

Expert Group Meeting Report:
Sustainable Development in the 21st century
(SD21)
SD21 drafters' meeting

Organized by United Nations DESA
UN Headquarters
5-6 April 2012

Organization:
Division for Sustainable Development
United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs
(UN DESA)

This is a report of the proceedings of the SD21 Drafter’s meeting, held at the UN Headquarters, NY on April 5-6, 2012.

The documents relative to the meeting, including the concept note, the agenda of the meeting and other related documents can be accessed on the meeting website.

http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_sd21st/meetings.shtml

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the participants and do not reflect the position of the United Nations.

Contents

1. Context and objectives of the meeting.....	3
2. Main conclusions from the meeting.....	3
3 Formal opening and introduction.....	4
4. Main messages from the SD21 background studies.....	4
5. Summary for policy makers: Core messages.....	4
6. Structure of the synthesis report.....	6
7. Dissemination of the project’s outputs.....	6
8. Derivatives of the background reports.....	7
9. Next Steps.....	7

1. Context and objectives of the meeting

The expert group meeting aimed to support the preparation of the SD21 synthesis report for policy-makers, to be tabled at UNCSD (Rio+20). The overall objective of the meeting was to gather input from the lead drafters of the seven studies that were commissioned by The Division for Sustainable Development (DSD) under the SD21 project. Specific objectives of the meeting were:

- To allow for an interaction among the lead contributors to the project, enabling the sharing of perspectives among them with a view to best informing the synthesis report of the project. On the morning of April 5 each author presented the main findings of their reports. This was followed by a first round of discussions;
- To brainstorm on what the core messages of a summary for policymakers should be. This was done on April 5 and 6;
- To gather the lead authors' feedback on an initial draft of the full synthesis report of the project. This was done on April 6 in the morning;
- To agree on steps to be taken by all involved to disseminate the findings of the project, both before and during UNCSD and in the longer term. This was discussed on April 6.

In addition, the workshop was also used for internal information purposes. The first half-day of the workshop was opened to interested DSD staff, giving them an opportunity to learn about the main messages of the reports commissioned under the project from their authors.

2. Main conclusions from the meeting

The discussions that took place throughout the two days led to conclusions on the core messages from the SD21 project and its seven background reports, possible derivative products produced from the background studies, as well as dissemination of the project outputs.

- **Dissemination.** The discussion explored possible channels for the dissemination of the SD21 background reports.
- **Derivative products.** The meeting explored ongoing projects and other possibilities for derivative products of the background reports and the project as a whole. The option of publishing a collected book out of the project's reports seemed worthwhile to the whole group and will be further explored after UNCSD.
- **Full synthesis report.** A longer, complete synthesis report of the project is being prepared for the donor (the European Commission) and will be completed after UNCSD. The conceptual structure used for that report will be used also for the summary for policymakers.
- **Summary for policymakers.** The workshop helped focus the messages of the summary for policymakers, incorporating specific messages from the background studies into the conceptual framework of the synthesis. The summary will be prepared by the project team, sent to a designer for professional design and layout and will be available for launch at the Rio conference.
- **Next steps:** Based on the discussion at the meeting, a timetable was established by the project team with the remaining steps and actions needed before, at and after Rio.

3. Formal opening and introduction

The project team began by giving a brief presentation of the SD21 project and its context, its outputs until now, as well as the process and time line for the remainder of the project. A short discussion took place on the positioning of the SD21 synthesis report with respect to other reports and assessments produced for Rio+20.

The formal opening of the meeting was done by N. Seth, Director of the Division for Sustainable Development.

4. Main messages from the SD21 background studies

The objective of this session was to allow the lead authors from the SD21 background studies to present the main messages from their reports, in order to set the stage for more in-depth discussions in the remainder of the meeting. The session was open to staff from the Division for Sustainable Development.

The SD21 project is based on seven background studies. Six studies were commissioned to experts outside the UN system. The remaining study, the review of scenarios, was done in-house by staff of the Division for Sustainable Development. The background studies are:

- Assessment of implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles (lead author: Felix Dodds)
- Building a sustainable and desirable Economy-in-Society-in-Nature (lead author: Robert Costanza)
- Lessons learned from sustainable development scenarios (lead author: Alex Roehrl)

- Food and agriculture: the challenge of sustainability (lead author: Daniele Giovannucci)
- Sustainable land management for the 21st century (lead author: Ephraim Nkonya)
- Challenges and ways forward in the urban sector (lead author: Kaarin Taipale)
- Perspectives on sustainable energy systems for the 21st century (lead author: Mark Howells)

All the reports are accessible on the website of the Division at:

http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_sd21st/21_reports.shtml.

5. Summary for policy makers: Core messages

The objective of this session was to discuss the core messages for policy-makers that could be extracted from the project reports, and the way they should be presented for maximum impact.

Most of the discussion centred on the angle that the synthesis for policy-makers should adopt, its tone, its target audience (the world versus politicians attending the conference in Rio) and its core messages. There was agreement that once these would be clear, there is more than enough content in the SD21 reports to include clear and specific highlights among more general points.

The project team presented a suggested outline of the general messages and highlights of the SD21 synthesis report, which could be used in the summary for policy-makers. Lessons from the stock-taking of sustainable development since 1992 included the following:

1. The record on sustainable development since Rio in 1992 has been mixed.
2. We are getting closer to ecological limits.

3. There is no agreement on the way forward on the SD paradigm, i.e. on what and needs to be sustained and what needs to be developed.
4. There tends to be too much focus on means and not enough on ends.
5. The political deal that emerged from Rio is moribund. A new political deal is needed.
6. The institutional system for sustainable development is relatively ineffective because of segmentation. The UN system for SD is overburdened.

Suggestions for going forward included:

7. Bringing equity back at the forefront of political discussions.
8. Allowing for more open and broad discussions of societal priorities.
9. Reconciling need for coordination and subsidiarity on global environmental issues.
10. Adjusting the institutional framework.
11. Enabling all components of society to contribute.
12. Empowering lower levels to act on their own.

From the discussion, it appeared that four cross-cutting dimensions were present in most of the reports, and would need to be reflected in the summary, perhaps as a way to organize the discussion on institutions: governance; measurement and indicators in a broad sense; the roles of the private and public sectors; and security and resilience.

1) Governance covered the need for institutional arrangements to help move forward, including in helping to define what needs to be sustained and what needs to be developed.

2) Indicators. This included related notions of measurement, performance assessment, and sustainability indicators. Goals need to be strategic, and using common metrics for measuring progress could take the debate

to another level, allowing for stronger targets.

3) Roles of the private and public sectors.

The various studies under the project came across the need to go beyond the false dichotomy of public and private institutions that prevails today, and sometimes redefine the roles of the public and private sectors. The ways to do this can vary across sectors and topics and should be based on well-defined ends and goals, not on dogmatic positions.

4) Security / resilience is also a cross-cutting theme that is relevant to all the reports to some degree and should be incorporated much more in the design of institutions.

There was agreement on the need for a short report with powerful messages. The main debate in the group was on what degree of agreement appears to exist at what levels. Some perceived that there was increasing consensus on the need for sustainable development, spurred by the sharing of information and empirical results on what has been achieved and how. Some also believed that there is a greater consensus today on the need for integrated goals and strategies. Others pointed out that even though this might be the case, there was clearly no agreement on what strategies should be pursued - to this day there is still no set of common goals. Lastly, some thought that basic lack of commitment to sustainable development as a paradigm and differences of opinions regarding the broad goals and strategies that should be mobilized to make it happen were an obvious explanation for the lack of success observed since 1992.

Despite these varying views, there was clear agreement in the group on the value of recalling the importance of integrated, multi-sector approaches, by referring to the imperative of connecting the three pillars of SD. There also was consensus on the importance of discussing how to measure the various goals and the steps needed to achieve them.

In view of this diversity of views even in a small group of experts fully familiar with the concepts of sustainability and strongly committed to sustainable development, it seemed fair for the summary for policymakers to acknowledge the lack of consensus on world views. In fact, doing this may be the main value added of the summary, as exposing different views at different levels would offer a framework for interpreting other more normative or prescriptive reports that have been produced for Rio+20. It was decided that the best strategy may be to refer to the approach followed by the Brundtland report, which explicitly acknowledged the broad range of views prevailing at that time, and identified common problems to be solved in the interest of all. Twenty-five years later, this message is still highly relevant.

The project team in the Division for Sustainable Development committed to produce a draft summary for policy-makers based on the discussion at the meeting. In the meantime, all the authors were invited to pinpoint messages from their reports that in their sense should be featured in the synthesis for policy-makers, as well as quotes or boxes that can be used to illustrate the main ideas of the report.

6. Structure of the synthesis report

The project team presented the structure that will be followed for the “full” synthesis report for the project. This will be the final report to the donor (the EC). It will take a systematic approach and refer to the main findings of the background reports, quoting longer excerpts from them as necessary or to give specific examples.

All the chapters of the synthesis will be structured along the following hierarchy of levels of discourse on sustainable development:

1. SD as an overarching objective;
2. Vision for sustainable development

3. Goals and strategies (the ends).
4. Action plans and policies (means)
5. Implementation

The initial feedback on the report structure included the agreement that if goals are consistent, then implementation can be effective. There was consensus among the group that starting from the fourth and fifth levels is not efficient and at times can be counterproductive. This reaffirms the importance of beginning from the top of the structure and defining goals before concentrating on the means. The discussion made clear that classifying arguments and ideas in specific levels could sometimes be a matter of judgment.

7. Dissemination of the project’s outputs

The objective of this session was to discuss ways of disseminating the reports produced under the project. The questions around the dissemination of the project’s outputs included, who should “own” them? How can they be made accessible to a broad audience? What public should be targeted? What dissemination channels that should be used? Which groups would align with the messages included in the reports?

There was general agreement that in order to have maximum impact, all the reports need to be well designed and polished. One report is already in a dissemination-ready format. The others will be done progressively, as UN administrative constraints permit.

It was agreed that two dissemination tracks would be followed:

- Dissemination through UN channels. This comprises the summary for policy-makers, to be tabled in Rio, with possibly a side event (pending confirmation); as well as posting of notices of the reports on the list servers used by DSD.
- Dissemination of background reports by the lead authors and their co-authors to

their networks. This includes thematic/sectoral list servers targeting specific communities (e.g. energy planners).

Everybody agreed that it made sense to produce a short (double A5) brochure on the project. The brochure will describe the 8 tracks and the general approach of the project, and point to the project website.

It was also agreed that it make sense to refer to only one website, in order to maximize the hits. All the reports are posted on the DSD SD21 webpage, http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_sd21st/21_reports.shtml. Announcements of the reports made by the authors on their or their institutions' websites should point to this link.

More dissemination channels will be mobilized in the coming months, using the authors' networks, including links from additional websites, mailing lists, forums, journals, as well as upcoming side events, workshops and conferences.

As a special channel for dissemination of the whole project, Stakeholder Forum offered to dedicate a special issue of Outreach to the project, to be issued some time during the third Preparatory Committee of Rio+20.

There was a discussion on the title of the project / report. It was agreed that it is important to keep continuity with the existing material, so that the project name should be kept, but that the summary for policy makers should have a more catchy title.

8. Derivatives of the background reports

Some authors plan to publish policy briefs or short article versions of their background reports.

On a longer term, all authors expressed interest for publishing the essence of the reports and synthesis in an edited book

based on a collection of shortened chapters (~30 pages). Using the core messages relevant to the reports (governance, indicators, private and public sector, security, resilience) as a basic structure for the narrative could be a way to harmonize the chapters. All chapters could include a page or two at the end reflecting on what happened at Rio and what the implications may be for furthering progress in their area. The discussion covered the choice of a date for publication (possibly at the end of 2012), the need for an editor to harmonize the chapters, and the mobilization of high-level persons to write a foreword or preface.

9. Next Steps

The last session of the workshop was devoted to planning for the next steps to be undertaken by the projects participants.

Before Rio. The priority is to have validated versions of all the background reports, and to have some of them designed and laid out in time for UNCSD. Authors will be relied on to promote the reports that are in final form. As for the summary for policy makers, a full draft based on the approach discussed during the meeting will be prepared by the project team, circulated for reaction, and then submitted for approval in UNDESA.

At Rio+20. The project team, upon receiving confirmation and details for its SD21 side event, will prepare the agenda and its content with the authors. Authors attending Rio+20 will disseminate and feature the project brochure and reports in side events in which they will speak or participate.

After Rio. The DSD project team will finish the full synthesis report and send it for design. The synthesis report could be promoted through a variety of channels (conferences, side events, etc.). After UNCSD, the option of publishing a book will be further explored. This involves exploring alternatives for the book structure and composition, editing, and publishing.