

Environmental Data, Policy and the Sustainable Development Goals

The Case Study of Colombia



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 dimension¹ of the Sustainable Development Goals.

In Colombia, the work was based on the interaction of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals as identified using the Sustainable Development Goals Synergies analytical tool developed by the Stockholm Environment Institute. Emphasis was placed on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the subnational level and on the response to the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) pandemic.

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.

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

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

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 policy coherence has been strengthened in Colombia using the particular skills and experience of UNEP.

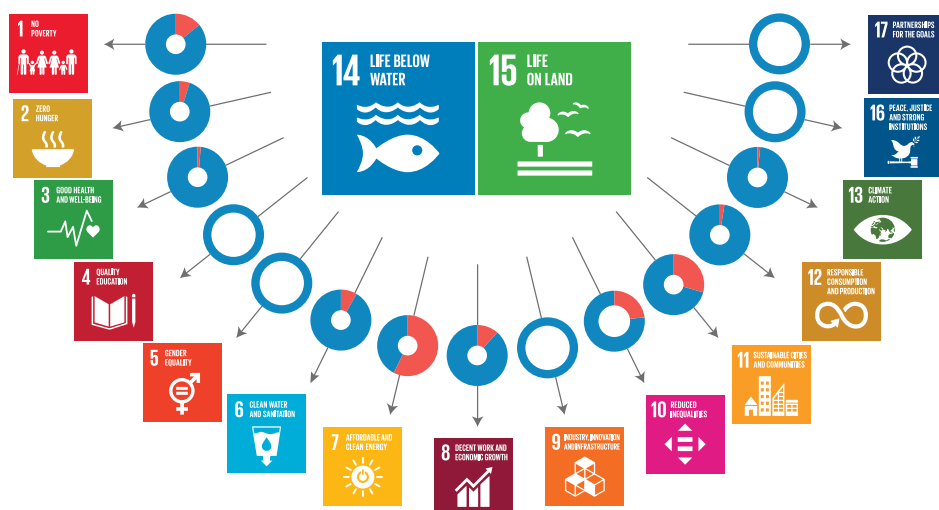


Figure 1. Environment as the Basis of the Sustainable Development Goals

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

¹ 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 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.

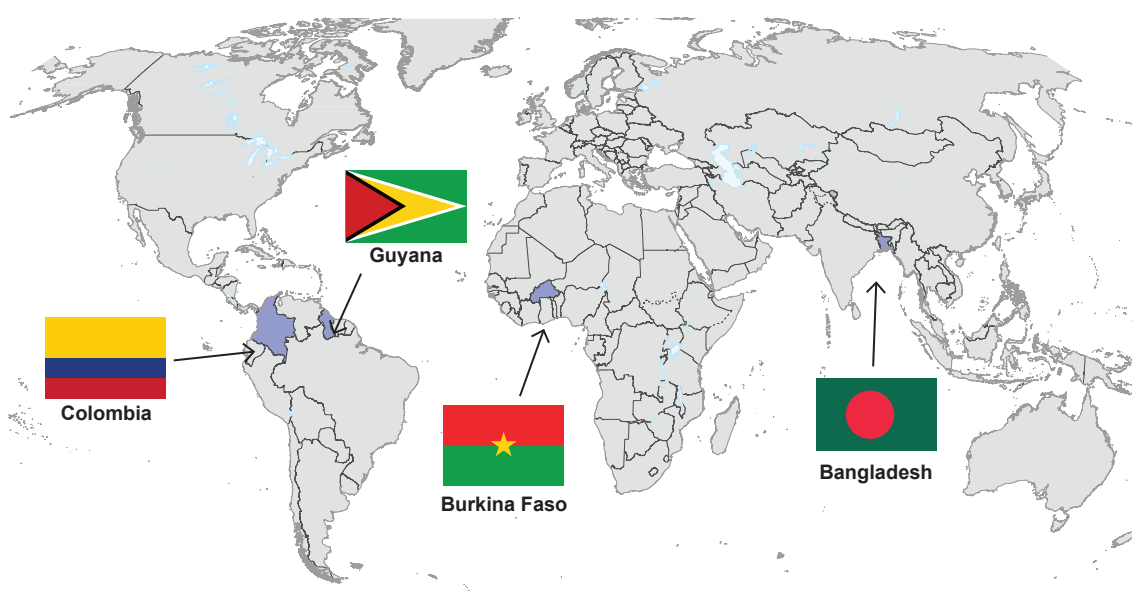


Figure 2. Participating Countries

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 – Colombia

Colombia is the world's most densely biodiverse country per square kilometre. It is the second most biodiverse country in the world, second only to Brazil, which is approximately seven times larger. Colombia is party to several multilateral environmental agreements and is one of the countries most active in the promotion of sustainable development. The Government played a leading role in the international negotiation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable

Development and the Sustainable Development Goals and was quick to begin work on their implementation. It established its national High-level Inter-Institutional Commission for the Preparation and Effective Implementation of the Sustainable Development Agenda Post-2015 and its Sustainable Development Goals² in 2015, the year of adoption of the

² The Commission is composed of the heads of seven national government entities.

2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. The role of the Commission is to guide and coordinate implementation by territorial entities (departments, districts, municipalities and indigenous territories), civil society, the private sector and academia. The Commission is supported by a technical committee composed of representatives of the senior management of bodies that are members of the Commission. The Commission, which complements the pre-existing National Council for Economic and Social Policy and the National Planning Department, is chaired by the President of Colombia and is leading development efforts.

Colombia takes a long-term approach in its sustainable development policies, using a 15-year horizon for multiple government-led cycles to promote consistency, stability and predictability in public policy. Through implementation of its National Development Plan 2018–2022, Colombia aims to join the group of high-income countries and is aware that implementing the environmental dimension of sustainable development is a precondition for that. The country has already had significant success in achieving the Millennium Development Goals and has strengthened its implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by adopting an approach involving the whole of society. For example, the Sustainable Development Goals have been incorporated, to some extent, into all subnational development plans. The National Development Plan treats environmental issues as cross-cutting and aims to strengthen environmental institutions and procedures and improve transparency and data generation and use. Environment-related policies are informed by the country's Green Growth Policy, covering the period 2018–2030, and complemented by territorial development plans in which the Sustainable Development Goals are reflected to varying degrees.

Colombia has already submitted three voluntary national reviews of its implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. It was one of the first countries to submit a review in 2016, followed by further reviews in 2018 and 2021. The 2016 voluntary national review explained how the country was preparing its institutional arrangements for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals. The 2021 review outlined how Colombia was responding to the COVID-19 pandemic and its efforts to balance the three dimensions of sustainable development in building back better. The Policy for Reactivation, Re-empowerment and Sustainable and Inclusive Growth is aligned with the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and aims for the country to resume the development path that it was following before the pandemic. Environment-focused Sustainable Development Goals, such as Goals 14 and 15, were not prioritized in the 2016 and 2021 voluntary national reviews. Goal 15 was among those prioritized in the 2018 voluntary national review. The 2021 review includes analysis of the incorporation of the environment-focused Sustainable Development Goals into subnational public policies. While all reviews are developed using a participatory approach that includes non-governmental actors, the reviews are intended to be data-driven and use both government and private sources.

3. Environmental Data in Colombia

Strategy for Implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia of March 2018 places strong emphasis on data. Two of its four specific objectives are as follows: to define a scheme for monitoring and reporting progress in the implementation of the Sustainable

Development Goals in Colombia (specific objective 1) and to define a plan to strengthen the production and management of data for the measurement of sustainable development (specific objective 2).

For each nationally relevant target of the Sustainable Development Goals, Colombia has assigned responsibility for the tracking of overall progress in meeting that target to a lead entity and an accompanying entity. The National Administrative Department of Statistics (DANE) has the mandate to oversee the national statistics system, which is responsible for producing and disseminating official national and subnational statistics. The National Administrative Department of Statistics therefore managed the process to identify national indicators to track the country's progress in achieving the targets and goals of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. A total of 156 indicators were selected.

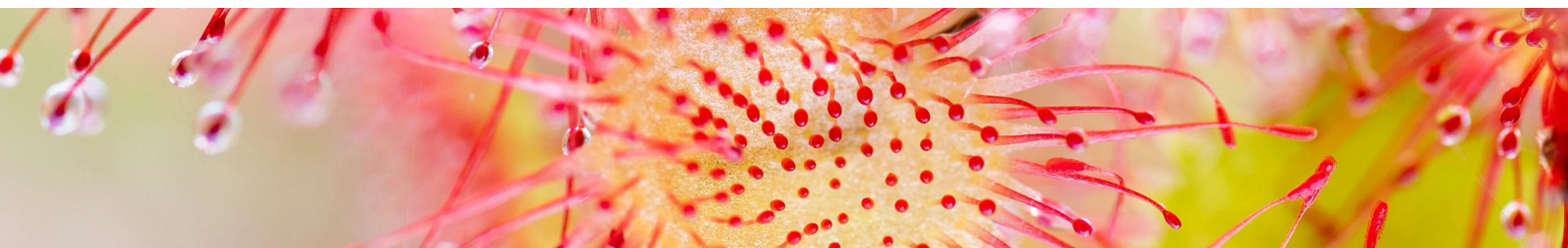
The National Administrative Department of Statistics is advised by the National Statistics Advisory Council, which approved the National Statistics Plan 2017–2022, defining the overall strategy for strengthening production and dissemination of official statistics within the national statistics system. The aim is to obtain

a better understanding of the economic, sociodemographic and environmental reality in Colombia. The National Statistics Plan is also intended to strengthen the capacities of at least 30 per cent of the entities that work within the national statistics system.

Colombia complements its government-generated data with data from other sources, such as the Sustainable Development Goal Corporate Tracker,³ which measures the contribution of the private sector to the implementation of the Goals. The Government of Colombia maintains a public web portal containing information on implementation of the Goals.⁴

3 Further information on the Tracker is available at <https://sdgs.un.org/partnerships/sdg-corporate-tracker-colombia-sdg-ct>

4 The portal can be accessed at <https://www.ods.gov.co>



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

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



UNEP has a global mandate to monitor the environment and 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 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. As such, UNEP is custodian of indicator 17.14.1 (the number of countries with mechanisms in place to enhance policy coherence of sustainable development).

Under the present project in Colombia, the UNEP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean worked closely with the National Planning Department and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development as its main counterparts for project implementation.

The focus of the project was defined with the Government of Colombia in response to the strong emphasis that the country places on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the subnational level. The project enabled identification of the most important areas of interaction of the Goals at the national and subnational levels. UNEP entered into an

agreement with the Stockholm Environmental Institute for the testing of a tool, developed by the Institute that analyses the interaction of the Sustainable Development Goals and their targets.

The methodology used in the tool, which is called Sustainable Development Goal Synergies, combines quantitative and qualitative approaches. A broad range of experts from Governments and other stakeholders were invited to two workshops, held on 29–30 November 2018 and 7–8 March 2019, to attribute scores to the interactions among the Sustainable Development Goals at the target level, according to a seven-point scale ranging from -3 to +3. For each country, region or municipality to which the tool was being applied, a subset of the 169 targets had been preselected on the basis of the prevailing circumstances. The lowest score of -3 means that progress in one target cancels out progress in another, thereby making it impossible to reach the other target. The highest score of +3 means that progress in one target is indivisibly linked with progress in the other target. Most interaction between targets is somewhere in between. The interaction may be “counteracting”, which means that it clashes with another goal; “constraining”, which means that it limits the options for another goal; “consistent”, which means that there is no significant positive or negative interaction; “enabling”, which means that it creates conditions that further another goal; or “reinforcing”, which means that it aids the

achievement of another goal. The result of all the interaction among the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals is presented in a matrix.

The Synergies tool was applied for the first time at the subnational level in the Antioquia Department of Colombia. The test was undertaken in partnership with the Regional Autonomous Corporation of Antioquia (subnational environmental authority), the Government of Antioquia and ProAntioquia, a private-sector foundation that is taking the lead in the planning, monitoring and reporting of efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals.

The tool was later applied at the national level on the basis of a subset of 20 targets from 14 Sustainable Development Goals. The indicators in the subset were chosen in collaboration with the National Planning Department and the Ministry of Environment and Sustainable Development. The workshop held to score the interaction of those 20 targets brought together experts from the national government, the private sector, academia and civil society. The results of the analysis were presented at another workshop held in July 2019 in New York, United States of America, on the margins of the United Nations high-level political forum on sustainable development.

The results of application of the tool at the national level showed that the target with the greatest influence on other targets is target 11.6 (Reduce the environmental impact of cities), followed by targets 9.5 (Enhance scientific research and upgrade technological capabilities) and 12.5 (Reduce waste generation). The results of the subnational application of the tool in the Antioquia Department also showed that the target with the greatest influence on other targets was target 12.5, this time followed by target 2.4 (Ensure sustainable food production systems). Furthermore, targets 1.5 (Build the resilience of the poor and vulnerable) and 6.3 (Improve water quality) were those most influenced by other targets at the national level and targets 1.5 and target 2.4 were the targets most influenced by others at the national level.

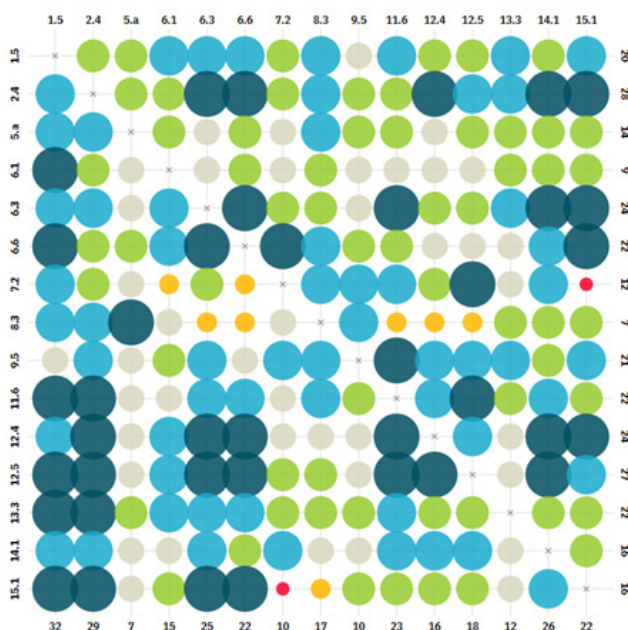


Figure 3.
An example of a matrix showing the interaction of the targets of the Sustainable Development Goals at the subnational level. Source: Stockholm Environment Institute (SEI).

In addition to the testing and application of the Synergies interaction tool, the present project comprised a number of other activities.



Colombia - © Flickr/Craig Bellamy

In 2020, a guide on environmental obligations for municipalities and governments in Colombia, entitled “Sustainable Territories”, was launched. The guide was developed by the Attorney General’s Office with the support of UNEP and others. It aims to protect the right to a healthy environment and to address the increase in environmental problems that are considered to contravene the Colombian Constitution of 1991 and some of the country’s laws. The guide seeks to orient territorial entities in fulfilling their environmental obligations. Issues dealt with in the guide include the relevance of multilateral environmental agreements to the subnational context, national and subnational obligations and good practices relating, for example, to sustainable land use, coastal and marine management, climate change and disaster risk

management, hazardous waste management and sustainable construction.

The environmental consequences of the socioeconomic impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and changing trends were analysed by UNEP in cooperation with the United Nations country team and the local non-governmental organization Fundación Natura. The analysis focused on environmental degradation and changes in land use caused by deforestation and mining and on the impact thereof on the capacity of local authorities in Colombia to enforce environmental regulations. Deforestation, which had decreased by 19 per cent in 2019 compared with 2018, increased again during the pandemic in 2020, by 8 per cent, from 158,894 ha to 171,685 ha. The main reason for the increase was the absence of government authorities, especially in remote areas, which normally limits the advance of illegal crops and the agricultural frontier. It appears that illegal mining also increased during the pandemic, owing to increased international market demand, although data are scarce, also on account of a lack of governmental control.

The analysis also included application of the Sustainable Development Goal Synergies tool and looked at links with the nationally determined contributions of Colombia to reduce greenhouse gas emissions under the Paris Agreement. Application of the Synergies tool showed that the COVID-19 pandemic has had a negative impact on progress in 56 per cent of priority targets. The full results of the analysis will be published by UNEP.

5. Results



The success of the present project, “Towards coherent implementation of the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals”, is in large part due to the effective cooperation between the UNEP Regional Office for Latin America and the Caribbean and the Stockholm Environment Institute and between the UNEP Regional Office and UNEP headquarters. The cooperation between UNEP and the Stockholm Environment Institute enabled testing of a promising tool for assessing the interaction of targets of the Sustainable

Development Goals at the subnational level, which provided meaningful insights into the differences among government levels and the related applicability of such tools. UNEP led the project through a change in government, ensuring that the new government remained informed and supportive of the project, and undertook regional networking and information exchange on the lessons learned.

The project was adapted to the requirements of Colombia, while maintaining its overarching



Colombia - © Pexels/Enrique Hoyos

objectives. UNEP provided guidance and expertise. The activities in the present case study can be upscaled and applied by other regions and countries. Owing to the COVID-19 pandemic, however, some of the activities as originally planned had to be adapted to respond to the changing circumstances.

Achievements of the present project include:

- ❑ The lasting impact of the project. The Sustainable Development Goal Synergies tool of the Stockholm Environment Institute continues to be used, for example to inform discussions on the launching of a national platform to enhance stakeholder participation in implementation of the Goals.
- ❑ The finding that the Synergies tool is applicable and relevant for both national and subnational governments. The

project responded to the importance given to subnational implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals by Colombia in terms of application of the tool at the subnational level and the publication of the guide on environmental obligations for municipalities and governments in Colombia.

- ❑ The continued use of the tool by the Government of Colombia. The tool was used to identify the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in the country, which in turn informed the development of the ***Policy for sustainable and inclusive recovery, repowering, and growth***.
- ❑ Increased visibility for the Synergies tool. As part of outreach efforts, the results of the testing and first application of the tool were brought to the attention of the United Nations high-level political forum for sustainable development and a number of countries and regions. This might lead to further uptake of the tool.
- ❑ The project's support for the COVID-19 response, through its analysis of the impact of the pandemic on progress towards meeting environmental targets. It thereby highlighted the importance of safeguarding the environmental dimension of efforts to meet the Sustainable Development Goals in COVID-19 response measures.

Lessons learned under the project

Owing to the presence of UNEP in Colombia, its interaction with governmental and non-governmental partners was straightforward and facilitated the continuation of project during and following a change in government. The new government was open to and interested in continuing work on the project. Given that Colombia places strong emphasis on implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the level of cities, regions and municipalities, tools that are applicable at the subnational level are very helpful. The Sustainable Development Goal Synergies tool developed by the Stockholm Environment

Institute has proven its worth and could be applied in other countries too. This project has played a pioneering role in that regard. Such work would benefit from more extensive outreach activities beyond the country itself, for example through the UNEP network and United Nations country teams around the world. The event at the high-level political forum on sustainable development is a very good example of the kind of event that could be organized. Many countries and United Nations agencies might be interested in the experience gained and lessons learned under this project.

UNEP is committed to promoting gender equality in strengthening the environmental dimension of the Sustainable Development Goals in Colombia 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.



Colombia - © Pixabay/Ulises Casaraz

6. Recommendations

- Through its territorial development plans, Colombia fosters implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals at the subnational level. The Sustainable Development Commission promoted the Goals at subnational level and supported their integration in the territorial development plans. This good practice could be further promoted by UNEP and other organizations. UNEP could also promote use of the Sustainable Development Goal Synergies tool for use by countries at a variety of levels.
- Colombia is one of the pioneers of preparation of voluntary local reviews by local and regional governments. Such voluntary local reviews allow local and regional governments to increase their ownership of the Sustainable Development Goals and empower them with regard to the actions that they can take to achieve them. UNEP and other organizations could promote the preparation of voluntary local reviews. The guide on environmental obligations for municipalities and governments in Colombia can support even stronger local engagement and is relevant for municipalities in other countries too. UNEP could both promote the guide and use it as a basis for the development of guidelines that would be applicable worldwide.

□ Colombia consistently takes a very comprehensive approach to implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals, which makes a lot of sense given their interconnectedness. Nevertheless, there is a risk that the environmental dimension could be neglected, as could be derived from an analysis by the National Planning Department, for example in the 2021 voluntary national review.⁵

□ Colombia is a strong advocate of a multi-stakeholder and participatory approach and has created a platform bringing together a variety of actors. It could enhance its reporting on partnerships by applying the UNEP 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 national level and is based on a scoring system. It aims to identify not only missing mechanisms, but also ways of strengthening existing mechanisms.

□ Colombia has taken an innovative approach to business engagement through the Sustainable Development Goal Corporate Tracker. The initiative could be replicated in other countries.

□ The institutional set-up in Colombia of a Sustainable Development Commission that complements other existing institutions in monitoring implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals and providing advice is remarkable. This set-up could be further analysed from the point of view of environmental governance to ascertain whether it might provide a good model for implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals in other countries too.

□ All the results of this project could be promoted with further outreach activities and upscaled in follow-up projects, both in Colombia and in other countries and regions.

⁵ For example, figure 14 in the 2021 voluntary national review shows the programmes of the territorial development plans in relation to the Sustainable Development Goals in the 10 priority municipalities. Available in Spanish at https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/282902021_VNR_Report_Colombia.pdf.

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