

# Environmental Data, Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Case Study of Bangladesh



**SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS**

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A healthy environment is a precondition for achieving the Sustainable Development Goals. To be able to meet environmental objectives, Governments need accurate and reliable environmental data.

With funding from the United Nations Development Account, the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) partnered with the Governments of Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia and Guyana to monitor, in a coherent and integrated manner, implementation of the environmental dimension<sup>1</sup> of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In Bangladesh, UNEP worked closely with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) as its main in-country partner to strengthen the focus on the environment in national development plans and sustainability monitoring frameworks. Particular emphasis was placed on cooperation among the agencies implementing multilateral environmental agreements.

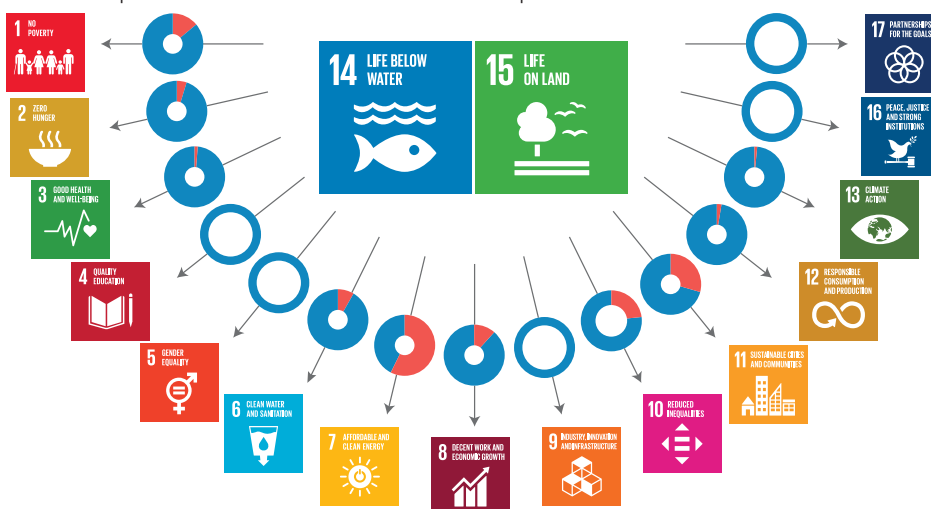
## 1. Context

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development, with its 17 Sustainable Development Goals, charts a new path for ensuring a balance between humanity and the planet. Achievement of the highly interconnected Sustainable Development Goals is integral to the correct functioning of the biosphere, which is vital for people's livelihoods and well-being and therefore resilience.

with other commitments; they also need to be able to translate this understanding into concrete measures to realize environmental objectives in an integrated manner.

Countries need to be well equipped to understand the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals and their links

To achieve this, access to accurate information, cross-sectoral collaboration, coordination within and across institutions and more inclusive mechanisms are all necessary. This case study shows how the generation and use of environmental data has been strengthened in Bangladesh using the particular skills and experience of UNEP.



**Figure 1. Environment as the Basis of the Sustainable Development Goals**

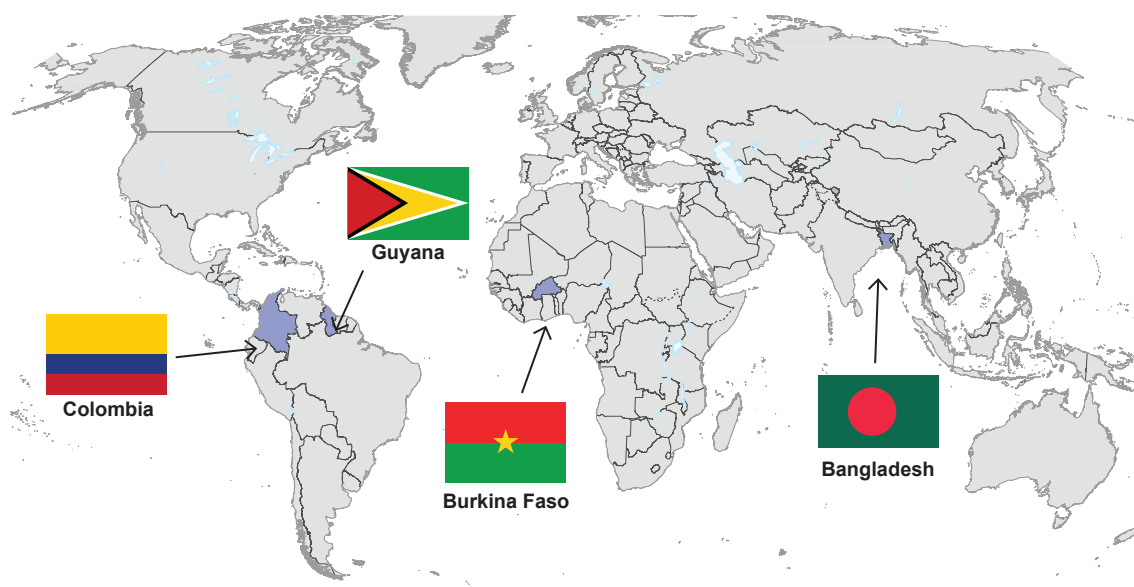
The illustration above shows how the achievement of Sustainable Development Goals 14 (Life below water) and 15 (Life on land) affects the achievement of the other Sustainable Development Goals in terms of co-benefits (blue) and trade-offs (red). It is based on information from 65 global assessments (United Nations reports and international scientific assessments) and 112 scientific articles, published since 2015, that make explicit reference to the Sustainable Development Goals. Where the rings are thin, this indicates either gaps in knowledge or a weaker link.

Source: A. Obrecht and others, "Achieving the SGDs with Biodiversity", Swiss Academies Factsheets, vol. 16, No. 1, 2021

<sup>1</sup> There is no precise definition of the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals, and there are different views on what the environmental dimension of development should include. The most common approach is to take the 93 environment-related indicators of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals under the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development as presented by UNEP to the Committee of Permanent Representatives to the United Nations Environment Programme at its subcommittee meeting on 20 September 2018.

## Overall Project Objectives

- To enhance the technical capacities of national focal points, in relevant institutions in fields such as development, finance, agriculture, fisheries and the environment, to contribute to implementation of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development in a coordinated, integrated and evidencebased manner.
- To enhance the technical capacities of national statistical and data-collection institutions regularly to produce comprehensive environmental data sets that integrate information related to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and to implementation of multilateral environmental agreements.
- To share the lessons learned and the knowledge acquired by the countries participating in the project with a wider set of countries through interregional and intraregional networking and collaboration, thereby creating the basis of a case study of South-South cooperation on the use of integrated approaches for coherent policy planning and implementation.



**Figure 2. Participating Countries**

Under the present project entitled, “Towards coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals” (United Nations Development Account project 1819Q), UNEP worked with the Governments of four countries: Bangladesh, Burkina Faso, Colombia and Guyana.

## 2. Case Study – Bangladesh

Bangladesh is rich in natural resources and fertile land, sustaining the world’s eighth-largest population of about 165 million people. It is affected by environmental challenges, such as sea-level rise, salinization and extreme weather events, which has led to the country’s firm commitment to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals. Bangladesh has already submitted two voluntary national reviews of its implementation of the 2030 Agenda for

Sustainable Development, in 2017 and 2020. The 2020 review emphasizes the impact of urban expansion on the environment and highlights the increased likelihood of natural hazards owing to climate change. It recognizes the need to strengthen partnerships among development actors working in the environmental field, yet it does not explicitly mention target 17.14, under Goal 17, on enhancing policy coherence for sustainable development.



The Government has taken environmental degradation and climate change into account in its medium-term planning process and has identified specific objectives and strategies for environmental protection and climate-change mitigation. The development of environmental policies in Bangladesh is guided by the country's key development plans and sector-specific strategies, such as the National Adaptation Programme of Action under the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the related Bangladesh Climate Change Strategy and Action Plan 2009, and the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2016–2021 under the Convention on Biological Diversity. All of the country's overarching policy documents stipulate that growth must be sustainable and environment-friendly. Certain sectors are required to apply sustainable practices that take into account the Sustainable Development Goals. In addition, in August 2021 Bangladesh submitted revised nationally determined contributions under the Paris Agreement. The update to the nationally determined contributions outlines further mitigation action that Bangladesh may take to tackle its growing greenhouse gas emissions and to play its role in global efforts to respond to climate change.

The country's Eighth Five-Year Plan (2021–2025) explicitly recognizes that growth can be sustainable only when it “entails the sustainable use of natural resources” (p. xlii). This is because, while the measures associated with environmental conservation might appear economically burdensome in the very short run, the likelihood of maintaining fastpaced longrun growth in the absence of environmental conservation is low due to the loss of capital stock as a result of ecosystem degradation such as land degradation, soil erosion, flooding, loss of land fertility and health hazards due to air and water and soil pollution.

The Eighth Five Year Plan outlines a sustainable development agenda and focuses on the integration of economic and environmental planning to ensure the coherence of decision-making on both fronts. The Plan also provides a coordination framework for a number of national environmental plans, including the National Environment Policy 2018; the Ecologically Critical Areas Management Rules 2016; the National Biodiversity Strategy and Action Plan 2016–2021; the Biosafety Policy of Bangladesh (in draft); and the Bangladesh Delta Plan 2100, which aims for long-term water and food security. Furthermore, the Bangladesh Vision 2041 included in its Perspective Plan 2021–2041 set quantified targets, such as a reduction in degraded land from 18 per cent in 2018 to 5 per cent in 2041 or an increase in forest cover from 15 per cent in 2018 to 20 per cent in 2041. The environmental targets therein are coherent with those in the Eighth Five-Year Plan.

Given the lengthy time frames of such policies and plans, the Sustainable Development Goals are of only limited relevance. The Eighth Five-Year Plan recognizes that “it is not so clear how these laws and regulations interact with each other and how they connect to the overarching goal of reconciling economic progress and environmental sustainability” (p. 483).

The body that has been overseeing implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh since 2015 is the Interministerial Committee on Sustainable Development Goal Implementation and Review, which is chaired by a principal coordinator in the Office of the Prime Minister. The secretariat function is performed by the General Economic Division of the Planning Commission. The Committee monitors and oversees the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, with the participation of the various ministries and divisions responsible for related activities. For activities to implement Sustainable Development Goal 15, these are the Ministry of Environment, Forest and Climate Change, the Economic Relations Division and the Finance Division of the Ministry of Finance and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

The Government of Bangladesh undertook an exercise to map its national ministries, divisions and organizations in relation to implementation of each of the 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. As a result, lead and co-lead actors were assigned for each target and were requested to prepare action plans to meet those targets. On the basis of the plans of 43 ministries and divisions, the General Economic Division prepared an overall national action plan. Nevertheless, the Government

in its Eighth Five-Year Plan recognizes that these institutions have “inadequate capacities, technical knowledge and staffing due to very limited resources” (p.483) and that inadequate coordination between ministries undermines environment management, including at the subnational level. The Eighth Plan also notes that “technical data on environment performance is scarce and not regularly monitored or updated to check the progress” (p. 483).



Europe, UK, Yorkshire Moors, Round-leaved sundew on a peatland bog. © UNEP/Stephanie Foote

### 3. Environmental Data In Bangladesh



The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics is mandated, by the Statistics Act 2013, to provide data for 105 of the 232 indicators of the Sustainable Development Goals. A National Data Coordination Committee brings together representatives of the government institutions, civil society organizations and private entities that generate data. An online Sustainable Development Goal Tracker provides an easy-to-access overview of selected indicators.<sup>2</sup> The 2020 voluntary national review reported that, out of the 232 indicators, data for only 61 are readily available. The plan is gradually to increase this number to 200 in 2030. Through its platform, the World Environment Situation Room, UNEP provides, by country, a summary of the 93 indicators related to the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals. It shows the trend between the present year and a baseline, either the average for the period 2000–2004 or the year nearest to 2004 for which there are data. Bangladesh has seen a positive change in relation to 15 of the 93 environment-related indicators and a negative change in relation to 10 of them, indicating the need for action to reverse the trend. There was little positive or negative change in relation to 6 of the indicators, which signifies the need for more intense effort. There are, however, significant data gaps, with little or no data currently available for most of the 93 environment-related indicators.

<sup>2</sup> Available at <https://www.sdg.gov.bd>.

In 2017, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics published the Bangladesh Environmental Statistics Framework 2016–2030, which provides an overview of the environment-related indicators and associated data gaps and highlighted issues regarding data-processing and reporting methodologies and institutional and human capacity. The document highlights institutional and systemic strengths and weaknesses and provides recommendations for strengthening national environmental data management and reporting, including in relation to international reporting obligations under, for example, multilateral environmental agreements and the Sustainable Development Goals.

The challenges faced by Bangladesh in relation to environmental data can be enumerated as follows:

**Data parameters.** Methodologies or standards for the collection, processing, management and reporting of data are not consistent. Technical data on environmental performance are scarce and not regularly monitored or updated. Data for most of the environment-related indicators are not linked to metadata, which makes quality control and assurance difficult, and there is no data-quality-assurance mechanism. Environmental data collected by different ministries and agencies do not conform to a common standard or use a common presentation format.

**Institutionalized data exchange among government entities.** As is the case in many countries, inter-agency cooperation is difficult in Bangladesh because mechanisms for data-sharing and coordination are inefficient or ineffective. Data-sharing and coordination among governmental agencies is not sufficiently underpinned by dedicated cooperation mechanisms, particularly at the technical level. Such mechanisms would also need to be extended to agencies outside the national government, such as subnational entities, research institutions and nongovernmental organizations. Although an interministerial technical working committee exists, the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics would need a special mandate to cooperate with subnational entities, as well as the necessary resources and capacity.

**Relevance of indicators.** Data collection and use present challenges in Bangladesh and need to be not only demand-driven but also consistent over time. Baseline information needs to be established for all indicators, and those indicators need to be in line with international reporting requirements and, even more importantly, domestic needs, priorities and policies.

**Capacities and awareness.** Staff working with environmental data in agencies and institutions require the technical skills to be able to address gaps in data and metadata, establish baselines and systematically improve the quality of data sets. Other necessary technical skills relate to data management, spatial data analysis and data exchange.



Bangladesh - © Pixabay/Arifur Rahman Tushar

## 4. UNEP Action to Improve Environmental Data and Policy Coherence in Bangladesh

UNEP has a global mandate to monitor the environment and is the custodian of 25 environment-related indicators of progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals. The mandate of UNEP includes the promotion of policy coherence and the coherence of

efforts to meet the environment-related targets of all 17 Sustainable Development Goals, notably through subprogramme 4 of the UNEP programme of work on environmental governance and subprogramme 7 on the environment under review.



In the case of Bangladesh, the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific, based in Bangkok, worked with the UNDP country office in Bangladesh, the General Economic Division and other domestic partners to improve the environment-related aspects of data, reports and projects with a view to contributing to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the national level. At the core of this support were activities to strengthen institutional capacity for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh that took place under the global programme Poverty–Environment Action for the Sustainable Development Goals run by UNDP and UNEP.<sup>3</sup> To enable such cooperation, an inter-agency agreement was concluded for the work on improving environmental data and the preparation of voluntary national reviews and the national progress report on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals.



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In that context, the following activities were carried out in Bangladesh. Work was initiated to develop a road map for sustainable financing to support the efforts of UNDP and UNEP and to aid resource mobilization and alignment for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. It aimed to ensure that national policies and plans took the Goals into account, that funding for their implementation was secured and that all sectors of society were involved in implementing the Goals and monitoring progress. The additional financing, over and above the current level of investment, needed for implementation of the Sustainable

Development Goals in Bangladesh is estimated to be \$928.48 billion for the period 2017–2030. This will cover about 80 per cent of the activities needed to meet the 169 targets of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The financing road map succeeded in securing \$2.8 million in funding from the UNDP–UNEP programme Poverty–Environment Action for the Sustainable Development Goals.

A meeting of focal points of ministries concerned with the monitoring and evaluation of activities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals brought together representatives of 46 ministries. The meeting served to raise their awareness of the potential for synergies between national policies and the Sustainable Development Goals, as well as other international frameworks, and reviewed the country's ability to track progress towards achievement of the Goals. It also took stock of evolving international and national indicator frameworks.

The Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, in collaboration with UNDP and UNEP, also convened a training workshop, on capacity-building in the field of environmental statistics for the Sustainable Development Goals. A total of 22 ministries, divisions, departments and organizations were represented. Another workshop on environment-related data for data producers and users was organized to identify gaps in the data generated to measure national progress towards implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. Participants agreed on steps for improving environment-related data. They also found that analytical and methodological capacities needed to be improved and that approaches to the reporting, monitoring and sharing of environmentally relevant data needed to be determined in relation to the national plans and frameworks and multilateral agreements to which they pertained. The participants exchanged knowledge and lessons learned related to the collection, use and sharing of environment-related data and indicators for assessing and reporting on progress in meeting the Sustainable Development Goals. They also discussed policy coherence for sustainable development and indicator 17.14.1 (the number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development), including UNEP-developed methodology for measuring progress in relation to that indicator. This work provided a good example of the UNEP Regional Office and the Science Division working together to provide integrated support at the national level.

<sup>3</sup> The UNDP–UNEP programme Poverty–Environment Action for the Sustainable Development Goals (2020–2023) aims to ensure that development planning and budgeting and associated monitoring systems integrate objectives related to environmental sustainability and the climate with the aim of poverty eradication.



Bangladesh received advice and data from UNEP for the production of its 2020 voluntary national review and a report entitled “Sustainable Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report 2020”. The voluntary national review included a number of good practices that could be replicated in other countries. It highlighted the need for an integrated approach to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals and referenced other multilateral environmental agreements, including the Stockholm Convention on Persistent Organic Pollutants, the Basel Convention on the Control of Transboundary Movements of Hazardous Wastes and their Disposal, the Minamata Convention and the three Rio Conventions: the Convention on Biological Diversity, the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change and the United Nations Convention to Combat Desertification in those Countries Experiencing Serious Drought and/or Desertification, Particularly in Africa. The voluntary national review also noted that there are environmental aspects of the Sustainable Development Goals that are not focused primarily on the environment.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>4</sup> For example, the need for environmentally sustainable farming under Goal 2 (Zero hunger); for improvements to environmental health under Goal 3 (Good health and well-being); for technology to address environmental issues under Goal 9 (Industry, innovation and infrastructure); for environmental protection efforts as a contributing factor under Goal 16 (Peace, justice and strong institutions); and for environment-related action as a contributing factor in support of implementation of the national Social Development Framework under Goal 17 (Partnerships for the Goals).

The voluntary national review highlighted green finance and the Integrated National Financing Framework, which is considered a key mechanism for ensuring an integrated and coherent approach to the financing of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Furthermore, the voluntary national review addressed emerging issues, in particular the coronavirus disease pandemic, and emphasized the role that vulnerable groups should play in the analysis of progress towards achievement of environment-focused Sustainable Development Goals.

The process of preparing the review involved consultations with the Federation of Bangladesh Chambers of Commerce and Industry, which was important in view of the need for private sector action on sustainable financing and sustainable production and consumption in order to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals. Both the 2020 voluntary national review and the report entitled “Sustainable Development Goals: Bangladesh Progress Report 2020” were prepared by the Bangladesh National Planning Commission using a participatory process and under the leadership of the Interministerial Committee on Sustainable Development Goal Implementation and Review.

## 5. Results

The success of the present project is in large part due to its joint delivery by UNDP and UNEP. Such an approach is in line with the ongoing United Nations reforms called for by the General Assembly and the Secretary-General. Cooperation among United Nations agencies allows for a more integrated approach to support, which draws on the differing strengths and expertise of the agencies concerned. The close cooperation of UNEP with UNDP allowed UNEP to complement its competencies with the in-country implementation capacity of UNDP, its network of contacts within government entities and its country-specific expertise.

The UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific manages the regional components of the present project and the activities undertaken as part of the four-year Poverty–Environment Action for the Sustainable Development Goals programme. This allowed for an integrated approach in the delivery of both initiatives, taking advantage of the synergies between them. This provides a model for the delivery of UNEP work in other countries. In the case of Bangladesh, the modest funds of the project allowed UNEP to strengthen the environmental dimension in much larger projects related to the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh and the region.

Achievements of the present project include:

- ❑ The creation and strengthening of partnerships. UNEP lived up to its mandate and assumed the role of catalyst. It cooperated closely with UNDP and other international organizations. While the lack of UNEP representation in the country could have been perceived as a weakness, the combination of UNEP, with its regional and global expertise, and UNDP, with its in-country relations, turned out to be a strength.
- ❑ The cooperation between UNEP and UNDP under this project, which provides a good example of a mode of implementation that conforms to the objectives of the United Nations reform agenda and which can be applied in other projects and countries.
- ❑ The testing of the UNEP-developed methodology for measuring progress in relation to indicator 17.14.1 of the Sustainable Development Goals. The methodology was developed to assess policy coherence at the national level and is based on a scoring system. It aims to identify not only missing mechanisms, but also ways of strengthening existing mechanisms. The testing raised awareness of the importance of policy coherence and brought together the main actors involved in monitoring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the national level;
- ❑ The achievement of leverage by guiding the disbursement of \$2.8 million in funding for implementation of activities to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh and the region;
- ❑ The realization of synergies among projects related to achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals, in particular with the UNEP and UNDP programme Poverty-Environment Action for the Sustainable Development Goals and the UNDP projects on strengthening institutional capacity for achievement of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh and other countries in the region.
- ❑ The provision of support by the UNEP Regional Office for Asia and the Pacific for the development of reports on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals, notably the 2020 voluntary national review. The experience gained in Bangladesh prompted the Regional Office to engage in the development of voluntary national reviews elsewhere in the region.



Bangladesh - © Pixabay/David Bawm

## Lessons learned under the project

When UNEP is not represented at the country level, cooperation is more important than when it is present on site. In such cases, projects can be strengthened by the concluding of agreements with national-level partners with knowledge and expertise that complements that of UNEP. Inter-agency cooperation among United Nations agencies can ensure more efficient and effective use of the human and financial resources of the United Nations and better integration of the support delivered by the system. In the present project, however, the limited in-field presence of UNEP meant that there was a need to ensure its visibility as part of the joint activities, throughout the entire project period, even if its provision of resources was relatively minor or its contribution was rather facilitative in nature. Collaboration with ministries of planning, in partnership with ministries of the environment, the traditional government partners of UNEP, can strengthen application of the integrated approach as ministries of planning have cross-cutting mandates and greater power to convene meetings with multiple other ministries.

In the case of Bangladesh, the modest funds allocated to the project allowed UNEP also to strengthen implementation of the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals in much larger projects in both Bangladesh and the region.

## A Touch of Gender

UNEP is committed to promoting gender equality in strengthening the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals in Bangladesh and the region. The application of a gender lens in reviewing the recommendations in this case study recognizes the cross-cutting nature of SDG 5 and its relation to the environmental goals. Therefore, countries

drawing examples from this case study are encouraged to promote the progress of gender equality at various levels. UNEP through its [Medium Term Strategy](#) provides guidance on how to integrate gender related environmental elements in the Sustainable Development Goals through the integrated approach.

## 6. Recommendations

National legal frameworks regulating the collection and monitoring of data need to be underpinned with increased awareness of the importance of applying integrated approaches to environmental data management to break down silos. The generation, monitoring and reporting of data on progress towards the Sustainable Development Goals can be strengthened through the active engagement of all relevant ministries and their offices in such an integrated approach. Responsibilities at the level of each indicator need to be clearly assigned and contact points established.

The development of common standards, protocols and criteria for data will enhance their quality and improve interoperability. In that regard, Bangladesh could consider participating in the early application of the data-reporting tool for multilateral environmental agreements “DaRT”.<sup>5</sup> DaRT provides

parties to multilateral environmental agreements with a private and secure working space to organize, maintain and share information, data and knowledge across conventions and across reporting purposes.

Increased use of additional data sources, such as data gathered through remote-sensing, would strengthen data sets and give a fuller picture of the status of the environment and related trends. Capacity-building for data gathering is needed.

A review could be conducted of the institutional arrangements for environmental monitoring and data management at the policy and operational levels in institutions at the national and subnational levels. The online Sustainable Development Goal Tracker could be updated and complemented in particular with environment-related data.

<sup>5</sup> DaRT is being developed by UNEP with the support of the secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity and has been endorsed by the United Nations Information Portal

on Multilateral Environmental Agreements (InforMEA). It is available at <https://dart.infornea.org/home>.



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