Retreat on "SDGs, Rio+20 and the Post-2015 Development Agenda"
Tarrytown House Conference Center
Tarrytown, NY 22-24 January 2012

Discussion Note 2:[1]

Informal consultations on the proposal for Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) in the context of Rio+20 and the post-2015 development agenda were held in Tarrytown, NY from 23 to 24 January 2012, with the participation of 44 countries, representatives of NGOs, and representatives of the UN and UN agencies. This is the second of three background discussion notes prepared for the Retreat by the World Resources Institute.

Sustainable Development Challenges as Thematic Areas of Common Concern

In the run up to Rio+20 there has been growing interest in the eventual establishment of a set of quantitative, time-bound, and verifiable Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that can spur policy innovation at the national level, form the basis of international cooperation, and shape priorities for development aid, investment, and assistance in the post-2015 era. However, there has yet to be a significant international discussion on what thematic priorities – or sustainable development challenges – a set of SDGs might address. This discussion note provides information about sustainable development challenges and implications for thematic areas of common concern around which SDGs may be formulated.

Sustainable Development Challenges – Three perspectives and implications for SDGs

To be most effective, SDGs should provide a tool for overcoming challenges to the realization of a sustainable society that embodies "care and respect for people, planet and prosperity."[2] Challenges within these three domains of sustainable development – social, environmental, and economic – can be identified in a number of ways with different implications for SDGs. Three useful perspectives include:

Challenges in the implementation of Agenda 21 and related commitments

In the context of Agenda 21, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the Doha Ministerial Declaration, and many other major conventions and agreements on all aspects of sustainable development, the international community has committed to programs of work, targets for aid and technology transfer, and other means of implementation. One way to describe sustainable development challenges is in terms of gaps in implementing key provisions of these agreements. For example, as part of the JPOI, countries committed to creating "open, equitable, rules-based, predictable and non-discriminatory multilateral trading and financial systems that benefit all countries in the pursuit of sustainable development" and to completing the program of work contained in the Doha Ministerial Declaration to advance this goal.[3] Progress has lagged.[4] From this perspective, SDGs can be seen as a tool for accelerating implementation of open-ended agreements through use of time-bound quantitative targets.

Challenges in achieving sustainable development conditions

Another perspective on sustainable development challenges is to focus on worrisome trends and conditions that are holding back progress in achieving sustainable development around the world, such as increased vulnerability to climate change, food shortages, water scarcity, energy poverty, unmanaged and unsustainable urban expansion, ecosystem degradation, and loss of biological diversity. SDGs can help fill in the holes where global goals, targets, and indicators for these critical issues are lacking.

Where goals and targets exist, but are not being met, SDGs could help by addressing underlying factors that contribute to non-attainment. For example, SDGs may be useful in establishing targets and indicators that address cross-cutting factors preventing achievement of CBD objectives such as "limited capacity in financial, human and technical issues, the absence of scientific information, limited biodiversity mainstreaming or the absence of economic valuation of biodiversity".[5]

Challenges limiting attainment of human well-being

As noted by the U.N.'s Environment Management Group, "[t]he protection and enhancement of human well-being is a common denominator for the UN system and the ultimate goal of sustainability practices."[6] Over the past ten years or so, a new perspective on sustainable development has emerged that emphasizes the relationship between subjective well-being as reported in systematic surveys such as the World Values Survey, and the four forms of capital (human, social, built, and natural) essential to a sustainable society.[7] Given the increasing popularity and relevance of this field, an inventory of major sustainable development challenges could be enhanced by examining factors found to limit subjective well-being as reported in this field of research. For example, such research has consistently found a strong negative correlation between self-reported well-being and both inflation and unemployment. According to a recent UNDP report, "[i]nflation—apart from corroding purchasing power—creates feelings of reduced morale and national prestige and exploitation. Unemployment, aside from the pecuniary loss, is associated with costs such as loss of self esteem, depression, anxiety, and social stigma."[8] What this implies is that SDGs could be designed to address factors not typically part of the sustainable development discourse but nonetheless vital to sustainable well-being.

Sustainable Development Challenges – Evidence from Rio preparations, MDGS, and the literature

A systematic survey of sustainable development challenges from each of these perspectives is a formidable challenge in and of itself. In preparation for Rio+20, UNDESA is working with the NGO Stakeholder Forum to prepare a comprehensive analysis of gaps in the implementation of Rio Principles and Agenda 21.[9] An inventory of challenges from the perspective of worrisome conditions and trends and factors limiting well-being is, by necessity, less objective and systematic due to wide variations in how these conditions, trends, and factors are classified, described, and measured. Nonetheless, there are many sources that provide useful information to help inform the SDG development process. Findings from four of these sources are reported in Table 1 below, including:

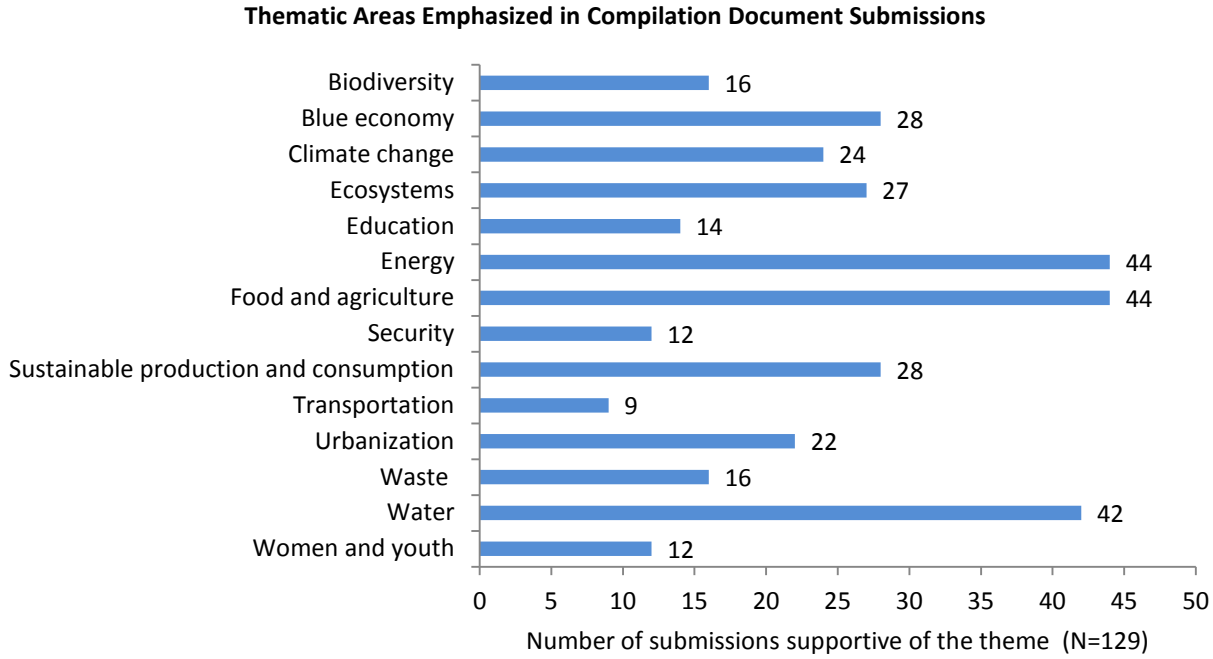
- Column one lists sustainable development gaps and challenges most often cited in a WRI analysis of submissions to the Rio+20 negotiating document and regional preparatory reports. The submissions reviewed include submissions from four major political groups, six NGOs, IGOs, and U.N. agencies, five major groups, as well as summaries of five regional preparatory meetings.[10] The challenges and gaps included in column one appear in descending order of frequency. So, for example, development assistance was cited as an important gap in 13 of the 20 documents. Vulnerability to food and energy shortages, economic crises, epidemics, and natural disasters was cited in 11 of 20, as were greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions.
- Column two lists "priority sectors and cross-cutting issues" identified in the August 2011 Report of the Secretary General on implementation of Agenda 21.[11]
- Column three is based on data from the latest Millennium Development Goal (MDG) report.[12] It identifies MDG goals or targets that are not likely to be met by 2015 in a majority of regions as well as indicators that have shown worsening trends since 1990.
- Column four is based on two literature reviews of well-being research.[13] It lists the most consistent variables that relate to self-reported well-being in a statistically significant manner in various models in multiple regions and years.

Figure 1 provides additional perspectives. This analysis reviewed 129 compilation document submissions to identify thematic areas that member states and other stakeholders support for the formulation of Rio+20 outcomes. While these thematic areas are not necessarily related to challenges or gaps, they are nonetheless suggestive of underlying issues of concern and so are useful to consider. Food and agriculture and energy top the list having been identified as priority thematic areas in 44 of the submissions reviewed, followed by water (42), blue economy (28), sustainable production and consumption (28), ecosystems (27), climate change (24) and urbanization (22).

Table 1: Sustainable Development Challenges

Sustainable Development Gaps and Challenges			Factors Limiting Subjective Well-Being
From compilation document submissions:	*From Secretary General's report:*	*From MDG indicator trends:*	*From well-being surveys and research:*
Development assistance	Energy access	Poverty	GNI per capita
Vulnerability	GHG emissions	Productive employment	Social capital
GHG emissions	Clean water access	Primary education	Natural capital
Biodiversity loss	Water supply	Women's employment	Poor health
Energy access	Food security	Women in government	Inequality
Food security	Unsustainable agriculture	Child mortality	Inflation
Unsustainable agriculture	Urbanization	Maternal mortality	Unemployment
Over-consumption	Slums	Reproductive health	Political corruption
Progress indicators	Biodiversity loss	HIV/ AIDS	Poor air quality
Freshwater scarcity	Deforestation	Tuberculosis	Consumerism
Enforcement	Harmful fishing practices	Deforestation	Basic freedoms
		GHG emissions	
		Fish stocks	
		Extinction	
		Sanitation	

Figure 1: Desired Thematic Areas for Rio+20 Outcomes



Implications for SDGs – Thematic areas of common concern

As the foregoing discussion suggests, a comprehensive set of SDGs designed to address sustainable development challenges could be informed by three perspectives that consider implementation of international agreements, worrisome conditions and trends, and factors known to limit subjective well-being. SDGs could be useful in accelerating implementation, establishing goals, targets, and indicators for issues that have not yet been considered in detail, or to address underlying factors that thwart attainment of goals and targets already established.

In terms of content, the information presented in Table 1 and Figure 1 is suggestive of thematic areas of common concern – food, energy, water, GHG emissions, loss of biodiversity, and degradation of ecosystem services, for example. However, what these data also show is that these thematic areas – take food for example – have various dimensions such as sustainability of agriculture, affordability, equitable access, security of supply, and nutritional health so in designing an overall architecture for SDGs, it may be useful to consider higher order aggregations that ensure each important dimension is considered. For example, one aggregation may be inequality – an aggregation that underlies various thematic issue areas such as overconsumption, women's rights, inadequate development assistance, slums, and access to health care. SDGs would not necessarily set goals for these higher order aggregations – those have already been fairly well fleshed out; rather, such aggregations would inform development of SDGs and associated targets to ensure that all important dimensions are addressed. Discussion note 3 will explore SDG architecture along these lines.

ENDNOTES

[1] This discussion note was prepared by John Talberth and Erin Gray at the World Resources Institute. The views and opinions expressed are not necessarily those held by WRI. For more information on this Discussion Note or

WRI's work on Green Economy please contact John Talberth (john.talberth@wri.org) or Erin Gray (erin.gray@wri.org).

[2] This basic framework for the three pillars of sustainable development was first published by the United Nations in 1987 and was used as the slogan for the World Summit for Sustainable Development in 2002.

[3] Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI) of the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, para. 47.

[4] According to the Secretary General: "Failure to reach agreement in the Doha Development Round of multilateral trade negotiations represents a continuing challenge to international cooperation." From Report of the Secretary General: Progress to date and remaining gaps in the implementation of the outcomes of the major summits in the area of sustainable development, as well as an analysis of the themes of the Conference. May 2010.

[5] Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity (2010) Global Biodiversity Outlook 3, Montréal, 94 pages.

[6] The Environment Management Group Secretariat, UNEP. 2011. A Framework for Advancing Environmental and Social Sustainability in the U.N. System. UNEP, Environmental Management Group.

[7] Engelbrecht, Hans-Jürgen. 2009. Natural Capital, Subjective Well-Being, and the New Welfare Economics of Sustainability. Palmerston, NZ: Massey University, Department of Economics and Finance.

[8] Conceicao, Pedro and Romina Bandura. 2008. Measuring Subjective Well Being: A Summary Review of the Literature. New York: Office of Development Studies, UNDP.

[9] UNDESA, Division for Sustainable Development. 2011. Sustainable Development in the 21st century (SD21) Review of implementation of Agenda 21 and the Rio Principles - Detailed review of implementation of the Rio Principles December 2011 (DRAFT). Study prepared by the Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future.

[10] Political groups: CARICOM, EU, G77/China, Pacific SIDS. NGOS, IGOs, UN: World Bank, UNDP, Stakeholder Forum, Pew Environment, Oxfam, Green Economy Coalition. Regional meetings: Africa, Arab Region, Asia Pacific, Latin America/ Caribbean, Europe-North America. Major groups: Business and Industry, Farmers, Indigenous Peoples, Workers/ Unions, Women. Submissions available at: http://www.uncsd2012.org/rio20/index.php?menu=115.

[11] United Nations. 2011. Implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development – Report of the Secretary-General.

[12] United Nations. 2011. Millennium Development Report, 2011. Statistical Annex.

[13] Engelbrecht, Hans-Jürgen (2009), note 8; Conceicao, Pedro and Romina Bandura (2008), note 9.