The relevance of sustainable development to the post-2015 development agenda

A background document for the Experts Group meeting on 27-28 February 2012

1. Why is sustainable development important for the post-2015 development agenda?

The 2000 Millennium Declaration and the establishment of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) heralded an unprecedented global effort towards the reduction of poverty. Since then, the world has made significant progress in reducing hunger, increasing education, reducing maternal and child mortality and reversing the prevalence of malaria, HIV/AIDS and other diseases. The past two decades have also seen considerable economic growth, particularly in emerging economies, with hundreds of millions of people rising from poverty in Asia, Latin America and, increasingly, Africa.

Yet, while numerous successes have been recorded, the world and its population still face significant challenges and perils. Eradicating poverty remains a challenge and still too many children and mothers die of preventable causes. Much of the world’s population still lacks access to adequate sanitation, while rapidly growing urban populations have led to increasing numbers of people living in slums and squatter settlements. In recent years, financial and economic instability and food price volatility have brought additional social consequences with increasing unemployment and risks of food insecurity. In addition, about half the forests that covered the earth are gone, groundwater resources are still being depleted and contaminated, enormous reductions in biodiversity have already taken place and, through increased burning of fossil fuels, the stability of the planet’s climate is being threatened by global warming. While the impacts of these harms will be felt worldwide, poor and developing countries, particularly the Least Developed Countries, will be among those most adversely affected and least able to cope with the anticipated shocks to their social, economic and natural systems.

The concept of sustainable development as described in the Brundtland Commission’s 1987 “Report of the World Commission on Environment and Development: Our Common Future” is development “that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.” With the global population expected to reach 9 billion by 2050, it is critical that efforts towards economic growth be balanced with respect for the human and natural capital that forms its foundation. As such, it is imperative that sustainable development delivers a balanced supply of social, economic and environmental values treating these as integral parts of a single system. Otherwise, we risk exceeding the limits of the earth’s capacity to support decent living standards in large parts of the world, especially the developing world.

Therefore, sustainable development must be at the centre of the post-2015 UN development agenda. Sustainable development should be a common goal and a responsibility for all countries. Thus, it is critical that the post-2015 development framework be globally applicable, creating a more balanced onus for actions not just by developing countries, but by developed countries as well. Achieving the goal of sustainable development will inevitably require, for example, altering consumption and production patterns in developed countries, hence, addressing issues of intra- and inter-generational equity.

In recognition of the central importance of sustainable development to the United Nations’ work, the Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon has designated sustainable development as his top priority for his next five year term.

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1 World Economic and Social Survey 2011: The Great Green Technological Transformation, United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (E/2011/50/Rev.1ST/ESA/333)
2. Sustainable development in the MDG framework

Sustainable development requires a three-pronged and balanced approach on economic development, social development and environmental protection. Although the MDGs encapsulate social, economic and environmental aspects, 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 which cover solely social issues such as education, gender equality, child and maternal health and combating major diseases. These Goals are evidently important, helping assure attainment of a social development threshold, but they are also deeply linked with environmental and economic factors, a relation which the MDG framework does not fully reflect. For instance, while the importance of clean drinking water to health and well-being is recognized, other important health-environment links (such as through the quality of air people breathe) are not. One could also make the case that, under a Goal on education, a target on sustainable development education in school programmes is important to foster the changes of lifestyles needed to achieve sustainable patterns of consumption and other behaviour.

Goal 1 - Eradicate Extreme Poverty & Hunger - is widely viewed as mainly reflecting social concerns with some inputs on economic aspects such as labour productivity. And yet, some of the targets under this goal do have strong links with environmental and economic aspects. For example, this Goal includes a target of halving, between 1990 and 2015, the proportion of people who suffer from hunger. This target has significant environmental implications, like the environmental impact of agricultural practices and the importance to long-term food security of sustainable agricultural practices, including agro-forestry, which are nowhere addressed in the MDG framework. Massive wastage along food supply chains is also an aspect that requires attention if food security and improvements in rural incomes are to be sustained.

Environmental aspects are addressed under Goal 7 - Ensure Environmental Sustainability. Its four targets, however, and their 10 related indicators, only address a small subset of issues related to environmental sustainability, failing to address issues such as land degradation and desertification, management of natural resources, etc. In addition, all the targets under this Goal have major economic and social impacts, including in the achievement of other MDGs such as poverty eradication, but these linkages are nowhere reflected in the MDG framework.

It is becoming increasingly clear that enduring development must respect ecological limits, calling for clear targets on the management of natural resources. Targets under Goal 7 however are on the loose side, even for indicators for which data are available such as those on fish stocks, protected areas, water resources and carbon emissions. They are not well grounded in a scientific assessment of environmental constraints.

Goal 8 aims at promoting partnerships for development, which have been recognized as an essential tool for achieving not only development but also sustainable development. This Goal also addresses key instruments in the implementation of sustainable development, such as finance and technology. Key instruments currently not covered include innovative forms of financing, as well as broader technology goals – going beyond ICT – and capacity building. To the extent that achieving sustainable development goals requires incurring additional costs, at least during an initial period, a goal on international partnership may need to address the equitable distribution of those costs.

In addition, progress towards the different goals has not been equal, further highlighting the need to integrate different development aspects so that economic and social development as well as environmental protection can go hand in hand. Contrary to other goals, many targets
of Goal 7 (environmental sustainability) still show worsening trends: the global percentage of forest areas is still decreasing; CO2 emissions have increased faster after than before 2000 despite notable reductions in the CO2 emissions per unit of GDP; the percentage of fish stocks beyond sustainable exploitation has increased. This shows the environmental dimension needs a stronger place in the development agenda in order to trigger concrete actions towards achieving environmental goals.

3. How to ensure sustainable development for post-2015

3.1 Themes of relevance for sustainable development

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 cities; green jobs, decent work and social inclusion; and disaster risk reduction and resilience.

Other areas mentioned in the submissions include: desertification and land degradation; green growth; sustainable transport; sustainable management of natural resources, chemicals and waste; climate change and social equity. Some areas highlighted in the submissions are already covered in the MDGs: poverty, forests, slums, health, biodiversity, education, gender equality and empowerment of women, child and maternal health.

It is yet unclear how much can be achieved by Rio+20 regarding agreement on themes. Some Member States would prefer just to define principles and launch a process immediately after Rio+20. Others would welcome agreement on the themes. Some Members States are more ambitious and would support agreement at Rio+20 on a goal on energy, and possibly also on food security and water.

3.2 Including sustainable development in the post-2015 development framework

Achieving real and sustainable progress on poverty reduction requires finding an effective balance between those goals originally identified as part of the MDGs and the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, not just in developing countries but at the global level. Thus, the MDGs, in this view, would need to be nested in a broader sustainable development framework, for all countries, and aiming at achieving universal human development while staying within a safe operating space of the planet. Thus, three criteria will be used here to guide the menu of options to integrate sustainable development in the post-2015 development framework:

i) the need to reflect and integrate the three pillars of sustainable development – economic, social and environmental – in any development agenda;

ii) coverage of the eight SD priority areas highlighted during the Rio+20 preparatory process (see section 3.1);

iii) the need to establish a social floor, i.e. a minimum social threshold, to wipe out poverty, and an ecological ceiling to ensure that the management of natural resources is sustainable.
3.3 Options to incorporate sustainable development in the post-2015 development agenda

In case the MDG framework is taken as a basis, five options can be considered to achieve the above-mentioned criteria:

a) To reflect economic, social and environmental dimensions in relevant MDG goals with targets on social “floors” and ecological “ceilings”

MDG 1 (eradicate poverty and hunger) for example has an obvious impact on the social dimension but also on the economic and environmental dimensions. For example, a three pillar approach for eradicating hunger could consider food security (social), efficient use of water, energy and land (economic) and decreased environmental degradation and waste in food production and consumption (environmental). Access to productive employment and decent work, a current MDG 1 target, reflects already economic and social aspects and could be extended to reflect environmental aspects by including green jobs.

b) To upgrade and expand MDG 7 by revising targets on current areas and including other areas of relevance for environmental sustainability

MDG 7 can be expanded to include for instance: (i) new targets on the sustainable management of oceans, sustainable cities and water efficiency; (ii) modify current areas in which new developments have taken place since 2000.

c) To add new goals to the MDG framework to cover priority areas of sustainable development

Among the priority areas, obvious candidates for new goals include: sustainable energy for all; sustainable consumption and production patterns; and disaster risk reduction and resilience. Energy in particular is gaining a lot of momentum in the discussion on goals for Rio+20. The three dimensions of sustainable development may be reflected by considering targets for example energy access (social), energy efficiency (economic), use of renewable sources (environmental).

An overarching goal on sustainable management of natural resources could alternatively be considered, encompassing targets on water efficiency, energy efficiency and clean energy, use of non-renewable sources, land use and soil fertility, sustainable management of forests. Such a goal would promote the use of clean technologies, such as recycling, as well as improved management practices.

d) To integrate the MDGs into a larger sustainable development framework.

There have been consistent and consensual calls from Member States during the Rio+20 Preparatory process to integrate and ensure a balance among the social, economic and environmental pillars. Member States have also continuously emphasized the importance of poverty reduction. MDGs 1 to 6 could be organized around poverty reduction and the social pillar (education, employment, health, water and sanitation access are all aspects of poverty), perhaps consolidated into three or four goals. There could be another small set of goals reflecting economic dimensions (resource productivity, energy efficiency, water efficiency) and another on environmental dimensions (use of renewable energy, sustainable agricultural practices, sustainable urban planning). The essence of the MDG framework would then be kept but embedded within a larger sustainable development framework, consisting of about ten goals.
e) To establish targets on economic, social and environmental aspects by identifying sustainable social and environmental constraints

This approach would integrate the economic, social and environmental dimensions by recognizing that development must proceed within planetary boundaries while ensuring a minimum social threshold. The social threshold should bring all people above the poverty threshold and ensure social justice. As poverty is a multi-dimensional concept, this would also entail minimum requirements for access to food, health, education, water, sanitation, energy and other essential dimensions of human development. At the same time, planetary boundaries should be respected. There is a scientific body of work on the planetary boundaries which may shed light on identifying appropriate targets. For example, it has been suggested that the atmospheric CO2 concentration should not go beyond 350 ppm (current value 387) or that the annual rate of biodiversity loss should not exceed 10 species per million (currently it is above 100 species per million).²

Options a) to e) are not mutually exclusive; they can also be considered in combination. A mix may perhaps provide the required flexibility in adapting the current MDG framework to reflect sustainable development dimensions.

3.4 Incorporating the Rio+20 themes

The options above can be combined to incorporate the eight priority areas highlighted in the UNCSD preparatory process, as illustrated below:

- food security and sustainable agriculture: under an upgraded MDG 1
- green jobs, decent work and social inclusion: under an upgraded MDG 1
- water access and efficiency: under an upgraded Goal 7; alternatively, water access could be part of Goal 1 reflecting one aspect of poverty, and water efficiency could be under a new goal on sustainable management of natural resources
- oceans and sustainable cities: under an upgraded MDG 7
- sustainable energy for all: under a new goal on energy; or divided with its social dimension - energy access - under MDG1 (one aspect of poverty), energy efficiency under a new goal on sustainable management of resources and clean energy under upgraded Goal 7
- sustainable consumption and production patterns: under a new goal
- disaster risk reduction and resilience: under a new goal or an upgraded MDG 7.

Finally, when the phase to identify concrete goals comes, goals and targets defined by major UN processes and outcomes, particularly those agreed after 2000, may serve as a useful source to identify relevant suggestions.