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Emerging issues: contributions of social development to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals

Note by the Secretariat

I. Introduction

1. Pursuant to Economic and Social Council resolution 2006/18, the Commission for Social Development has included the agenda item entitled “Emerging issues” in its programme of work since its 2007-2008 review and policy cycle. Under this agenda item, the Commission addresses current issues affecting social development that require urgent consideration or new cross-cutting issues in the context of evolving global development challenges. The Bureau of the Commission decided that the question of “Contributions of social development to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals” would be considered under this agenda item at the fifty-third session.

2. The present note has been prepared as background information for the discussion of this topic. It focuses on some specific areas in which social development can contribute to achieving socially, economically and environmentally sustainable development. It should be read in conjunction with the report of the Secretary-General on rethinking and strengthening social development in the contemporary world (E/CN.5/2015/3), as well as the notes prepared for the fifty-first and fifty-second sessions (E/CN.5/2013/11 and E/CN.5/2014/8).

* E/CN.5/2015/1.



II. Transitioning from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals

3. In the United Nations Millennium Declaration adopted in 2000 (General Assembly resolution 55/2), world leaders identified the key challenges facing humanity at the dawn of the twenty-first century and committed themselves to addressing these challenges with international and national action. The Millennium Development Goals, a limited number of clear, time-bound and measurable goals and targets to achieve development for all, endorsed by the General Assembly in its resolution 56/95, have galvanized unprecedented action and consolidated the efforts being made by multiple actors, as well as bringing in new partners who contributed to better resource mobilization and enhanced public-private partnerships.

4. Since the adoption of the Millennium Declaration, many countries have made impressive gains in reaching the Millennium Development Goals. However, progress towards the goals has been uneven. There remain disparities in achievements between regions and within countries. More than 1 billion people still live in extreme poverty and many more live marginally above the poverty line (\$1.25 per day). They continue to struggle with limited access to basic services, including education, health services, safe drinking water and sanitation. Rising inequality and exclusion, unemployment and lack of decent work opportunities remain problems in many countries. The “unfinished business” of the Millennium Development Goals must be carried on beyond 2015 (see [A/68/970](#), para. 18).

5. Furthermore, complex and interrelated threats have emerged or intensified. These include environmental degradation, climate change, spread of diseases, economic and financial fragility, volatile food and energy prices, food and water insecurity, rapid urbanization and increased incidents of internal conflict. These social, economic and environmental challenges, if not tackled, threaten to reverse the development gains made so far and to undermine future progress.

6. Against this background, in the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012, entitled “The future we want”, world leaders 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” (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex, para. 3). They also launched a process to develop a set of sustainable development goals that would be limited in number, aspirational and easy to communicate, and would address in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and be coherent with and integrated into the United Nations development agenda beyond 2015 (paras. 246 and 247).

7. The Open Working Group of the General Assembly on Sustainable Development Goals submitted its report to the Assembly in August 2014 (see [A/68/970](#)), which the Assembly, in its resolution 68/309, acknowledged as the basis for integrating sustainable development goals into the post-2015 development agenda. During the sixty-ninth session of the Assembly, further discussions are expected with a view to elaborating a universal, transformative and action-oriented post-2015 development agenda, with poverty eradication and sustainability at the core, and integrating economic, social and environmental dimensions, to be adopted by Heads of State and Government at a summit meeting in September 2015. This

offers a unique opportunity to design a coherent, integrated and people-centred framework to achieve “the future we want” envisaged at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, that will leave no one behind.

8. The present note aims to examine key areas in which social development can contribute to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals. Section III presents an overview of the concept of social sustainability. It is followed by a section discussing how social policies can drive the transition to sustainable development, with particular focus on: (a) investment in human capacity; (b) the transition to a green economy; and (c) knowledge and new technology. The note concludes with some questions for the Commission to consider in its discussion.

III. Social sustainability

9. The World Summit for Social Development, held in Copenhagen from 6 to 12 March 1995, set a broad vision of social development to create a society for all. Social development was seen as both as an objective and a process to ensure the well-being of all people and the harmonious functioning of society through its three core commitments: eradication of poverty, promotion of productive employment and social integration. As a process, social development involved a progressively fairer distribution of opportunities and resources to foster social justice and equality. It also entailed greater inclusion and participation of all people in economic, social and political processes.

10. The World Commission on Environment and Development defined sustainable development as development that “meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” — intergenerational equity — focusing on two key areas: needs, in particular the essential needs of people living in poverty; and “limitations imposed by the state of technology and social organization on the environment’s ability to meet present and future needs” (A/42/427, annex). From this perspective, sustainable development requires balancing the needs of diverse populations, within and among generations across economic, social and environmental dimensions. It is a concept with equity at its core.

11. More recently, “The future we want” (see para. 6 above) identified poverty eradication, changing unsustainable and promoting sustainable patterns of consumption and production and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development as the overarching objectives of and essential requirements for sustainable development (General Assembly resolution 66/288, annex, para. 4). In this framework, the social dimension of sustainable development includes poverty eradication, the creation of better opportunities for all, reduction of inequalities, better standards of living, equitable social development and social inclusion.

12. Despite calls for integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced manner, the social aspect has been the least developed of the three. Traditional approaches have often focused on the environmental dimension and its linkage with economic growth. The difficulty

of quantifying some key elements of social sustainability has also been a contributing factor.¹

13. While there is no universally agreed definition of social sustainability, a literature to conceptualize the notion is emerging.

14. Some propose that human well-being, equity, democratic government and democratic civil society are primary constituents of social sustainability.² Social sustainability requires equity within and between generations, social integration and inclusion, broad-based participation and empowerment and engagement of citizens to direct their own future. Another argument emphasizes that a socially sustainable system must achieve adequate provision of social services, distributional and gender equity, participatory and pluralistic democracy and political accountability.³ Yet others define social sustainability by focusing on the relationship between the world of work, nature and society. Within this paradigm, social sustainability is attained “if work within a society and the related institutional arrangements satisfy an extended set of human needs [and] are shaped in a way that nature and its reproductive capabilities are preserved over a long period of time and the normative claims of social justice, human dignity and participation are fulfilled”.⁴ Other approaches define it as a condition that improves the quality of life for all segments of population or provides the minimal social requirements for long-term development,⁵ or one that sustains communities that are equitable, diverse, connected and democratic, and provide a good quality of life.⁶

15. Sen sees the need for taking the discussion of sustainability further and argues that, while human beings are often seen as “consumers” or “people with needs” in the current discourse, they should be seen rather as “agents of change who can — given the opportunity — think, assess, evaluate, resolve, inspire, agitate and, through these means, reshape the world”.⁷ In this context, in addition to needs and their fulfilment, the concepts of freedom and capability could be considered: the freedom of current and future generations to decide what they want and to live as they would like, and the capability to do what they have reasons to want to do.

¹ See Stephen McKenzie, “Social sustainability: towards some definitions”, Hawke Research Institute Working Paper Series, No. 27 (Magill, South Australia, University of South Australia, 2004).

² Kristen Magis and Craig Shinn, “Emergent themes of social sustainability”, in *Understanding the Social Aspect of Sustainability*, J. Dillard, V. Dujon and M.C. King, eds. (New York, Routledge, 2009). Available from www.clackamas.us/leadership/documents/socialsustain.pdf.

³ Jonathan M. Harris, “Basic principles of sustainable development”, Global Development and Environment Institute Working Paper 00-04 (Medford, Massachusetts, Tufts University, 2000).

⁴ Littig and Griebl (2005) cited in A. Colantonio and T. Dixon, *Measuring Socially Sustainable Urban Regeneration in Europe* (Oxford, Oxford Institute for Sustainable Development, 2009).

⁵ M. Polèse and R. Stren, eds., *The Social Sustainability of Cities: Diversity and the Management of Change* (Toronto, University of Toronto Press, 2000).

⁶ Western Australian Council of Social Services, “Model of social sustainability”. Available from www.wacoss.org.au/Libraries/State_Election_2013_Documents/WACOSS_Model_of_Social_Sustainability.sflb.ashx.

⁷ Amartya Sen, “The ends and means of sustainability”, *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*, vol. 14, No. 1 (2013).

16. Social sustainability is also defined as maintaining (or enhancing) social capital,⁸ which in turn is defined as shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within and among groups. Social values, rights, trust and social interactions, such as cooperation and participation, are considered essential criteria for maintaining social sustainability. Violence, for example, is seen as a social cost resulting from inadequate investment in social capital.⁹ Safety nets, education and health systems, as well as institutional capacity to deliver these services, are also seen as key elements for social sustainability.¹⁰

17. These various approaches focus on different aspects of social sustainability. They generally include the following elements: social norms and behaviours, values and ethics, social justice, equity, fulfilment of basic needs, well-being, quality of life, social capital, human capability, rights, trust, human interaction (cooperation and participation), freedom, security, social responsibility, social inclusion and cohesion, solidarity and social resilience.

18. In the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals, the important synergies between social development and economic growth and environmental protection need to be further clarified (see [A/68/970](#)). Social policies are already dealing with issues closely related to sustainability, although they are not necessarily framed in social sustainability terms. Further clarification of the concept of social sustainability will enable better articulation of these synergies and ensure greater coherence among social, economic and environmental policies.

19. While the concept of social sustainability requires further clarification, some practical elements can be highlighted on the basis of existing literature. They include a broad vision and policies to improve the quality of life and the well-being of all people through investing in human capacity and social capital; promoting employment and decent work for all; and promoting greater inclusion and participation of all people by ensuring equitable access to social services and productive resources, equal opportunities and citizen engagement, as well as institutional capacity to deliver services.

IV. Contributions of social development to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals: key areas

20. One of the critical lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals is that economic growth, while fundamentally necessary, is not sufficient to achieve development for all. Without adequate economic and social policies, economic gains

⁸ According to the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), social capital refers to networks, shared norms, values and understandings that facilitate cooperation within and among groups. Societies with high social capital are considered to have higher degrees of mutual trust and social cohesion and may be more effective in achieving sustainable development. The concept of socially responsible investing encompasses some aspects of social sustainability, such as diversity, employee relations, human rights, product safety, reporting and governance structure.

⁹ Robert Goodland, "Sustainability: human, social, economic and environmental" (Washington, D.C., World Bank). Available from <http://eu.wiley.com/legacy/wileychi/egec/pdf/GA811-W.PDF>.

¹⁰ OECD, *Policies to Enhance Sustainable Development* (Paris, OECD Publications, 2001).

tend to benefit a small portion of society, further exacerbating existing inequality. A growing body of empirical evidence shows that the effect of economic growth on poverty has been dampened in countries with rising income inequality, and that the “poverty-reducing power” of economic growth is less in countries that are initially more unequal. A highly unequal society is also vulnerable to physical insecurity and social tensions.

21. In fact, growth in recent years has not been inclusive.¹¹ Income inequality has increased sharply over the last few decades (1980-2010) in many countries, while non-income inequality¹² remains high, despite the marked progress in reducing disparities in education, health and other dimension of human development. Seven out of 10 of the world’s people live in countries where income inequality has risen. Particularly after the recent global financial and economic crisis, human suffering intensified as a result of many people remaining unemployed or trapped in low-wage jobs, at risk of falling into poverty.¹³

22. The current pattern of economic growth is also achieved at the cost of environmental degradation that has taken a heavy toll on the livelihoods and well-being of people.¹⁴ With the current rate of consumption, the future availability of natural resources, including food, water, energy and minerals, is being severely challenged.¹⁵

23. The International Social Science Council, in its joint report with the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO), stated that environmental problems and other social, economic and political crises were not disconnected challenges; they were part of a single complex system. Global environmental change is therefore fundamentally a social problem as well.¹⁶ Unless fundamental changes are introduced in respect of the use of natural resources, sustainable development will remain elusive. But changing the relationship between societies and the natural environment will require a major change in production and consumption patterns which will require, in turn, a fundamental change in the values, behaviours and mindsets of people.

¹¹ See *Inequality Matters: Report on the World Social Situation 2013* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.IV.2); Technical Support Team, “TST issues brief: promoting equality, including social equity”, available from http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2406_TST%20Issues%20Brief%20on%20Promoting%20Equality_FINAL.pdf; Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, International Fund for Agricultural Development and World Food Programme, *The State of Food Insecurity in the World 2014: Strengthening the Enabling Environment for Food Security and Nutrition* (Rome, FAO, 2014); United Nations, *The Millennium Development Goals Report 2014* (New York, 2014); Forbes, *The World’s Billionaires* (www.forbes.com/billionaires/ accessed in March 2013, March 2014 and August 2014).

¹² The non-income dimensions of inequality include health and educational outcomes and disparities between urban and rural areas and within urban areas.

¹³ For more detailed analysis, see *Inequality Matters: Report on the World Social Situation 2013* (United Nations publication, Sales No. E.13.IV.2).

¹⁴ OECD, *Towards Green Growth* (Paris, OECD Publishing, 2011). Available from www.oecd.org/greengrowth/48224539.pdf.

¹⁵ See Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, *Climate Change 2014 Synthesis Report*. Available from http://www.ipcc.ch/pdf/assessment-report/ar5/syr/SYR_AR5_LONGERREPORT.pdf.

¹⁶ International Social Science Council and UNESCO, *World Social Science Report 2013: Changing Global Environments* (Paris, OECD Publishing and UNESCO Publishing, 2013).

24. To effectively address poverty, inequality and social and economic vulnerabilities, as well as environmental challenges, strong political will and a right mix of public policies within a coherent framework are needed. These policies should aim to achieve more inclusive and equitable growth, invest in human capacity; expand employment and decent job opportunities; promote social inclusion, equity and equality; strengthen social protection; and enhance social capital, reduce vulnerability and strengthen resilience. These fall in the realm of social policy and social development.

25. Social development, with the core objectives of poverty eradication, full employment and decent work for all and social integration, captures the core values underlining sustainable development. Fulfilling social development goals is necessary to ensure that development will be inclusive and sustainable.

26. Social development is an end unto itself, while also instrumental to achieving sustainable development. Social development enhances the quality of life and well-being of all members of society; increases the capacity and productivity of all people, which enables inclusive and equitable economic growth; and strengthens knowledge and the capacity of people to better manage natural resources and ensure environmental sustainability. The following sections highlight some important areas for further discussion and elaboration by the Commission for Social Development.

A. Reducing vulnerabilities and building resilience for sustainable development through investment in human capacity

27. Building human capacity through investments in education, health, safe drinking water and sanitation and social infrastructure is crucial to reducing social and economic vulnerabilities¹⁷ and enhancing resilience. It prevents people from falling into poverty or being trapped in intergenerational poverty. It empowers individuals and communities by giving them agency and voice, and the capability to exercise their rights.

28. Investments in education, health, safe drinking water and sanitation and social infrastructure, in particular, help to strengthen the social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. In addition to buttressing aggregate demand (especially in times of economic downturn) to sustain economic growth, such investments will maximize the productive potentials of individuals and produce a healthy, well-educated and skilled workforce necessary for economic growth. The high and growing economic and social returns to investments in education and health for individuals, economies and societies at large are empirically well established. Investment to improve access to education, basic health care, safe drinking water and sanitation, especially in early childhood, helps break the intergenerational transmission of poverty, as such access allows young children to grow up healthy and develop the skills needed to gain access to productive employment and other opportunities. Investment in women's education has also been shown to result in better education and health outcomes for their children.

¹⁷ People differ in their exposure to physical, economic, social and environmental risks as a result of their socioeconomic status and social identity, including gender, age, disability, place of residence and other factors. As a result, people experience different types of vulnerability at different points along the life cycle.

29. The impact of investments in health, education and other social services on vulnerability to poverty (and exclusion) depends on the coverage of social services. Universal access to quality education and health services and social protection benefits people living in poverty and those who are sick or unemployed. It reduces social and economic vulnerability and enhances resilience to crises of various kinds. The provision of universal quality services also contributes to build social cohesion by reducing inequalities of access to basic services.

30. Universal provision of these basic services is feasible, even in poor countries,¹⁸ although it may require changes in public spending priorities as well as resource mobilization. The International Labour Organization (ILO) suggested that the cost of the basic cash benefit package (old-age, disability pensions and family allowances, without health care) would be between 2.2 per cent and 5.7 per cent of GDP in low- and middle-income countries.¹⁹ The World Health Organization (WHO) estimated the average cost of ensuring access to basic health services as approximately US\$ 60 per capita for the low-income countries.²⁰ A recent ILO study found that a benefit package for children under 16 years old, composed of a family allowance per child equivalent to 50 per cent of the minimum wage, additional education services and one meal per day, would cost 0.8 per cent of GDP, and would reduce the child poverty rate from 20.8 per cent to 2.2 per cent.²¹

31. Investments in human capacity and social infrastructure also equip people with the skills and knowledge necessary to better manage the use of natural resources, to mitigate risks arising from economic shocks, natural disasters and environmental hazards and to change consumption and production patterns. Investing in these areas will also strengthen the resilience of people adversely affected by the negative effects of climate change, such as droughts, heat waves, forest fires and sea level rise, and secondary effects such as decreasing crop yields or loss of landmass in coastal areas. People living in poverty or in rural and remote areas are more vulnerable to environmental change, as they are more dependent on natural resources or have less assets and savings. Thus, such investment will also help to reduce inequality associated with geographic locations.

32. Investments in universal provision of basic social services may be extended to cover those who are adversely affected by natural disasters or environmental changes. Universal provision may be combined with other measures to enhance the human capacity of people vulnerable to natural disasters or environmental change, including measures to increase their productive assets and savings and improve their access to a wide range of financial services (for example, microfinance, credit, insurance and community or cooperative banks), which will facilitate recovery from disasters. Supporting local saving schemes through investment in social infrastructure

¹⁸ ILO, *Social Protection Floor for a Fair and Inclusive Globalization: Report of the Advisory Group Chaired by Michelle Bachelet, Convened by the ILO with the Collaboration of the WHO* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2011).

¹⁹ ILO, *Can Low-Income Countries Afford Basic Social Security?*, Social Security Policy Briefings, Paper 3 (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2008).

²⁰ WHO, *Constraints to Scaling up the Health Millennium Development Goals: Costing and Financial Gap Analysis — Background Document for the Taskforce on Innovative International Financing for Health Systems* (Geneva, 2010).

²¹ Michael Cichon and others, *Analysis of the Viet Nam National Social Protection Strategy (2011-2020) in the Context of Social Protection Floor Objectives: A Rapid Assessment*, ESS Paper No. 32 (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2012).

as well as financial literacy education, for example, is a way to enable vulnerable households to readily access cash or credit, thereby avoiding their selling productive assets to meet immediate needs, a coping mechanism that typically leads to poverty.

33. In sum, investment in human capacity yields high returns not only in terms of achieving social development objectives. It supports inclusive and sustained economic growth by improving the productivity of the labour force as well as boosting aggregate demand. It contributes to environmental sustainability through improvement in natural resource management, changes in production and consumption patterns and greater resilience to and better mitigation of the impact of environmental risks.

B. Facilitating the transition to the green economy

34. Environmentally sustainable development will require a fundamental change of current production and consumption patterns to make them consistent with sustainable use of natural resources and a reduction of waste. However, the transition towards a green economy involves structural changes that will have a significant impact on the composition and level of employment.

35. The centrality of employment and decent jobs for people-centred sustainable development has been well recognized. Decent jobs enable people to gain the income necessary to sustain their livelihoods, improve their quality of life and well-being and create a path to escaping poverty at the individual level, while contributing to economic growth by increasing tax revenues and expanding aggregate demand at the national level. Therefore, managing the transition to the green economy is critical for not only environmental but also social and economic sustainability. Social policies can play an important role in facilitating this transition.

36. The Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) defines green growth as “fostering economic growth and development while ensuring that natural assets continue to provide the resources and environmental services on which our well-being relies” and says that it requires “catalysing investment and innovation which will underpin sustained growth and give rise to new economic opportunities”.²² ILO and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) define green economy as “one that results in improved human well-being and social equity, while significantly reducing environmental risks and ecological scarcities”.²³ Along these lines, UNEP broadly defines a green job as any decent job that contributes to preserving or restoring the quality of the environment whether it is in agriculture, industry, services or administration.²⁴

37. Creating jobs in green sectors, such as forest conservation and restoration, sustainable agriculture, water treatment and renewable energy in rural areas, not

²² OECD, *Towards Green Growth* (see footnote 14 above).

²³ International Labour Office, “Definitions of green jobs used in the employment and environment policy context”, available from www.ilo.org/wcmsp5/groups/public/---dgreports/---stat/documents/presentation/wcms_195740.pdf; see also ILO, *Working Towards Sustainable Development: Opportunities for Decent Work and Social Inclusion in a Green Economy* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2012).

²⁴ UNEP, *Green Jobs: Towards Decent Work in a Sustainable, Low-Carbon World* (2008). Available from www.unep.org/PDF/UNEPGreenjobs_report08.pdf.

only sustains economic growth, but also reduces the risk of further natural resource depletion and environmental degradation, and avoids negative effects of air and water pollution and climate change. The number of people employed in green jobs has been increasing in recent years.²⁵

38. However, green economy is not automatically inclusive. Social policy plays a critical role in making it so. In addition to equipping people with new skills through education and training, social policy could ensure equal access to green jobs by removing barriers and discrimination and facilitating the structural transition to a green economy. Another important role of social policy is to ensure that green jobs also meet the requirements for decent work (i.e., guaranteeing a living wage, eliminating child labour, protecting workers from occupational health hazards, developing guidelines for safety at work and providing social protection and freedom of association).

39. Another side of the transition to a green economy is the elimination of jobs in traditional resource-intensive, pollution-generating sectors. Without appropriate measures to support workers affected by such changes, the resulting rise in unemployment, poverty and social strain would undermine social progress and economic growth. Social protection plays a key role in enabling the transition. To the extent that the transition involves major structural changes, universal social protection will be needed to protect those workers and communities negatively affected. Programmes to guarantee the minimum income to sustain livelihoods through unemployment benefits and basic income security will make the transition easier to implement. The basic social protection floor initiative of the United Nations system, in particular, would help reduce the economic vulnerability of people and communities and increase their resilience to the adverse effects of climate change through basic income security. Some social protection floor programmes also contain elements that provide opportunities for retraining by securing basic income support and access to basic health and education services.²⁶

40. To leverage the contribution of social protection to sustainable development, innovative social protection mechanisms can be added to protect people from climate-related challenges. For example, insurance services to cover various life risks and agriculture losses would contribute to build resilience among vulnerable households.

41. In addition, there are other areas where social policy can directly support the green economy and environmental sustainability. The following examples illustrate the direct link between environmental protection and policies, strategies and programmes to reduce poverty and create decent jobs for vulnerable and disadvantaged social groups and individuals, including people living in poverty or in rural and remote areas.

²⁵ ILO, *Working Towards Sustainable Development: Opportunities for Decent Work and Social Inclusion in a Green Economy* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2012).

²⁶ International Labour Office and WHO, "The social protection floor: a joint crisis initiative of the UN Chief Executives Board for Co-ordination on the social protection floor" (Geneva, 2009). Available from <http://www.un.org/ga/second/64/socialprotection.pdf>.

Waste management and recycling

42. Waste management and recycling, while often associated with low-skill, low-wage jobs with hazardous working conditions, provide income opportunities for people living in extreme poverty, especially in developing countries. This sector is expected to grow to an estimated world market of US\$ 410 billion by the year 2050 owing to the anticipated increase in the amount of waste and in the recovery/recycling rate in the future (the current rate is 25 per cent).²⁷ Social policy, labour market policy in particular, can contribute to upgrading or formalizing jobs in this sector, with the triple effects of uplifting the quality of life and well-being of workers from poor communities, contributing to economic growth and reducing environmental risks and degradation.

Water and sanitation

43. Another important sector in which social policy plays an important role is the use and management of freshwater resources (both in quality and quantity). As many people living in poverty and in rural and remote areas lack access to safe drinking water and sanitation, policies and measures to improve their access should also promote effective use of water resources to address increasing water scarcity. Fresh water is essential for life and a prerequisite for all human activities. However, only 2.5 per cent of all surface water is fresh water, of which less than 1 per cent is accessible to people.²⁸ While freshwater resources are considered as renewable, the sustainability of water resources is increasingly being challenged by growing population, rapid urbanization, greater consumption by agriculture and industry, waste, contamination and pollution.²⁹ According to the 2014 United Nations World Water Development Report, at least one in four people is likely to live in a country affected by chronic or recurring shortages of fresh water by 2050.

44. A key challenge is to preserve freshwater resources while improving access to safe drinking water and sanitation for the many people still lacking adequate access, and at the same time providing water resources for agriculture and other industrial purposes. Social policy can play a critical role in increasing efficiency in water use and reuse by providing for investment in affordable and sustainable clean water technologies to improve access to safe drinking water and sanitation for all, especially for disadvantaged social groups.

Agriculture surface soil

45. Social policy has also a significant impact on the agricultural sector. Many poor households living in rural areas are engaged in subsistence or small-scale agriculture, and thereby depend heavily on natural resources such as land, water, and firewood for their livelihoods.³⁰ Land in particular is an essential asset for

²⁷ ILO, *Global Employment Trends 2014: Risk of a Jobless Recovery?* (Geneva, International Labour Office, 2014).

²⁸ www.un.org/events/water/brochure.htm.

²⁹ www.un.org/waterforlifedecade/background.shtml.

³⁰ According to UNEP, ecosystem services and other non-marketed goods are estimated to make up 50 to 90 per cent of the total livelihoods of poor rural households (UNEP, “Green and decent jobs for poverty eradication”, UNEP Post-2015 Note No. 4, available from www.unep.org/roap/Portals/96/UNEP-Post-2015-Note-4-.pdf).

agriculture. However, 25 per cent of the earth's lands are degraded,³¹ and land and water systems in many countries face the risk of progressive breakdown of their productive capacity. Furthermore, half of the topsoil on the planet, necessary for crop cultivation, has been lost in the last 150 years owing to erosion and unsustainable agricultural practices.³² Considering that forming 3 centimetres of topsoil naturally can take at least 500 years,³³ topsoil erosion is a major concern.³⁴

46. As the vast majority of poor households live in rural areas, promoting sustainable agriculture practices will have a direct impact on poverty reduction and improving rural dwellers' quality of life and well-being. Policies and measures to promote social protection and financial inclusion, for example by enhancing access to insurance and low-rate loans for smallholders and improving the terms of credit and grace periods, will support a transition to sustainable agriculture. Engaging in dialogue with rural communities enables policymakers to identify their specific needs and find better ways of increasing the efficiency and productivity of agriculture while ensuring sustainability.

C. Promoting new technologies for sustainable development

47. One of the fundamental changes in the approach to development in the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals is the recognition that a people-centred development agenda is based on the empowerment of people as agents of change. To realize inclusive, equitable and sustainable development, it is essential to build the knowledge and capacity of people, in particular the most vulnerable, so that they can qualify for green jobs and benefit from economic growth, technological advance and innovation. Enhancing knowledge of existing and emerging risks also enables better management of natural resources and conservation of the environment.

48. Some technological advances and innovations to make production processes more efficient are also particularly relevant to the green economy, for example, renewable energy, energy-efficient building, clean air and water technologies, waste management and recycling and sustainable agriculture and forestry. Without wider access to technology and innovation, however, this process has the potential to widen the gap between those who have access to modern technology and those who do not. In fact, capital-intensive technology and the so-called "robotization" of production can adversely affect vulnerable, unskilled and semi-skilled workers,³⁵ as their jobs may become redundant. On the other hand, those with skills and access to productivity-enhancing new technology stand to benefit greatly.

³¹ FAO, *The State of the World's Land and Water Resources for Food and Agriculture: Managing Systems at Risk* (Rome, Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations; London, Earthscan, 2011).

³² See www.worldwildlife.org/threats/soil-erosion-and-degradation.

³³ See <http://blogs.ei.columbia.edu/2012/04/12/why-soil-matters/>.

³⁴ United States of America, Department of Agriculture, *Summary Report: 2010 National Resources Inventory* (Washington, D.C., Natural Resources Conservation Service; Ames, Iowa State University, 2013). Available from http://www.nrcs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/stelprdb1167354.pdf.

³⁵ UNEP, "Green and decent jobs for poverty eradication" (see footnote 30 above).

49. A good example of new and green technologies helping rural poor households can be found in Bangladesh, where about 70 per cent of the population does not have access to electricity. Grameen Shakti,³⁶ a non-profit village renewable energy scheme linked to the micro-credit lender Grameen Bank, provides small loans that enable households in rural and remote areas to buy a solar home systems. By introducing solar systems, the scheme helps reduce carbon footprints, inhibit deforestation and create job and income opportunities.

50. Knowledge sharing and mutual learning offer a powerful tool for gaining insights, new information, good practices and lessons on promoting social, economic and environmental sustainability. The patent landscape reports of the World Intellectual Property Organization³⁷ constitute a platform for such sharing. They cover such areas as public health, food security, climate change and environment. These reports provide information on new technologies that can help people emerge from poverty by engaging in environment-saving activities.

51. A recent report³⁸ quantifies significant opportunities for small and medium-sized enterprises in developing countries in the clean technology sector, and recommends action to be taken by policymakers and the private sector. Formulating targeted policy incentives to encourage home-grown clean-technology sectors, for example, will create jobs while improving access to clean and affordable energy, clean water and climate-resilient agriculture.

52. Social policy, especially in education and training, plays a key role in fostering innovations necessary for the transition to knowledge-based and innovation-driven economies. Such a transition requires well-educated people who are capable of creating, absorbing and utilizing innovations and new technology. In addition to increasing the number of people trained in the natural sciences, technology development and engineering, educational systems and vocational training should aim to build creative thinking skills and the capacity to absorb the wide variety of knowledge available at the global level.

53. Moreover, social policy, with its principles of promoting equity and inclusive development, plays a critical role in ensuring that all people, including those of marginalized and disadvantaged groups, have equal access to knowledge and new technology and equal opportunity to develop the ability to utilize these technologies. This lays the foundation for development that is sustainable socially, economically and environmentally.

V. Conclusion

54. Actions to effectively tackle the adverse effects of climate change must simultaneously advance economic growth and social progress, improving the well-beings and standard of living for all people. Progress in one area should not be made at the cost of the other areas.

³⁶ See www.gshakti.org/.

³⁷ See www.wipo.int/patentscope/en/programs/patent_landscapes/.

³⁸ The World Bank Group, *Building Competitive Green Industries: The Climate and Clean Technology Opportunity for Developing Countries* (Washington, D.C., World Bank, 2014). Available from www.infodev.org/infodev-files/green-industries.pdf.

55. The present note has illustrated how social policy can contribute to the transition from the Millennium Development Goals to the sustainable development goals in a number of areas across the three dimensions of sustainable development. Social science and social policy provide frameworks to analyse the impact of environmental degradation on vulnerable groups, communities and individuals and provide the means to build their resilience and reduce their vulnerability. In addition, it provides the mechanisms to change social norms, values and behaviours and to empower people as active agents of change towards more sustainable paths to development.

56. More rigorous research is needed to further clarify the concept of social sustainability. Important concepts and principles such as equity, equality, social inclusion and cohesion should be further explored to make them consistent with the objective of achieving social sustainability, understood not only as a long-term goal but also as a process that drives development outcomes towards more sustainable patterns.

57. Social policy is central to achieving sustainable development outcomes. In the preceding sections, there is an attempt to illustrate some areas where social policy can make a remarkable contribution to sustainable development. Even more importantly, the challenges we face in realizing sustainable development require collective action which is rooted in and fostered by social development. Thus, promoting social development, strengthening the social pillar, is fundamental to sustainability.

58. The Commission for Social Development may wish to consider the following questions in its deliberations on the emerging issue at its fifty-third session:

(a) **How can social policy, poverty eradication strategies in particular, integrate environmental sustainability perspectives in the promotion of inclusive and equitable economic growth?**

(b) **What measures can be taken to implement innovative social protection systems and programmes that mitigate risks arising from external shocks and negative effects of climate change, safeguard people from falling into poverty and enhance health and education outcomes?**

(c) There are existing and emerging job opportunities, including in sectors where upgrading of skills will be expected, in the transition to a green economy. **How can policymakers ensure adequate investment in human capacity to develop employable skills in these areas? What good practices, both in terms of national programmes and international support, can be shared?**

(d) **How can the international community facilitate knowledge sharing and access to new technologies and innovation, including renewable energy, sustainable use of natural resources and ecosystem services and information and communication technologies? How can they be made widely available to all members of society, including youth, older persons, persons with disabilities, indigenous peoples, other vulnerable groups and people living in poverty or in rural and remote areas?**