



Economic and Social Council

Distr.: General
14 February 2013

Original: English

Economic Commission for Europe

Sixty-fifth session

Geneva, 9–11 April 2013

Item 2 (b) of the provisional agenda

Follow-up to Rio+20 and post-2015 development agenda

Sustainable development governance: regional implications and perspectives for the post-Rio+20 institutional set-up

Note by the secretariat*

I. Background

1. The rules of procedure of the Economic Commission for Europe (ECE) require basic documents to be prepared in relation to the agenda items, as appropriate. This document is being submitted to support the discussion on the regional implications and perspectives for the establishment of the post-Rio+20 institutional set-up to govern the sustainable development under item 2 (b) of the High-level segment.

II. Introduction

2. The United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD, Rio+20) took place in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012. The Rio+20 Conference focused on two main themes: a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; and the institutional framework for sustainable development. The Conference's outcome document entitled "The future we want" was endorsed by the United Nations General Assembly in September 2012 (A/RES/66/288¹).

3. In December 2012, in its resolution A/RES/67/203 on Implementation of Agenda 21, the Programme for the Further Implementation of Agenda 21 and the outcomes of the World Summit on Sustainable Development and of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the General Assembly reaffirmed the Rio+20 outcome document and urged its speedy implementation.

* This document has been submitted after the official documentation deadline due to the need to await the completion of the intergovernmental process of the Executive Committee.

¹ http://www.un.org/ga/search/view_doc.asp?symbol=A/RES/66/288.

4. The outcomes of UNCSD are clustered into six components: common vision; renewing political commitment; green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication; institutional framework for sustainable development; framework for action and follow-up; and means of implementation. Under these clusters a broad range of sustainable development issues are addressed.

5. The Rio+20 outcome document gives an important role to the United Nations system to support the work for advancing sustainable development in the follow-up to the Conference. Among others, the United Nations Regional Commissions, including ECE, have been given the mandate to coordinate the collection and compilation of regional inputs to global processes on sustainable development, including to the process for developing Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) and the assessment of their implementation (paras. 98, 100 and 251). Furthermore, the outcome document encourages the enhancement of the Regional Commissions for delivering on the mandate in the field of sustainable development.

6. In the absence of a separate ECE Regional Implementation Meeting (RIM), the specific discussion at the present session of ECE provides an opportunity to address the Rio+20 follow-up issues related to the institutional set-up. The results from the discussion will serve as a regional input into the global process.

III. High-level political forum

7. The Rio+20 outcomes related to the “institutional framework for sustainable development” include the establishment of a universal intergovernmental high-level political forum that would build on the strength, experiences, resources and inclusive participation modalities of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) and subsequently replace it. The High-Level Political Forum (HLPF) shall follow up on the implementation of sustainable development and should avoid overlap with existing structures, bodies and entities in a cost-effective manner (A/RES/66/288, Annex, paras. 84–86).

8. Paragraph 85 of the Rio+20 outcome document defines the functions that the new forum could have. They can be summarized as follows: provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations; enhance integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development; provide a dynamic platform; have a focused, dynamic and action-oriented agenda; follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments; encourage high-level United Nations system-wide participation; improve cooperation and coordination within the United Nations system; promote transparency and implementation; promote the sharing of best practices and experiences; promote system-wide coherence and coordination; strengthen the science-policy interface; and enhance evidence-based decision-making at all levels.

9. The resolution A/RES/67/203 called for the negotiation process under the General Assembly to define the format and organizational aspects of the high-level political forum to start in January 2013 at the latest, with the aim to conclude by May 2013 so as to provide enough time to prepare the first high-level forum to be convened at the beginning of the sixty-eighth session of the General Assembly. It recommended that the CSD hold its last session (short and procedural) immediately before the first high-level political forum to ensure a smooth institutional transition.

10. When considering how the high-level political forum could best fulfil the expectations, it might be useful to take into account the experience with CSD. Some internal reflections of the secretariat on the lessons learned from CSD are summarized below. The positive aspects include:

(a) CSD has contributed to keeping sustainable development on the international agenda and it became a regular “meeting point of the sustainable development family”, an important forum for informal discussions, triggering new sustainable development initiatives and partnerships;

(b) Its participatory approach with the engagement of major groups and other relevant stakeholders has been exemplary for other bodies in the United Nations system; while a multi-stakeholder approach has become standard in many global intergovernmental processes related to sustainable development, this was not the case back in 1993;

(c) The preparations for CSD meetings have contributed to enhancing coordination and cooperation in the United Nations system, but also in government administrations, as different organizations as well as different ministries needed to work together on cross-cutting issues and on the review of progress in implementing sustainable development commitments; and

(d) RIMs have been useful in shaping and assessing sustainable development approaches at the regional level. In addition, holding “interregional sessions” at some CSD meetings in order to present the outcomes of all RIMs proved to be valuable in exchanging information on regional approaches.

11. CSD challenges include:

(a) While negotiated CSD decisions may have provided valuable policy guidance and promoted the implementation of Agenda 21 in the first years of CSD, their usefulness was more and more questioned by governments and other stakeholders. This applies especially to issues being addressed by specific instruments or organizations (Rio Conventions, World Trade Organization (WTO), Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO), etc.) and their own governing bodies. Intense and time-consuming negotiations yielded only small progress or even failed to reach consensus;

(b) In many governments, environment ministries have been the lead ministries for CSD, hindering a balanced integration of sustainable development pillars. Traditionally “economic pillar” ministries such as those of economics, trade, finance did not consider their participation in CSD as priority;

(c) Theoretically CSD and the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) Governing Councils/Global Ministerial Environment Forums have different roles and mandates, but in reality they have been competing for the attention of the global sustainable development community and environment ministers;

(d) From the perspective of a Regional Commission, inputs generated by RIMs have not been much valued or integrated in the global discussions and negotiations.

12. After the Johannesburg World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002 following a decision by the CSD-11, the Regional Commissions were invited to organize a RIM every two years, in accordance with the CSD Multi-Year Programme of Work, to provide input into the global discussions at CSD.

13. Since 2003, ECE has organized four two-day RIMs (2004, 2005, 2008 and 2009) that provided comprehensive input (in the form of a Chair’s summary) into the global discussions. While RIMs were meetings of the ECE, their organization was carried out in close cooperation with main partner organizations in the region (UNEP/Regional Office for Europe (ROE), United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), FAO, United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD), etc.), depending on the topics addressed at the RIMs.

14. Major groups played an important role in the successful organization of the ECE RIMs and had many participants (on average, there were around 60 major groups

representatives out of over 200 participants per RIM). Also, major groups coordination meetings organized the day before the RIMs proved to be an efficient means to prepare a consolidated position for the major groups interventions at the RIMs.

15. The interactive format of RIMs (multi-stakeholder panels and interactive discussion from the floor) proved to be efficient for the organization of such meetings. A limited number of thematic documents (maximum two per RIM) prepared by the secretariat in close cooperation or jointly with other partners provided good background material to support the discussions. Also, a number of thematic questions identified in advance of the meeting for each theme helped to focus the discussion.

16. The preparation of the Chair's summary during the RIMs with a view to having a full draft ready by the end of the meeting proved to be very intensive in terms of human resources and time spent. At the same time, the Chair's summary provided a comprehensive overview of regional progress in advancing in respective areas of sustainable development and served as regional input into the global discussions.

17. At its sixty-fifth session, the ECE is invited to consider regional implications and perspectives related to the establishment of the high-level political forum with a view to providing input into the General Assembly negotiation process.

18. In particular, ECE could consider efficient ways of continuing assessing the progress in sustainable development at the regional level and providing a regional input into the global discussion at the high-level political forum. In this regard, special consideration should be given to the format and periodicity of possible future regional consultations,² as well as to the nature of the expected substantive input into the global process. Proposed questions for a focused discussion are contained in section V of the present document.

IV. Sustainable Development Goals in the new global institutional set-up

19. The Rio+20 outcomes related to the "framework for action and follow-up" include the development of a set of SDGs, based on Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, which fully respect all the Rio principles, taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and priorities. The SDGs need to be consistent with international law, build upon commitments already made, and contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major summits in the economic, social and environmental fields, including the Rio+20 outcome document (A/RES/66/288, Annex, paras. 245–251).

20. For this purpose, an Open Working Group (OWG) of 30 representatives (nominated by Member States with a view to a fair, equitable and balanced geographical representation) was established by a General Assembly decision in the second half of January 2013. At a first informal meeting, the OWG would have to decide on its first formal meeting, on its work methods, including the participatory nature of the OWG and the role of civil society, academia and the private sector. The OWG work is supported by a technical support team co-chaired by the Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and UNDP secretariats. This process needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes to consider the post-2015 development agenda.

² The past experience with organizing RIMs every two years has shown that the work involved is rather intensive but still feasible with current resources available in the secretariat. However, organizing yearly consultations would require strengthening the human resources for this activity.

21. The resolution A/RES/67/203 reiterated that the OWG would submit its report to the General Assembly at its sixty-eighth session and that reports on the progress of work of the Group would be made regularly to the General Assembly, taking into account the convening of the first high-level political forum, without prejudice to the format and organizational aspects of the forum, and the special event in 2013 to follow up efforts made towards achieving the Millennium Development Goals.

22. The Rio+20 Conference recognized the importance of sustainable transport as a key sector for achieving sustainable development. The OWG, as well as the planned Global Transport Ministerial Meeting are expected to become catalysts in further promoting sustainable transport, including the development of a SDG related thereto. These processes should also lead to a stronger leadership by United Nations organizations, including ECE, on this topic.

23. The Rio+20 Conference recognized that there is a need for global, integrated and scientifically based information on sustainable development. In this regard, the Conference requested the relevant bodies of the United Nations system, within their respective mandates, to support the regional economic commissions in collecting and compiling national inputs in order to inform this global effort. The Conference further committed to mobilizing financial resources and capacity-building, particularly for developing countries, to achieve this endeavour.

24. In this context, countries need to be able to assess the effectiveness of the policies and monitor the progress of their implementation. ECE in partnership with Eurostat and the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) has developed a common framework with a set of indicators for measuring sustainable development. The framework is planned for endorsement by the Conference of European Statisticians in June 2013. The framework can help in analysing whether countries are on a sustainable path, and in establishing sustainable development goals that would be SMART (specific, measurable, attainable, realistic and timely). The framework might serve as a proposal from the region when discussing review of progress in the implementation of Rio+20 outcomes.

25. While the work of the OWG on SDGs is only at its very beginning, consideration might be given to the possible role of the high-level political forum in assessing the progress in the achievement of SDGs. The Commission may wish to consider ideas for a possible architecture of the process that links the assessment of SDGs with the work of the high-level political forum.

V. Questions for discussion

26. ECE is invited to consider the following questions:

(a) What modalities of the universal high-level political forum are key for fulfilling its functions? How and why would these differ from the CSD?

(b) Can the ECE region be better heard in the discussions and negotiations on the global level? What are the lessons from the regional dimension of CSD? What can change under the new circumstances of the global sustainable development governance?

(c) What would be the possible mechanism(s) for providing efficient regional input to the HLPF process? Is there a need for consolidated ECE-wide regional input to the global HLPF?

(d) Is the establishment of a regional HLPF (with regular meetings) an option for the above? What are other options?

- (e) If the regional HLPF is established, what could be the periodicity of its meetings? The type of participation? The possible outcomes (including formal documents for the input to the universal HLPF)?
 - (f) How can the participatory approach of CSD RIMs with the engagement of major groups and other relevant stakeholders be maintained and enhanced in the new governance architecture, especially on the regional level? Can there be new levels of engagement?
 - (g) How can the HLPF process contribute to enhancing coordination and cooperation in the United Nations system, including at the regional level? How should the HLPF be linked to the Economic and Social Council (ECOSOC) and to the General Assembly?
 - (h) How can the HLPF process contribute to enhancing coordination and cooperation in government administrations? How can it be ensured that the HLPF process is adequately taken into account at the national level? What are national experiences from the CSD process in this regard?
 - (i) What is the relation between the SDG process and the HLPF – on global, regional and national levels? Is there a need to coordinate on the regional level during the process of establishing SDGs? What could such a coordination look like?
 - (j) What could be the role of ECE in promoting a SDG on sustainable transport?
 - (k) How can the ECE region play a role in assessing the progress on SDGs? In this context, can a common framework approach as described in paragraph 24 serve as a proposal from the region for reviewing progress in the implementation of Rio+20 outcomes and, in particular, SDGs?
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