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**Sustainable development**

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**Implementation of and follow-up to major  
United Nations conferences and summits**

**Mainstreaming of the three dimensions of sustainable  
development throughout the United Nations system**

**Report of the Secretary-General**

*Summary*



## I. Introduction

1. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, from 20 to 22 June 2012, world leaders renewed their commitment to sustainable development and to promoting sustainable development for present and future generations. They outlined a broad vision that places poverty eradication as the greatest global challenge facing the world today and as an indispensable requirement for the attainment of sustainable development.

2. In the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the United Nations system, including international financial institutions, should support the efforts of all countries, in particular developing countries, in the achievement of sustainable development (resolution [66/288](#), para. 91).

3. In order to fulfil the renewed commitments, world leaders recognized that the United Nations system needed to approach its own work from a sustainable development perspective. They therefore called on the programmes, funds and specialized agencies to mainstream the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development throughout the work of the United Nations system. In accordance with the request contained in paragraph 93 of the resolution, in 2013, the Secretary-General reported to the General Assembly, through the Economic and Social Council, on the progress made in that regard ([A/68/79-E/2013/69](#)). The report provided reflections on the conceptual framework for mainstreaming sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system and identified achievements and challenges. It also pointed out that progress in that regard would enhance the capacity of the United Nations system to support Member States in taking forward the post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals.

4. In his report, the Secretary-General also identified important conditions for mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations system, including commitment at the highest level bolstered by clear and coherent intergovernmental guidance, and stronger coordination and policy coherence. Also critical were adequate institutional support, analytical capacity-building, and mobilization and allocation of resources to drive sustainable development.

5. As requested by the General Assembly in resolution [68/210](#), the present report provides an update on developments related to the mainstreaming of economic, social and environmental dimensions in the work of the United Nations system since 2013 (section II). It addresses institutional reform and the creation of the high-level political forum on sustainable development, which are expected to lead to coherent intergovernmental guidance in that area (section III), and looks at the role of inter-agency coordination mechanisms in mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development (section IV). The report analyses the extent to which mainstreaming is reflected in the strategic plans of funds, programmes and specialized agencies, as well as in their operational activities for development in developing countries (section V). It reviews recent developments in quality assurance and safeguard mechanisms as a tool for mainstreaming the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development (section VI). Consideration is also given to the role of inspections and independent evaluations in

the United Nations system (section VII). Last, the report draws conclusions and provides a set of recommendations to further advance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system (section VIII).

## **II. United Nations system at work: an update**

### **A. Translating sustainable development into the work of the United Nations system: practical implications**

6. Sustainable development is not a new concept. Since the convening of the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development 22 years ago, sustainable development has become the overarching framework for the work of the United Nations system.<sup>1</sup> However, systematically translating that vision into practice is still proving arduous, and the way the United Nations system works does not routinely reflect the interlinkages between the economic, social and environmental dimensions. Organizations must work together to provide integrated support to help countries to pursue nationally owned sustainable development results.

7. In attempting to define in his previous report ([A/68/79-E/2013/69](#)) what Secretary-General indicated that:

Not all United Nations system policies and programmes have all three dimensions; however, it is important that the potential economic, social and environmental implications of policies and programmes be carefully considered. This is essential in order to avoid unintended impacts, conflicting policies or unsustainable outcomes. It also enables the United Nations system to identify synergies and possible triple-win opportunities.

8. Mainstreaming sustainable development requires, first, the adoption by individual organizations of strategies, programmes and projects that include simultaneously all three dimensions and take account of their interrelations and, second, stronger collaboration among various United Nations organizations, notably those in the economic, social and environmental areas, in order to ensure consideration of all three dimensions when providing support to countries.

### **B. Post-2015 development agenda as a driving force**

9. The post-2015 development agenda and the sustainable development goals will have major implications for the way development is pursued at the national, regional and international levels. The United Nations system needs to ensure that it adapts to support the agenda. Success in that regard will depend in no small part on

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<sup>1</sup>

hence includes funds, programmes, specialized agencies, departments of the United Nations Secretariat, other entities and international financial institutions that are independent specialized

the 32 funds, programmes and specialized agencies that are members of the United Nations Development Group. It thus excludes the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund.

the ability of the system to mainstream the three dimensions of sustainable development in its work.

10. Not only must such integration be realized within each organization but coordination and cooperation must also be stepped up within the United Nations system as a whole. This is essential so that the system can provide integrated support to Member States, grounded in the unique expertise of all the funds, programmes and specialized agencies.

11. The need for integrated support and coordination derives from a characteristic of the post-2015 development agenda. While the focus on the Millennium Development Goals will remain, the agenda will also address economic and environmental issues because it will have poverty eradication and sustainable development at its core.

12. The post-2015 development agenda will be both universal and relevant to each country, taking into account their varying capacities and levels of development. A question that will need to be addressed is how the United Nations can bolster the implementation of such a universal development agenda. This may require taking a close look at some of its focus and activities. It will be important to make close linkages between the normative and operational roles of the United Nations. The new universal development agenda may also require frameworks for operational activities that are more inclusive and flexible.

13. Governments have been explicit in stating that the post-2015 development agenda should effect transformational change that is ambitious yet cognizant of intergenerational solidarity. Implementing such an agenda will require intellectual and analytical inputs from the United Nations system.

14. A transformative post-2015 development agenda must be supported by a renewed global partnership for development and be bolstered by multi-stakeholder partnerships. It is important therefore to deepen the engagement of the United Nations system with a breadth of development actors while also ensuring that accountability mechanisms conducive to engaging widely in such partnerships are in place.

### **C. Mainstreaming specific issues in the work of the United Nations system: what has been learned**

15. In his previous report, the Secretary-General pointed out that the United Nations system had mainstreamed specific issues in its work in several areas,

(c) Development of a conceptual understanding of what mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions means and entails;

(d) Engaging of the inter-agency machinery, namely the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB), through the expression of broad commitment and guidance and, as appropriate, the adoption of a system-wide plan or toolkits; the United Nations Development Group, to bolster mainstreaming at country level; and dedicated inter-agency groups;

(e) Clear methodology, guidance and tools on how to mainstream the three dimensions;

(f) Mobilization of United Nations country teams and system-wide capacity-building on how to use these tools;

Accountability frameworks require heavy initial investments of time, resources and staff, suggesting the suitability of a phased approach in their development and implementation.

The FAO reviewed strategic framework for the period from 2010 to 2019, which was approved by the Conference of the Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations at its thirty-eighth session, gives increased importance to decent rural employment. Around 60 countries have already referred explicitly to employment priorities in framing their collaboration with FAO under their respective country programming frameworks.

### III. Changing intergovernmental landscape

18. The first building block for integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations system is intergovernmental guidance. There have been important developments in that regard. In September 2013, the high-level political forum on sustainable development met for the first time. Established at the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, the forum is expected to provide political leadership, guidance and recommendations for sustainable development, follow up and review progress in the implementation of sustainable development commitments, enhance the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development in a holistic and cross-sectoral manner at all levels, ensuring the appropriate consideration of new and emerging sustainable development challenges (resolution [67/290](#), para. 2).

19. The guidance of the forum will thus greatly benefit the efforts of the United Nations system to develop a common vision and agenda for reform aimed at helping countries to adopt coherent strategies for sustainable development.

20. It will also be important for the United Nations system to support the deliberations of the nascent forum, be a partner in the implementation of decisions and report back on challenges and achievements. The forum will conduct regular reviews on the follow-up and implementation of sustainable development commitments as of 2016. These will include developed and developing countries but also reviews of relevant United Nations entities. If prepared and conducted effectively, the United Nations system reviews could provide important opportunities to discuss, for example, whether small groups of organizations are providing integrated support to Member States in a given area and whether individual organizations are mainstreaming economic, social and environmental dimensions in their work. The forum will need to decide on how it will conduct these reviews so that they lead to meaningful evaluations and findings. The peer reviews conducted in the context of the Environment Management Group, although focused on environmental sustainable management, could provide one example of how to conduct reviews.

21. At the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development, Members States also decided to strengthen the role of the Economic and Social Council in coordinating the follow-up to the outcomes of major conferences and summits in the economic, social, environmental and related fields, and in promoting the balanced integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development (resolution [68/1](#)). The strengthening of the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) and the decision to make its governing body universal with the establishment of the

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29. The framework contains possible actions for strengthening the environmental and social sustainability of (i) strategies and policies; (ii) operational activities, by means of programmes and projects; and (iii) administrative decisions of the United Nations system, such as facilities management. In his 2013 report, the Secretary-General noted the importance of the framework as a possible point of departure for mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development. In that context,

The Comprehensive Framework for Action was designed to be of use to Governments, international and regional organizations, and others with an interest in food security. It consisted of a range of policies and

ng of sustainable development into their respective mandates, programmes, strategies and decision-making processes in support of the efforts of all countries, in particular developing countries, in the achievement of sustainable development (A/67/226, para. 14).

35. Several United Nations funds and programmes, such as the United Nations Population Fund, UNEP and the World Food Programme, have either adopted their strategic plans for the period 2014-2017 or are in the process of finalizing them. Other United Nations organizations, including the specialized agencies, are updating their existing policy frameworks and management plans to take into account the outcome document of the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development and the quadrennial comprehensive policy review. A review of the draft strategic plans and policy papers of several organizations reveals notable progress as well as challenges in mainstreaming sustainable development in the strategic planning of the United Nations development system.

36. It needs to be acknowledged that not all organizations require major adjustments since their mandates and areas of work already integrate environmental, social and economic dimensions. Such is the case, for example, for FAO. In its reviewed strategic framework for the period 2010-2019, FAO developed a vision that mainstreams sustainable development in a balanced manner. It therefore undertakes to achieve a world free of hunger and malnutrition, where food and agriculture contribute to improving the living standards of all, especially the poorest, in an economically, socially and environmentally sustainable manner.

37. medium-term programme framework 2010-2015 for poverty reduction, inclusive globalization and environmental sustainability. The document calls on the organization to address three major global challenges, namely, poverty and inequality, uneven globalization, and environmental degradation and climate change. At the fifteenth session of the General Conference of the United Nations Industrial Development Organization.



systematically mainstreamed in strategic plans, from objectives through to outcomes, outputs and indicators. Nevertheless, there is a need to further clarify how this can be done system-wide. For example, an important step would be to identify and report on joint outputs among several organizations.

## **B. United Nations system operational activities**

46. Mainstreaming the three dimensions of sustainable development in the United Nations system also requires making changes at the country and programme levels. The United Nations Development Group is revising its guidelines on the development of United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks with a view to strengthening their sustainable development content. The effort is an important element in the mainstreaming of sustainable development in the policies, tools and

Conference was not, therefore, mentioned in the documents reviewed. The Millennium Development Goals still constitute the main frame of reference for the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks.

51. Nevertheless, some United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks still succeed in capturing the core concept of sustainable development by recognizing the multidimensional nature of development challenges and the importance of multisectoral intervention. For example, the United Nations Development Assistance Framework of India emphasizes that multidimensional problems require multidisciplinary approaches. Similarly, the United Nations Development Assistance

conundrums and fixable problems, can be found across sector, gender, geographic, ethnic, socioeconomic and

52. The concept of sustainability appears mostly, however, in the context of the environment. Nearly all the United Nations Development Assistance Frameworks

is one of the five programmi

will be needed in order for organizations to work better together and ensure that sustainable development and integrated approaches guide the work of the United Nations system as a whole.

56. Mainstreaming sustainable development also requires a flexible workforce that is able to address development challenges from all dimensions of sustainable development. Staff capacity assessments undertaken in several programme countries show growing demand from programme country Governments for specialized policy advisory support from the United Nations system to deal with emerging global challenges. Entities should be encouraged to develop inter-organizational cooperation projects and initiatives and flexible arrangements for pooling staff, and to establish common partnership strategies for acquiring human resources with the necessary expertise for both long- and short-term assignments, which are becoming increasingly intersectoral and interdisciplinary.

57. There is also a critical need to build the capacities and skills of United Nations system staff at the country level to help Governments in adopting policy approaches that integrate economic, social and environmental dimensions. Training and advisory services would be needed to equip Governments. These could be provided

Box 3

**World Bank Group safeguard policies**

The World Bank Group uses two policy frameworks: the safeguards framework of the World Bank, largely for the public sector; and the performance standards framework of the International Finance Corporation and the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency for the private sector. The two policy frameworks share similar objectives in that the World Bank seeks to avoid, mitigate or minimize the adverse environmental and social impacts of projects, and to ensure that the projects are environmentally sound and sustainable.

The World Bank uses its convening ability, financial instruments and intellectual resources to embed its environmental and social commitment across all of its activities. The commitments range from global engagement in issues such as climate change and gender equality, to ensuring that environmental and social considerations underpin all of the

translate  
into the overarching principle that the organization will look beyond doing











