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Measuring sustainable development in follow up to Rio+20

Follow-up to the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20), the process of establishing the Sustainable Development Goals

Note by the secretariat

Summary

The note provides a short overview of the United Nations initiatives undertaken to follow-up on the Rio+20 Conference and to establish the Sustainable Development Goals: the United Nations Secretary General's High-level Panel of Eminent Persons, Open Working Group, and the United Nations System Task Team. The note also provides a short description of recent United Nations statistical and regional initiatives related to this process.

I. Introduction

1. The outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) held in 2012 in Rio de Janeiro, *The future we want*, includes some important references to statistics, data and information, and provides mandates to regional commissions in the area of statistics. The document calls for concrete actions to improve data, information and assessment of progress in sustainable development.
2. As an outcome of Rio+20, a process has been initiated to establish Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). At the same time, a process is ongoing to discuss the post-2015 development agenda following up to the Millennium Development Goals.
3. An overview of the process of developing the post-2015 goals and the relevant references are provided in Section II. Short description of recent statistical and regional initiatives related to this process is provided in Section III.

II. Establishing Sustainable Development Goals

4. One of the main outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference was the agreement by Member States to launch a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will build upon the Millennium Development Goals and converge with the post-2015 development agenda.
5. The relevant text from the Rio+20 outcome document is provided in paras 245-251:

“248. We resolve to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals that is open to all stakeholders ...”

“250. We recognize that progress towards the achievement of the goals needs to be assessed by targets and indicators, while taking into account different national circumstances, capacities and levels of development.

251. We recognize that there is a need for global, integrated and scientifically based information on sustainable development. In this regard, we request 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. We further commit to mobilizing financial resources and capacity-building, particularly for developing countries, to achieve this endeavour.”
6. The process of establishing the post-2015 Development Agenda that builds on the Millennium Development Goals and the outcome of the Rio+20 Conference is currently underway through three main initiatives:
 - (a) High-level Panel of Eminent Persons appointed by the UN Secretary General;
 - (b) Intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) of member countries;
 - (c) United Nations system Task Team on the post-2015 development agenda.

A. High-level Panel

7. The High-level Panel of Eminent Persons was set up by the UN Secretary General in July 2012. It is composed of 27 eminent persons appointed by the United Nations Secretary-General. It has three co-chairs: the Presidents of Indonesia and Liberia, and the Prime Minister of the United Kingdom.

8. The High-Level Panel has held four meetings: (a) 25 September 2013 in New York, (b) 1-2 November 2012 in London, United Kingdom; (c) 31 January-1 February 2013 in Monrovia, Liberia; and (d) 25-27 March 2013 in Bali, Indonesia. An official communique has been issued after each meeting. For statisticians, the following text from the communique from the last meeting held in Bali is of interest:

“Data availability and better accountability in measuring progress. We need a data revolution. Too often, development efforts have been hampered by a lack of the most basic data about the social and economic circumstances in which people live. Substantial improvements in national and subnational statistical systems including local and subnational levels and the availability, quality and timeliness of baseline data, disaggregated by sex, age, region and other variables, will be needed. Stronger monitoring and evaluation at all levels, and in all processes of development (from planning to implementation) will help guide decision making, update priorities and ensure accountability. This will require substantial investments in building capacity in advance of 2015. A regularly updated registry of commitments is one idea to ensure accountability and monitor delivery gaps. We must also take advantage of new technologies and access to open data for all people.”

9. The final report of the panel was published on 30 May 2013 (http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf).

10. The Executive Summary of the Report notes:

“We also call for a **data revolution** for sustainable development, with a new international initiative to improve the quality of statistics and information available to citizens. We should actively take advantage of new technology, crowd sourcing, and improved connectivity to empower people with information on the progress towards the targets. “

11. The section entitled “Wanted: a new data revolution” in this Report (p.23-24) includes a quote from the Bali communique cited above. Furthermore, the following points are raised in the text:

- The need to bring together the traditional statistical community and the innovative initiatives using mobile technology and real-time monitoring to improve data;
- The need for data to be disaggregated by gender, geography, income, disability, and other categories;
- The need to draw on existing and new sources of data involving international agencies, civil society organizations and the private sector, and to integrate statistics into decision making, promote open access to and use of data and increased support for statistical systems;
- Governments should adopt the UN’s System of Environmental-Economic Accounting, along with the Wealth Accounting and the Valuation of Ecosystem Services (WAVES) introduced by the World Bank. These metrics can then be used to monitor national development strategies and results in a universally consistent way.

12. The Panel recommends establishing a Global Partnership on Development Data that brings together diverse stakeholders – government statistical offices, international organisations, civil society organizations, foundations and the private sector. This partnership would as a first step, develop a global strategy to fill critical gaps, expand data accessibility, and galvanise international efforts to ensure a baseline for post-2015 targets is in place by January 2016.

13. Furthermore, the Report notes the following concerning the role of the United Nations Regional Commissions (p.22):

“Reporting and peer-review at the regional level could complement global monitoring. It is often easier to review policies in-depth with friendly and constructive neighbours than with the whole world. The UN’s five regional commissions, with regional development banks, member governments and regional organizations, could form part of an improved coordinating mechanism in each region of the world, which would discuss and report on the sustainable development agenda in advance of each global forum.”

14. More information on the High-level Panel is provided at: <http://www.un.org/sg/management/hlppost2015.shtml> and <http://www.post2015hlp.org/>.

B. Open Working Group

15. The United Nations General Assembly (GA) intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) was established by the 67th session of the GA (on 22 January 2013; A/67/L.48/rev.1). The Open Working Group consists of 30 UN member country representatives nominated by different regions. An innovative, constituency-based system of representation is used by which most of the seats in the OWG are shared by several countries (the list of members is provided in the Annex).

16. A key objective of this group is to ensure that Sustainable Development Goals are an integral part of the post-2015 development framework. The first session of OWG held on 14-15 March 2013 established the methods of work and elected two co-chairs: Hungary and Kenya.

17. The second session on 17-19 April 2013 discussed conceptualizing the SDGs and the SDG process under the overarching framework of poverty eradication and sustainable development. The discussion also touched upon the measurement issues. Below are some quotes from the summary of the discussion by the co-chairs:

“We recognize the importance of measurability as a lesson from the MDGs. [...] And we need to consider measures of progress beyond GDP including those which capture well-being and happiness.”

“One lesson many have taken from the MDGs is that we must not neglect quality measures that may better reflect genuine progress than mere quantity measures.”

“But this requires also a reality check asking on which measures we can reasonably expect to collect reliable and timely data in the large majority of countries. Many countries have capacity constraints in meeting data requirements of reporting. [...] We must be sure that if we expect countries to collect new types of data and adopt new indicators to measure progress on SDGs we start early on to build institutional capacities to do so.”

18. The discussion ends with reference to scientific data, official statistics are not mentioned: “We will need to tap the best scientific knowledge, including both natural and social sciences, to inform our work, including in the setting of sensible targets and the choice of indicators, but also in the monitoring and evaluation of progress.”

19. The next sessions of the OWG are planned to deal with subject matter areas (see the draft programme of work of the forthcoming meetings in Table 1).

20. The OWG intends to gather information until early 2014. After this phase, the group plans to draft its report during April-August 2013, to be presented to 68th General Assembly in September 2014.

Table 1

The Open Working Group draft programme of work 2013-14

Third session; 22-24 May, 2013
Food security and nutrition, sustainable agriculture, desertification, land degradation and drought (1.5 days); Water and sanitation (1.5 days)
Fourth session; 17-19 June, 2013
Health and population dynamics (1.5 days); Employment and decent work for all, social protection, youth and education (1.5 days)
Fifth meeting; 25-27 November, 2013
Sustained and inclusive economic growth, macroeconomic policy questions (including international trade, international financial system and external debt sustainability), infrastructure development (1.5 days) Energy (1.5 days)
Sixth session; 9-13 December, 2013
Means of implementation; Global partnership for achieving sustainable development (2 days) Needs of countries in special situations, African countries, LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS as well as the specific challenges facing the middle-income countries (2 days) Human rights, the right to development, global governance (1 day)
Seventh meeting; 6-10 January, 2014
Sustainable cities and human settlements, sustainable transport (2 days) Sustainable consumption and production (including chemicals and waste) (1.5 days) Climate change and disaster risk reduction (1.5 days)
Eighth session; 3-7 February, 2014
Oceans and seas, forests, biodiversity (2 days); Promoting equality, including social equity, gender equality and women's empowerment (1.5 days); Conflict prevention, post-conflict peace-building and the promotion of durable peace, rule of law and governance (1.5 day)

C. United Nations system Task Team

21. The United Nations system Task Team (UNTT) on the post-2015 development agenda was set up by the United Nations Secretary-General in January 2012 (before the Rio+20 Conference took place). It is co-chaired by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (DESA) and the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), and assembles more than 60 United Nations system entities. The UNTT should ensure coherence between defining the Sustainable Development Goals and establishing a development agenda after 2015, the target date of the Millennium Development Goals. The Task Team supports the process by providing analytical thinking and substantive inputs.

22. The Task Team held several conferences and submitted its first report *Realizing the Future We Want* to the Secretary-General in June 2012 (available at: http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/pdf/Post_2015_UNTTreport.pdf). The report provided an assessment of key development challenges of the 21st century and proposed initial ideas about possible post-2015 UN development agenda.

23. The report recommended that new goals should build on the strengths of the MDGs, apply to all countries, and be based on the fundamental principles of human rights, equality, and sustainability. As part of this effort, the UNTT prepared 18 comprehensive think pieces

on issues related to: countries with special needs; culture; disaster risk and resilience; education and skills; employment; hunger and malnutrition; governance and development; health; human rights; inequalities; science, technology and innovation; macroeconomic stability, inclusive growth and employment; migration; peace and security; population dynamics; social protection; sustainable development; and sustainable urbanization (http://www.un.org/en/development/desa/policy/untaskteam_undf/them_tp.shtml).

24. The Task Team is currently engaged in three work streams:

- (a) Working Group on Global Partnership for Development,
- (b) Working Group on Monitoring and Indicators,
- (c) Technical Support Team (TST).

25. The aim of the Working Group on Global Partnership for development is to provide recommendations on potential dimensions of a renewed global partnership for development based on the current arrangements in Millennium Development Goal 8. The Technical Support Team provides technical support, including analytical inputs, background material and expert panellists to the Open Working Group.

26. Most relevant for the statistical community are the activities of the **Working Group on Monitoring and Indicators**. The Group's task is to develop recommendations on how to establish a monitoring framework for the post-2015 development agenda. The Group will publish its report at the end of May 2013, focusing on (i) lessons learned from the MDG framework; (ii) monitoring of emerging issues in the post 2015 agenda; (iii) cross-cutting issues; and (iv) global and national capacities and options for data collection and indicators for the post-2015 agenda.

27. The draft final report of the Working Group is currently sent for comments to the members of the Group. The Report refers in several places to the framework for measuring sustainable development prepared by the UNECE/Eurostat/OECD Task Force.

D. Other United Nations initiatives

28. **National consultations** on post-2015 development agenda and SDGs are undertaken in over 70 countries. Eleven global **thematic consultations** are held focusing on the issues of health, inequalities, education, food security and nutrition, environmental sustainability, population dynamics, governance, conflict and fragility, growth and employment, energy and water. Links to the thematic and national consultations are provided at: <http://www.worldwewant2015.org/sitemap>. The United Nations Regional Commissions are engaged in **regional consultations** and are preparing reports on regional perspectives on the post-2015 development agenda.

29. The **Sustainable Development Solutions Network** (SDSN), led by Jeffrey Sachs, is a global, independent network of research centres, universities and technical institutions that works with stakeholders including business, civil society, UN agencies and other international organizations. As a first step, the network will establish 10 global expert groups to support global problem solving in ten critical areas of sustainable development. SDSN also provides technical support to the High-level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda. (see: <http://unsdsn.org/>).

30. The UN **Global Compact** has been actively involved in ensuring that the views and contributions of businesses and the private sector feed into the post-2015 process.

31. To enable each citizen's voice to be heard, a United Nations **global survey My World** was established. Users can select their six priorities out of a list of 16 different

themes (the survey is available at: <http://www.myworld2015.org/>). Results of the survey will be submitted to the Secretary-General's High-level Panel.

32. There are a number of other on-going processes, including the 20 year review of the Programme of Action for the International Conference on Population and Development, a possible high-level event in 2015 on Women (Beijing follow-up), and the Financing for Development (FfD) process. The outcomes of these processes are viewed as providing additional inputs into the larger post-2015 process.

33. In order to ensure coherence across the different work streams an informal senior **coordination group** of four Assistant Secretaries-Generals (ASGs) has been put in place, which includes the ASG for Economic Development at DESA, the ASG for Development Policy at UNDP, the ASG for Policy and Programme at UN Women and the Special Advisor on Post-2015 Development Planning. A "One Secretariat" was established to facilitate the coordination and coherence across work streams, while each of the work streams remains substantively independent.

34. The 68th session of the General Assembly starting in September 2013 will be an important opportunity for the SDG and post-2015 processes to converge. It is expected that the Sustainable Development Goals should be established by late 2014.

III. Recent regional and statistical initiatives related to follow-up to Rio+20 and the Sustainable Development Goals process

A. The High-level forum held at the United Nations Statistical Commission

35. The High-level Forum on Official Statistics on "Response to the Rio+20 Mandate for Broader Measures of Progress" took place on 25 February 2013 in New York, back-to-back with the United Nations Statistical Commission. The Forum was held in response to the Rio+20 outcome document requesting to launch a programme of work on broader measures of progress. The forum discussed how official statisticians could contribute to the follow up to Rio+20 and the process of setting up the SDGs.

36. The forum was chaired by Mr. Enrico Giovannini who was the Chair of the Conference of European Statisticians at the time.

37. The following points were raised in the discussion:

(a) One of the lessons learned from the Millennium Development Goals is that statisticians should be involved in the selection of indicators to measure the achievement of the goals. This will help to address already in the setting-the-stage phase problems with the availability and quality of the data;

(b) Defining the SDGs should make the monitoring easy and resource-efficient for the statistical offices. The SDGs will be valid for all countries; therefore, the viewpoint of both developed and developing countries should be taken into account when establishing the Goals;

(c) The framework and the indicators developed by the Joint UNECE/Eurostat/OECD Task Force on Measuring Sustainable Development can provide a significant contribution to the SDG process.

B. United Nations Statistical Commission Friends of the Chair Group

38. The 2013 February session of the United Nations Statistical Commission set up a Friends of the Chair group to follow-up on the Rio+20 Conference, in particular in response to the para 38 from the outcome document:

“We recognize the need for broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product in order to better inform policy decisions, and in this regard we request the United Nations Statistical Commission, in consultation with relevant United Nations system entities and other relevant organizations, to launch a programme of work in this area, building on existing initiatives.”

39. The aim of the Group is to “build a work programme to develop broader measures of progress based on a stocktaking exercise of current practices in this field” and to “closely monitor the ongoing debate on development frameworks and to keep the Bureau of the Statistical Commission informed, undertaking an active dialogue with United Nations bodies and the policy sphere in order to ensure that a robust statistical measurement approach is incorporated from the outset in preparations for the post-2015 development agenda”.

40. The Group was launched on 27 May 2013. It is co-chaired by France and India. The mode of operation, deliverables and work plan of the Group are currently being discussed.

C. Sixty-fifth session of the Economic Commission for Europe

41. The sixty-fifth ECE session was held on 9-11 April 2013. The session included a panel discussion called “Sustainable development governance: regional implications and perspectives for the post-Rio+20 institutional set-up”. E. Giovannini, President of the Italian National Institute of Statistics and Chair of the Conference of European Statisticians at the time, participated in the discussion as a panellist. Below is an excerpt from the report of the session.

42. In his introduction, Mr. Giovannini noted that substantial improvement in statistical and monitoring systems is required. In order to establish an adequate monitoring and assessment system of measuring the progress towards sustainable development, it is necessary, as a first step, to put in place adequate methodology and expertise, as well as financial and human resources. There are still many countries and statistical areas where even the basic data are either lacking or are of low quality. It is crucial that statisticians be involved in the development of SDGs at an early stage. The experience with MDGs has demonstrated how the lack of investment in statistics may result in a lack of comparability of data.

43. Mr. Giovannini emphasized that the work carried out under the auspices of the CES serves as a valuable contribution to the ongoing process of developing SDGs and the respective targets and indicators. It is of crucial importance that the SDGs and the related targets be measurable. It will be more complicated to measure sustainable development than it is to measure MDGs. Therefore, it is important that the conceptual work on the framework for measuring sustainable development undertaken by CES member countries, together with UNECE, Eurostat, OECD and other international organizations, is taken into account. Once the SDGs are established, the CES should continue its work to align the framework and the indicators with the actual SDG targets. It is also vital to find simple ways to explain complex issues – e.g. inter-generational equity – to broader audiences, and link the concept of long-term “sustainability” to the issues of current policy interest, such as “vulnerability” and “sustainable and equitable welfare”.

44. During the discussion from the floor, delegations raised the following points related to statistics and measurement of sustainable development:

(a) Regarding SDGs, the Open Working Group on SDGs and the post-2015 development agenda process should ultimately converge into one single framework. Concerning the substance, any proposal for SDGs should reflect the three overarching objectives and essential requirements for sustainable development, i.e. poverty eradication, changing unsustainable patterns of production and consumption, and protecting and managing the natural resource base of economic and social development;

(b) SDGs should be global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, limited in number, action-oriented and easy to communicate. A reservation was made against broadening the concept of sustainable development by including issues like peace and security in the post-2015 development agenda;

(c) The importance of taking into account the measurement aspects when setting up the SDGs and targets was highlighted. A regular mechanism needed to be established for monitoring the achievement of the goals, and regional commissions could have an important role to play in this;

(d) Measuring the regional and global dimensions with the same indicators might not be possible. Some flexibility will be required to take into account regional and national circumstances when developing targets and indicators for the post-2015 development agenda;

(e) The regional commissions should assume a strong and active role in both the high-level political forum (HLFP) working in the area and SDGs processes, also acting as a “conductor” between global and national levels. ECE could continue to facilitate the discussions on issues that are specific to the region with a view to contributing to the work of the HLFP.

Annex

Membership of the Open Working Group on Sustainable Development Goals

1. Algeria/Egypt/Morocco/Tunisia
 2. Ghana
 3. Benin
 4. Kenya
 5. United Republic of Tanzania
 6. Congo
 7. Zambia/Zimbabwe
 8. Nauru/Palau/Papua New Guinea
 9. Bhutan/Thailand/Viet Nam
 10. India/Pakistan/Sri Lanka
 11. China/Indonesia/Kazakhstan
 12. Cyprus/Singapore/United Arab Emirates
 13. Bangladesh/Republic of Korea/Saudi Arabia
 14. Iran (Islamic Republic of)/Japan/Nepal
 15. Colombia/Guatemala
 16. Bahamas/Barbados
 17. Guyana/Haiti/Trinidad and Tobago
 18. Mexico/Peru
 19. Brazil/Nicaragua
 20. Argentina/Bolivia (Plurinational State of)/Ecuador
 21. Australia/Netherlands/United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland
 22. Canada/Israel/United States of America
 23. Denmark/Ireland/Norway
 24. France/Germany/Switzerland
 25. Italy/Spain/Turkey
 26. Hungary
 27. Belarus/Serbia
 28. Bulgaria/Croatia
 29. Montenegro/Slovenia
 30. Poland/Romania
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