



THE PRESIDENT
OF THE
GENERAL ASSEMBLY

20 April 2012

Excellency,

As we are approaching the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development UNCSDD (Rio+20) scheduled to take place in Rio de Janeiro from 20 to 22 June 2012, I am pleased to invite you to a thematic debate of the General Assembly entitled "Road to Rio +20 and beyond", which I am organizing on 22 of May 2012.

H.E. Mr Antonio de Aguiar Patriota, Minister of External Relations of Brazil, will brief Members States on the status of preparations for the Conference at this occasion.

The participants to the debate will include representatives of Member States, leading experts, academia, practitioners, private sector and civil society. This would provide an inclusive setting to facilitate a discussion among the participants on the possible outcomes in Rio+20 including on the major issues concerning the sustainable development goals, adequate institutional framework for sustainable development.

The thematic debate is intended also for exchange of views on the role of the General Assembly in supporting the objectives of the Conference UNCSDD (Rio+20) and the meaningful review of remaining gaps in the implementation and fulfillment of commitments.

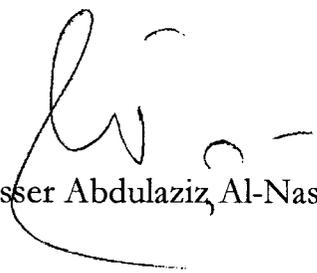
The two Panel discussions will focus on themes ranging from the centrality of the political commitment; to the importance of a sustained and meaningful engagement of all stakeholders for a successful outcome in Rio and post-2015 UN Development Agenda.

I am confident that the timely convening of this thematic debate will provide an opportunity to build on the political momentum of all the preparatory meetings and intersessionals held in New York. It is also expected to feed the ongoing negotiations on the outcome document to be adopted in Rio next June.

The Detailed programme and the updated information will be available on the website of the President of the General Assembly.

I look forward to your support and active participation towards the success of this debate.

Please accept, Excellency, the assurances of my highest consideration.



Nasser Abdulaziz, Al-Nassir

To All Permanent Representatives and
Permanent Observers
To the United Nations
New York

INFORMAL THEMATIC DEBATE OF THE 66TH SESSION OF
THE UNITED NATIONS GENERAL ASSEMBLY ON

” ROAD TO RIO+20 AND BEYOND “

Tuesday, 22 May 2012
ECOSOC, NLB, United Nations Headquarters

Background

The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) is scheduled to take place in Rio de Janeiro from 20 to 22 June 2012. The GA resolution 64/236 calling for the Conference stipulates that its objective is to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development and in achieving that it should focus on two themes: green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, and the institutional framework for sustainable development (IFSD). Subsequently in the preparatory process for Rio+20, a proposal has emerged for agreeing to sustainable development goals (SDGs) as an outcome of the Conference.

The SDG proposal is one that has garnered wide interest and growing support from Member States, but there are a number of outstanding issues that need to be debated and clarified in the run-up to the Conference in order to facilitate the negotiations. With respect to IFSD, there are a number of proposals under consideration for strengthening that framework, including ones pertaining specifically to the environmental pillar and UNEP and ones encompassing the Commission on Sustainable Development, ECOSOC and the GA.

The thematic debate is intended to shed further light on these two areas of discussion in the preparatory process. The morning will focus specifically on the SDGs, and consider what principles should govern the elaboration of SDGs, assuming a mandate is given in Rio, and how to organize the process after Rio to come up with a coherent and ambitious set of SDGs before 2015, a set that is fully aligned with and complementary to the MDGs in the context of the post-2015 UN Development Agenda.

Morning Session: How can Rio +20 foster the Global development Agenda ?

While the MDG agenda has achieved many successes in regard to social development, there is growing awareness that a future agenda should feature greater emphasis on *sustainability*, balancing economic development, social development and environmental protection.

Initially proposed at the High-level Dialogue on the Institutional Framework for Sustainable Development in July 2011 in Solo, Indonesia, the concept of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) has received increasing support from Member States and political groups in the lead up to the Rio+20 Conference. With support for SDGs in many Member State submissions to the compilation document as well as in the Report of the Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Sustainability, the Zero Draft of the Outcome Document features a section on SDGs that calls, *inter alia*, for

creation of a process to define a set of global SDGs and a mechanism for periodic follow-up and reporting on progress made toward their achievement.

The Zero Draft further lists possible areas for goals, including: oceans; food security and sustainable agriculture; sustainable energy for all; water access and efficiency; sustainable cities; green jobs, decent work and social inclusion; disaster risk reduction and resilience; and sustainable consumption and production patterns.

It is as yet unclear what will be agreed to at Rio+20, with discussion ranging from agreeing on specific goals to simply agreeing to launch a process to develop goals. Another option discussed has been agreeing at Rio+20 on broad themes to be addressed by the SDGs, leaving the work on deciding on goals, targets and indicators for after Rio+20. While there has only been limited support for defining coverage of goals (and even less for agreeing specific goals at Rio+20) a number of proposed amendments to the Zero Draft suggest possible areas for goals, if not goals themselves – *e.g.*, on land degradation, food, water, energy, oceans and cities.

In discussions on SDGs amongst Member States and other stakeholders, there have been several core areas of agreement that have emerged. Regarding principles, Member States and other stakeholders have largely emphasized that SDGs should: reflect an integrated and balanced treatment of the three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, environmental and social); be aspirational and voluntary; be universally applicable; be adaptable to different national situations; be limited in number; and reflect dimensions related to poverty eradication, inequality and gender.

In addition, Member States and other stakeholders have emphasized the need to remain cognizant of other on-going processes, particularly the post-2015 Development Agenda process. Member States, UN agencies and Major Groups have urged a convergence of the SDG and post-2015 processes, calling for a unified process to define the post-2015 framework, and a single set of international goals focused on sustainable development and poverty eradication. The critical question is *how* these processes can be converged in a way that ensures a coherent, comprehensive and forward-moving process.

Afternoon Session: The role of the General Assembly in supporting the objective of the Conference UNCSD (Rio+20)

Agenda 21 in its Chapter on Institutional Structure stipulates that intergovernmental follow-up of the Rio Conference in 1992 will be “within the framework of the United Nations system, with the General Assembly being the supreme policy-making forum that would provide overall guidance to Governments, the United Nations system and relevant treaty bodies”. It further stipulates in paragraph 38.9 that “the General Assembly, as the highest intergovernmental mechanism, is the principal policy-making and appraisal organ on matters relating to the follow-up of the Conference. The Assembly would organize a regular review of the implementation of Agenda 21”.

The JPOI also provides that the GA should “adopt sustainable development as a key element of the overarching framework for United Nations activities” and that it should “give political direction to the implementation of Agenda 21 and its review.”

The “engine room” for sustainable development is the Second Committee of the GA, which has a sustainable development item on its agenda with 9-11 sub-items depending on the year, since some sub-items are biannual. There is also a separate agenda item on Implementation of the outcome of the United Nations Conference on Human Settlements (Habitat II) and strengthening of the United Nations Human Settlements Programme (UN-Habitat) and one on Agriculture development and food security. The Third Committee also considers social aspects of sustainable development such as the outcome of the World Summit for Social Development, youth and the advancement of women. And the economic pillar is considered in GA under the follow-up process to the Doha Conference on financing for development.

The current situation shows that there is fragmentation in dealing with sustainable development issues. This arises from the fact that the sustainable development agenda is very broad and, if it is not tackled in an integrated and coherent manner with clear priorities, it becomes a long list of items that look only at certain aspects of an issue and have only weak connection to others on the agenda. Bearing in mind that any Member State can ask for any item or sub-item to be included on the GA agenda, an inclusive discussion which would clearly set priorities for the sustainable development agenda should result in fewer sub-items and resolutions and a more encompassing view of an issue. This would also result in better attainment of the objective of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD), namely “to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, assessing the progress to date and the remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits on sustainable development and addressing new and emerging challenges”. (Resolution 64/236)

The high-level political oversight and agenda-setting function of the GA is crucial to the effectiveness of the institutional framework, which needs to be considered in a holistic manner. At the intergovernmental level, ECOSOC and its subsidiary machinery, especially the Commission on Sustainable Development, are key components of the institutional framework. Submissions to the Zero draft include various options to enhance IFSD, encompassing ECOSOC, CSD or a Sustainable Development Council, and the environmental pillar through strengthening UNEP.

The IFSD reform options on the table can enhance the ability of the GA to promote sustainable development in the work of the United Nations. Recommendations in the area of sustainable development, emanating from a strengthened CSD or successor institution, could be consolidated in a report to the GA, drawing on a high-level segment held just prior to the General Debate of the GA in order to secure high-level representation. With more focussed and integrated recommendations, the GA would be better placed to consider an action-oriented set of policies that look at issues in an integrated way encompassing all three pillars of sustainable development. This could lead to more meaningful review of remaining gaps in implementation and fulfilment of commitments. It would also leave enough flexibility to focus on new and emerging issues, especially as they might prove to be obstacles to achieve sustainable development.