations entity level. This action plan was approved by CEB in 2012. Unified annual reporting for the action plan began in 2013, the results of which will set a baseline for reporting to ensure United Nations system accountability;

(b) United Nations country team performance indicators for gender equality and the empowerment of women was introduced in 2008. The indicators focus on the performance of United Nations country teams as a whole, for example, with respect to the quality of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework, including its development and monitoring and evaluation; joint programmes and programming; and capacity development with counterparts;

(c) The third mechanism, accountability for the United Nations system's contributions to gender equality development results at the country and normative levels, is expected to be developed after the first two have taken root more firmly.

Accountability frameworks have required heavy initial investment of time, resources and staff, suggesting the suitability of a phased approach in the initial and intermediate stages of their development and implementation.

V. Strengths, challenges, gaps and lessons learned

74. The integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions, together with the issues of coherence and coordination, need to be central to discussions on implementing sustainable development. The United Nations system has extensive knowledge of the three dimensions and a number of innovative collaborations exist, such as the work of the Social Protection Inter-Agency Cooperation Board on social protection floors of the Poverty-Environment Initiative. Guidance from coordination mechanisms is strengthening coherence across organizations. However, integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system and in its support to Member States and partners is uneven and remains

hindered by key challenges and gaps. A number of strengths, challenges, gaps and lessons learned are outlined below.

75. **Strengths.** A number of broad institutional strengths and accomplishments in integrating sustainable development exist:

(a) There is a high level of institutional awareness that an integrated approach to address interlinkages in development is an important and necessary evolution of the development agenda and that sustainable development is the overarching framework to make that happen;

(b) There is a comprehensive array of knowledge and skills within the United Nations system that address all three dimensions of sustainable development, strengthened further by strategic partnerships;

(c) A series of coordination mechanisms are in place at all levels to support policy coherence and multidisciplinary approaches, two important building blocks of sustainable development that should be further strengthened;

(d) The United Nations system takes both a top-down (from strategic plans to programmes) and bottom-up (from country and programme realities to strategic plans) approach to integrating social, economic and environmental dimensions in its work. Some innovative work has been done from the bottom up, where the theory of sustainable development is put into practice and institutional learning serves to continuously improve projects and programmes that are driven by national and subnational needs;

(e) There are examples of innovative programmes, some in place for over a decade, that integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development.

76. **Challenges and gaps.** Broad institutional challenges limiting the integration of sustainable development dimensions were found, including:

(a) *Unclear and inconsistent terminology and understanding*. A broad common understanding of what it means to translate sustainable development into the work of the United Nations system is still needed. This would support the development of clear common objectives on sustainable development and help to determine, in many cases, what has been achieved on sustainable development;

(b) *Sectoral silos*. The overall institutional arrangements remain shaped along sectoral lines, hindering efforts for a more integrated approach to development. The same challenge persists at the national level with sectoral government ministries. There is a need to change sectoral thinking and pursue integrated practices in the United Nations system. This will also require a reassessment of needed staff competencies and regular training of staff to ensure that sustainable development translates into their work, be it analytical or operational;

(c) *Imbalances among the three dimensions*. Cooperation among United Nations entities in the economic, social and environmental pillars is increasing. However, additional efforts are needed to collectively help Governments to develop policies that pursue the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development together. Cooperation between the Bretton Woods institutions and the rest of the United Nations system needs to be further deepened, building on the good progress made in recent years and months;

(d) *Lack of a process to assess impact or measure progress*. While many processes and mechanisms are in place to help facilitate the integration of sustainable development, there is currently no common capability to assess impact or measure progress in the integration of sustainable development, including into programming and projects;

(e) *Difficulty in scaling up successes*. While a number of positive examples of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development can be identified, how to scale up those successes remains a challenge;

(f) *Knowledge*. The United Nations system requires further analysis and guidance on how to mainstream sustainable development, not only at the policy level but also at the project/programme level to help move policy to practice;

(g) *Resource constraints*. Insufficient resources within Governments or for the United Nations system was often cited as an obstacle to integrating the three dimensions, fostering coordination and building capacity;

(h) *Partnership*. Sustainable development requires an enhanced level of engagement and a more inclusive approach to partnerships, such as including major groups[11] and other stakeholders in the country-level planning process.

77. **Lessons learned.** Overall, lessons can be learned from the various efforts to integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development and from United Nations system experiences in mainstreaming other issues or thematic areas in the work of the United Nations system (see box 9 above):

(a) *Ensure high-level support*. Mainstreaming efforts have used entry points at the headquarters or country levels. Either way, an intergovernmental mandate or decision is needed at some juncture to enable the initiative to build, sustain momentum and attract the resources it needs. It is important that a unified message come from the intergovernmental bodies;

(b) *Engage Member States and the United Nations system with a common purpose at the global, regional and country levels*. Work through the inter-agency machinery to translate that purpose into activities and policies;

(c) *Develop a clear methodology, guidance and/or tools that include a clear objective and how to reach it*. Although some individual United Nations entities have developed tools and guidance to further sustainable development in their work, the United Nations system does not yet have a set of unified measurable objectives for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development. The development of the sustainable development goals should help to address this;

(d) *Capacity-building*. This is needed to ensure effective understanding of how to use tools and report effectively. Enhanced analytical work is also needed on how to develop and implement integrated policies;

(e) *Establish a common reporting mechanism*. This may be accompanied by a set of indicators to measure progress over time.

[11] Major groups include business and industry, children and young people, farmers, indigenous peoples, local authorities, non-governmental organizations, the scientific and technological community, women, workers and trade unions.

VI. Conclusions and recommendations

78. Today's development realities challenge the United Nations system to work across its own structures and mandates and to better integrate economic, social and environmental concerns into its policy, programmatic and operational activities.

79. The present report has shown that coordination mechanisms and policies are increasingly in place to support an integrated approach but that, in many cases, much more needs to be achieved. Sustainable development has grown from theory to good practice, but the impact of the United Nations system's interventions has not been systematically captured to aid institutional learning. The breadth of what sustainable development means for the full range of United Nations system activities has not yet been fully grasped.

80. The development community is on the cusp of an historic opportunity, since a new overarching development agenda and sustainable development goals are being developed. These will play a critical role as guideposts for nationally owned policies, international cooperation and the work of the United Nations system. The system must be ready to support their implementation when they are agreed upon in 2015.

81. The high-level political forum created at the Rio+20 Conference could have a key role in reviewing the sustainable development goals and the post-2015 development agenda and in spurring an integrated approach to economic, social and environmental dimensions throughout the United Nations system bodies and organizations. The United Nations system must mobilize to support its role in the most effective way.

Recommendations

82. Within this broad context, a few steps could be taken in the future, with guidance from Member States:

(a) A road map for accelerating the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system would provide a useful framework for action. This could involve recommendations for developing a framework based on the environment and social sustainability framework initiated by the Environment Management Group;

(b) The Secretary-General could report to the high-level political forum on progress by the United Nations system in integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in its work. In general, reporting could start in 2014 and include an account of how the United Nations system will help the Secretariat to support the high-level political forum and of progress on developing the above-mentioned road map. A subsequent report in 2015 could outline a road map and framework for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system. Following that, the Secretary-General could report every two years on the topic;

(c) As Member States engage in the development of a new generation of strategic plans for 2014-2017 for some of the funds, programmes and specialized agencies, it will be important to bear in mind the recommendation in the Rio+20 outcome document that the governing bodies of the funds, programmes and specialized agencies of the United Nations development system consider appropriate measures for integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions across

the operational activities of the United Nations system. The respective secretariats will provide the support needed by Member States to prepare strategic plans that address the three dimensions of sustainable development in an integrated fashion;

(d) The United Nations country teams have a wealth of guidance notes and related material to draw from in preparing United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks. As such, the main thematic elements of sustainable development are covered; what is missing is a clear direction emphasizing the integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. As part of its ongoing review, the United Nations Development Group should ensure that the guidelines for the preparation of United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks are aligned with sustainable development principles and supportive of integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development. A dialogue with partner Governments will be important, since United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks are planning frameworks shared with Governments and are developed in response to key development plans.