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The Environmental Dimension of Sustainable Development

Humans are always setting goals. Ambitious visions allow us to chart trajectories, articulate strategies and mobilize resources. Goals create global narratives that define national and local priorities and actions. At the UN Sustainable Development summit in September 2015, 193 governments agreed to 17 Sustainable Development Goals covering all aspects of sustainable development. The SDGs are ambitious – articulating high expectations – and universal, committing all countries to their implementation. They will frame policies for the next 15 to 30 years, requiring action across the world and accountability by all actors. These goals, however, are not entirely new. They follow on previous commitments to enhance development and to operate within environmental limits. The challenge is in implementing them and the innovation in combining them into one integrated agenda that seeks to match contemporary planetary challenges.

The vision of an international agenda for development dates back to the end of the Second World War when governments saw development as a strategy to reduce poverty and to enhance security and stability in the international system by providing for basic needs. This was the core philosophy of international and national development agencies. It was on this foundation that the Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) created the international development goals in the 1990s, and supported efforts to articulate the eight Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that were adopted in 2001. The MDGs incorporated policy areas including education and health, to gender equality, environmental sustainability, and foreign aid.

Global environmental goals, often of binding legal character, have been articulated through multilateral environmental agreements since the early 1970s. As early as 1971, for example, the threat to wetlands from increased development led to the Ramsar Convention on Wetlands of International Importance. The Convention on International Trade in Endangered Species of Wild Fauna and Flora was adopted two years later. Global environmental conventions on ozone-depleting substances, biodiversity, desertification, climate change and chemicals and waste followed. They all articulated global goals for particular issues, and created the governance mechanisms to support and review implementation.

Integrating all Dimensions of Sustainable Development

The SDGs brought together in an integrated manner the development imperative of the MDGs, the environmental ambitions of the global environmental conventions, and fundamental social goals. They were conceived as universal and inclusive, applicable to “all nations and peoples and for all segments of society”. They explicitly recognize that development cannot be achieved without safeguarding the ability of the planet to maintain the conditions critical to human wellbeing, and are therefore “integrated and indivisible and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development: the economic, social and environmental”. They highlight nexus areas where integration and partnerships will be indispensable and open up opportunities for innovative and integrative solutions.

Building on the MDGs, the SDGs sought to motivate action and improve the ability of countries to deliver on core development indicators. The use of concrete targets and indicators proved an effective instrument for focusing efforts on the MDGs, monitoring the evolution of different strategies, and prompting global political mobilization. The SDGs also integrated the objectives of the environmental conventions, which, though more general, offered guidelines on the purpose and implementation of each agreement, and incorporated policy tools such as the Strategic Plan for Biodiversity including the Aichi Biodiversity Targets for 2011-2020 and the Overall Orientation and Guidance for Achieving the 2020 Goal of SAICM (Sustainable Approach to International Chemicals Management).

In 2015, countries adopted the Addis Ababa Action Agenda, a groundbreaking agreement that provides financial foundation for implementation of the global sustainable development agenda. To achieve the SDGs, countries agreed on technology transfer, addressing infrastructure gaps, providing social protection, and environmental taxation (Financing For Development, 2015).

The SDGs incorporate the environmental dimension both collectively and individually. They emphasize the connection between poverty eradication and environmental sustainability – as well as the importance of efficient use of resources and meaningful contribution from multiple stakeholders. Some of the goals have a major environmental dimension, such as SDG 13 (on climate action), SDG 14 (on life below water) and SDG 15 (on life on land). Others include important environmental dimensions on topics such as clean water and sanitation (SDG 6), clean energy (SDG 7), sustainable cities (SDG 11), and responsible consumption and production (SDG 12).

An important overview of the linkages between existing global environmental goals and the SDGs is available on the GEG-Live Website: <http://geodata.grid.unep.ch/geglive/>. This resource is a judgment-free effort by UNEP with support from Switzerland to provide up-to-date information and show progress achieved on issues identified in the GEGs in their relationship with SDGs. It serves as an information sharing platform and aims to better inform both decision-makers and the public.

Each of the 17 goals incorporates several economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as finance and governance mechanisms. Specific targets reflect the fundamental connections between the environment, economic wellbeing, and social development, and provide the necessary frameworks, policies, and partnerships to facilitate implementation. Some of the targets contribute to the reduction and eradication of the harmful effects of development on the environment. This is the case for SDG 1 (on poverty eradication), SDG 2 (on food security), SDG 6 (on sanitation), SDG 9 (on innovation), SDG 16 (on effective institutions), and SDG 17 (on partnerships for the goals).

The scope of the SDGs also includes values and lifestyles, and equality. Cutting across all the other goals is SDG 17 (on the means of implementation via global partnership). This goal has the largest number of targets (19). It incorporates targets relating to finance, technology, capacity-building, trade, institutional coherence, partnerships, data, monitoring and accountability.

Implementation Lessons

Global goals are a key governance instrument and have two equally important dimensions: the articulation of the problem and the implementation of the solution. With the articulation of the 17 SDGs and their associated targets now complete, countries are embarking on a journey to attain them. To this end, it will be important to learn from the successes and challenges of past efforts. Measuring progress is central to both environmental governance and sustainable development. Effective achievement of the SDGs will also require robust governance mechanisms for action and accountability at both national and international level. The 2030 Agenda asks for more and better monitoring processes, accountability, transparency and engagement. Without evaluating the implementation of these agendas, it will not be possible to determine whether the systems comprise simply a collection of conventions, organizations, and other governance instruments or whether they pose reliable mechanisms for planetary stewardship.

Specifically, environmental conventions also provide important lessons for the SDGs. They illustrate how global goals articulate important visions, contribute to the socialization of environmental issues, reduce uncertainty, and generate domestic policy responses. They provide lessons that the SDGs can incorporate as instruments of governance. Experience with integration and synergies among the conventions will be important as countries seek to tackle the nexus issues in the SDGs. The mechanisms for capacity building, technical support, and financial assistance to developing countries offer insights on governance approaches, strategies, and outcomes.

The challenges the agreements have faced also provide critical lessons. The obligations established by the conventions are often vague, and secretariats are forced to establish additional strategic frameworks and mechanisms. In addition, the conventions have not been comprehensive in the definition of specific targets and indicators to measure progress on implementation, and still need to foster a culture of monitoring. Finally, the overlapping of efforts among different conventions and ownership and functional fragmentation at the national level are some of the obstacles in the achievement of the overall objectives of the agreements.

Rio+20's outcome document and the General Assembly resolution creating the High-Level Political Forum set out a comprehensive vision for a new UN institution, but they do not provide a clear division of labor between the environment and sustainable development institutions. Thus, the potential for overlap, duplication, and competition between the new forum, UNEP, other UN institutions, and multilateral environmental agreements remains significant and threatens to perpetuate the dynamic that led to the institutional reform in the first place. It is important to clarify reporting expectations and explore opportunities to "name and acclaim" rather than "name and shame" performance. The HLPF could be the platform for the UN Environment Assembly to bring insights and articulate priorities by integrating inputs from governments, the MEAs, regional ministerial environmental forums, and other relevant actors and events.

UNEP's Role in the SDGs

UNEP played a critical role in the creation of Agenda 2030. In the planning stage, it ensured that the environmental dimension was embedded and linked with the social and economic dimension

of the global goals and advocated for universality of the agenda. UNEP contributed significantly to the body of knowledge and practical experience on sustainable development, especially on sustainable consumption and production (SCP). The 10-year Framework of Programmes on sustainable consumption and production or “Marrakech process” was developed by UNEP and UN DESA (Department of Economic and Social Affairs) in 2003 to provide a forum for developing policies and promote implementation of SCP at the national and regional level (Clark, 2007). The current 10-Year Framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns is the operational outcome of Rio+20 and builds on the experience of the Marrakech process (2003-2012) providing capacity-building and financial and technical assistance to countries to accelerate the shift to SCP.

As the anchor institution for the global environment, UNEP is one of the key actors in the monitoring of progress since 80 of the 179 indicators are environment-based. UNEP is the custodian agency for 26 indicators,¹ 11 of which are related to Goal 8 on Responsible Consumption and Production. Other indicators that UNEP is directly responsible for are linked to Goal 6 on clean water and sanitation, Goal 8 on decent work and economic growth, Goals 14 and 15 on life below water and on land respectively and coordinating Goal 17. Some of the indicators are delivered jointly with other agencies like for example WHO, UN Statistics Division, and OECD. The environmentally focused indicators are available on Environment Live which serves as a central database for tracking progress and as a knowledge-sharing platform in the area of environmental contribution to the implementation of the SDGs.

Resolution 2/5 adopted at UNEA 2 is an important milestone for the implementation of the environmental dimension of the SDGs (UNEA 2, 2016). It clarifies the roles of UNEA and UNEP in this process and defines institutional linkages with other sustainable development institutions. It commits UNEA to:

- Provide overarching policy guidance and define policy responses to address emerging environmental challenges
- Undertake policy review, dialogue and exchange of experiences
- Foster partnerships for achieving environmental goals and resource mobilization
- Convey the main messages of its sessions to the High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development to support its function in the follow-up to and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development

UNEP is requested to initiate new multi-stakeholder partnerships and support existing ones, to strengthen the science-policy interface regarding the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, and to ensure that the Global Environmental Outlook takes into account the SDGs. Resolution 2/5 also welcomes the role UNEP plays as a Secretariat of the 10-Year Framework on Sustainable Consumption and Production Patterns as well as the coordinating role in the inter-agency team on science, technology and innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals. It emphasizes the important role UNEP plays in the follow-up and review of progress in the implementation of environmental dimension of sustainable development and monitoring of SDGs implementation. It asks for integration of Agenda 2030 into the program of work, budget, and mid-term strategy of UNEP.

¹ https://uneplive.unep.org/media/docs/projects/SDG_Indicators_UNEP_as_custodian_agency.pdf

Many of the MEAs could provide valuable indicators, data, and knowledge about the state of the environment as related to specific SDGs. The systems of national reporting already collect information associated to the indicators defined by the SDGs, and therefore conventions can provide baselines for measurement and act as data collection and analysis mechanisms. UNEP could use the opportunity for integration that the SDGs provide to strengthen its collaboration with all MEAs – the ones it hosts and the ones that are independent. Ultimately, the goal of sustainability encompasses the goals and objectives of all the separate agreements, institutions, and mechanisms. UNEP has already committed itself explicitly to integration as a core principle and UNEA could offer the necessary platform for discussing and working on the environmental dimension of sustainable development.

Review Mechanisms

The United Nations High-level Political Forum created by Rio+20 is the central platform for follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the SDGs. A key mechanism to conduct this mission are the thematic reviews, which respond to the need for a more integrated approach in the implementation and analysis of the SDGs. These reviews are designed to provide a cross-cutting perspective on the different goals and targets. So far, the following reviews have been scheduled:

- 2017 Eradicating poverty and promoting prosperity in a changing world: Goals 1 (No Poverty), 2 (End Hunger), 3 (Good Health and Well-being), 5 (Gender Equality), 9 (Industry, Innovation, and Infrastructure), and 14 (Land below Water).
- 2018 Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies: Goals 6 (Clean Water and Sanitation), 7 (Affordable and Clean Energy), 11 (Sustainable Cities and Communities), 12 (Responsible Consumption and Production), and 15 (Life on Land).
- 2019 Empowering people and ensuring inclusiveness and equality: Goals 4 (Quality Education), 8 (Decent Work and Economic Growth), 10 (Reduced Inequalities), 13 (Climate Action), 16 (Peace, Justice, and Strong Institutions)

Member states also agreed to conduct voluntary reviews of progress at the national and sub-national levels. These voluntary reviews would serve as input for HLPF discussions and will be state-led, undertaken by both developed and developing countries, and establish mechanisms for participation, partnerships, and stakeholders' engagement. The reviews should also facilitate the sharing of experiences, the identification of best practices and challenges, and help strengthen policies and institutions to support the implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

If the implementation of SDGs integrates with the specific goals and targets of global environmental conventions, it will facilitate the monitoring and assessment process and contribute to countries' capacity to achieve their goals. Furthermore, lessons from the implementation of the global environmental conventions over the past forty years would be fundamental as countries integrate their own experience and learning into the new implementation and assessment processes. The immediacy and urgency of global environmental problems call for a new approach that brings action, accountability, and transparency into the system of global environmental and sustainable development governance.

Discussion questions

1. How to secure the delivery of the environmental dimension across all SDGs? What would be necessary for UNEP to fulfill its role outlined by UNEA Resolution 2/5? What other organizations should be engaged and how?
2. How to ensure that the environmental objectives and the legally binding character of obligations under environmental conventions are not weakened through the purely voluntary approach of the SDGs?
3. Is there a “hierarchy” among the HLPF, UNEP, and the MEAs? What are the implications?
4. What would be the implications of integrating the SDGs in UNEP’s Medium Term Strategy and Program of Work, at UNEA, and at the COPs?
5. What is necessary for the successful review of progress on the SDGs? How could UNEP contribute to global review mechanisms and thematic reviews?
6. How to secure coordination at the highest level (e.g. through the EMG, or the Chief Executives Board) and ensure implementation on the ground including facilitation of technology transfer? What role for UNEP and UNEA?

References:

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