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RIO+20

United Nations Conference
on Sustainable Development



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SYNTHESIS OF NATIONAL REPORTS FOR RIO+20



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on Sustainable Development

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Foreword

At the Rio+20 Conference, world leaders, along with thousands of participants from governments, the private sector, NGOs and other groups, came together to shape how we can reduce poverty, advance social equity and ensure environmental protection on an ever more crowded planet to get to the future we want. The results of Rio+20 expressed in the outcome document titled “The Future We Want” contain clear and practical measures for implementing sustainable development for Member States.

In the lead up to Rio+20 there were numerous efforts which took place in countries around the world to help Governments, Civil Society Organizations and individuals prepare for the event held in Rio de Janeiro in June 2012. One of the more significant efforts led by the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA) in collaboration with the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) was a support programme to 72 countries across all regions to build a consensus on national views around the themes and objectives of the Rio+20 Conference. The assistance programme was launched in January 2011 at the first Rio+20 Intersessional Meeting held in New York.

Undoubtedly, the results of this work and the fact that we have received almost 60 national reports are a testament to the efforts of a range of development professionals and partners. In many ways what we have found remarkable is the engagement of a wide range of civil society and private actors in this process. The programme activities elicited significant information which has been synthesized into this report. While we probably cannot include all the information garnered, we have attempted to provide relevant content, themes and observations that coincide with the Rio+20 Outcomes. In this regard, we focus on the priorities which have been clearly articulated across the majority of reports.

While a considerable number of reports highlighted the significant advances in sustainable development institutions, policies, programmes and projects, many also underscored the challenges and bottlenecks to moving beyond the economic-led growth strategies of the past 20 years. In this regard, much is still to be done now and in the future to reinforce the links between the economic, social and environmental dimensions that support the development ideals of Member States. The results of this synthesis report highlight a way forward and key priority areas to support the sustainable development ideals of Member States.

We trust you will find the report informative.



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Executive Summary

In the run-up to Rio + 20, UNDESA and UNDP supported more than seventy countries to engage stakeholders in nationally-led processes whose aims were to review progress, challenges and gaps in the implementation of sustainable development approaches over the last two decades. These preparations were informed by national development plans and strategies and reflected the views of participating stakeholders.

This synthesis report concludes that many countries have made substantial progress over the last twenty years in establishing and strengthening the institutional frameworks necessary to ensure sustainable development. The progress made on the conceptual and institutional levels in the two decades that followed the Earth Summit represents a significant achievement.

Today's challenge is chiefly implementation. The evidence from the reports is overwhelming that a gap exists between stated commitments to sustainable development and the reality of implementing sustainable development policies and programmes in all countries and regions reviewed. This is largely due to integration, inclusion, and coherence challenges. Translating the idea of sustainable development into practice by integrating economic, social and environmental aims and approaches to further environmentally sustainable and socially equitable economic growth remains difficult for most countries. It is clear that fragmented approaches must give way to inclusive processes that bring together sectoral and central government agencies in the formulation of development plans and in their implementation, as well as other national stakeholders, including major groups, at all levels. Equally clear from the evidence is that two ingredients critical to successful implementation are missing from many national development recipes: political will and good governance.

Economic growth is still the chief priority for most governments, and although they increasingly integrate poverty alleviation and other social concerns into development planning, the integration of environmental considerations has lagged. The review of national reports revealed little evidence that countries see sustainability as contributing to growth; at best, governments see sustainability as compatible, or at least not interfering, with growth, but there is little indication that these countries see environmental sustainability as necessary for long-term growth.

The progress in integrating social issues was spurred in large part by the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs); the national reports indicate that most countries have mainstreamed the MDGs into their national development plans and planning processes. The success of the MDGs in influencing national development plans stems from their shared focus on poverty reduction; the globally accepted set of indicators, with clear goals, targets and timeframes, that accompanied them; and the comparatively high level of visible political commitment attached to the Goals.

The national reports highlight a widespread lack of clarity about the meaning of the term "green economy." Lack of clarity around the definition is accompanied by apprehension about perceived risks associated with green economy, including the potential for imposing conditionalities on aid, barriers to trade and other risks. As a result, relatively few countries have initiated national-level policies or plans for a green economy approach, although some countries have formulated economic development plans and strategies that could provide the foundations for the shift to greener economies. Interestingly, all the national reports contain examples of small-scale "green" projects and initiatives for renewable energy, agriculture, fishing, forestry for livelihoods and the like that address areas of the green economy in practice. This disconnect



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suggests that additional efforts may be needed to clarify and help unpack the different inclusive green economy tools, methodologies and measuring frameworks, building on the text and recommendations captured in the Rio+20 outcome document and ongoing follow-up at the regional and country levels.

Poverty reduction has been a top priority for the countries involved in this process, and the national reports reveal significant progress in reducing levels of absolute poverty and hunger; however, in many countries, the distribution of poverty reduction is unequal, with rural areas having made less progress than urban areas. Although countries have made progress towards achievement of the gender equality and maternal mortality goals (**MDGs 3 and 5**), wide gaps separate women and men in terms of socioeconomic targets, such as access to employment, access to and control over productive resources, and empowerment. Many countries flagged the need for improved **integrated water resources management** to address conflicting priorities between different water uses, among them agriculture, energy (hydro), drinking water, irrigation, ecosystem services and flood control. **Energy** is likewise an important issue for all countries, with a primary focus on ensuring reliable supplies of energy for economic growth and for urban populations, and a secondary focus on renewable energy, especially hydropower, but with an increasing interest in other sources such as solar energy, geothermal and wind power.

The synthesis report documents the wide variety of different approaches countries from all regions are taking to sustainable development. Most importantly for the future of sustainable development, it identifies concrete challenges and bottlenecks related to government capacity for implementing policies and programs that integrate the social, environmental and economic aspects of development—challenges and bottlenecks that require the concerted attention and action of national and international development actors. These challenges can be understood as follows:

- **Integration:** incorporating environmental issues into economic planning remains a challenge; there is considerable scope to learn from and build upon the comparatively more successful integration of social issues in mainstream development practice that resulted from national and international commitments to the Millennium Development Goals, whose clear, time-bound, and nationally tailored targets and agreed-upon indicators raised the profile of, and attached a sense of urgency to, issues of poverty, equity, hunger, education, and health.
- **Inclusion:** processes that bring government actors, the private sector and civil society together to pool knowledge, participate in the decisions that affect them, and collectively craft a national vision for the future is critical for development that meets people's needs and whose benefits are both widely shared and enduring.
- **Coherence:** the Rio+20 national preparations underscored the need for more coherent planning and decision-making at and between the national, subnational, and local levels of government as well as across thematic sectors. The evidence shows that few countries boast a well-functioning coordination mechanism with the capacity to align efforts around key, often multi-sectoral, national objectives.
- **Implementation:** the evidence is overwhelming that a gap exists everywhere between stated commitments to sustainable development and the reality of sustainable development implementation, which is constrained by the integration, inclusion, and coherence challenges flagged above.

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