Embedding the Environment in Sustainable Development Goals

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Précis

One of the principal outcomes of Rio+20 was the call to produce a set of universally applicable sustainable development goals (SDGs) that balance the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. This Paper provides advice and guidance on how environmental sustainability can be incorporated in the SDGs.

An analysis of current environmental goals and targets shows that the successful ones are built on general support from society and a scientific consensus that the problem exists and is urgent. The ones making most progress tend to be embedded in effective governance regimes, and be easier to implement because solutions are readily available. A key to success also seems to be that goals are underpinned by specific and measurable targets.

After considering the above and other lessons from current goals, the following framework is proposed for embedding environment in the SDGs:

1. A **rationale and overarching vision for the SDGs**, which is a narrative describing the basis for including environmental sustainability in the SDGs;
2. An **integrated approach for embedding environment in goals and targets** which proposes basic characteristics and types of goals and targets to be selected;
3. A **set of six criteria** for assessing or proposing goals and targets, and guidance on how to use them. The criteria are: (i) Strong linkage of environment with socio-economic developmental goals; (ii) Decoupling of socio-economic development from escalating resource use and environmental degradation; (iii) Coverage of critical issues of environmental sustainability such as important irreversible changes in the global environment; (iv) Take into account current global environmental goals and targets, (v) Scientifically credible and verifiable; and (vi) Progress must be "trackable".
4. A **list of best practices for selecting indicators** that can effectively support targets.

The framework and other ideas presented in the Paper are meant to stimulate a dialogue on environmental sustainability and the SDGs.

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Executive Summary

World leaders at the 2012 United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio+20) reaffirmed their commitment to sustainable development which embraces economic progress, social development, and environmental protection for the benefit of all. One of the principal outcomes of Rio+20 was the call to develop a set of universally applicable sustainable development goals (SDGs) that carefully balance the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development. This Paper provides advice and guidance on how environmental sustainability can be incorporated in the SDGs. It is intended to stimulate a dialogue on environmental sustainability and the SDGs rather than be the last word on the subject.

Lessons Learned from Current Goals and Targets

While countries recommended that the SDGs take a forward-looking approach, they also suggested that the new goals be based on experiences from current international goals and targets. With that in mind, it has been observed that particularly *successful* goals are …

- built on general support from society and a scientific consensus regarding the urgency of the problem;
- embedded in effective institutional and political frameworks and governance regimes that ensure implementation and compliance;
- made easier to implement because of the availability of solutions;
- linked to specific and measurable targets.

On the negative side, a major *barrier to* their success has been *fragmentation* with respect to design (by neglecting the interconnectedness of goals, especially

A Framework for Embedding Environmental Sustainability in the SDGs

Building on lessons from existing goals, a framework is suggested for embedding environmental sustainability into SDGs. This framework includes the following:

The first part of the framework is the **rationale and overarching vision for the SDGs**, which is a narrative describing the basis for including environmental sustainability in SDGs.

The second part is an **integrated approach** for embedding the environment in goals and targets. This approach includes:

1. A *complementary set of goals and targets* – An important principle for selecting goals and targets is that they should reinforce and complement each other, firstly, by ensuring that they cover all of the main objectives of the environmental, social and economic dimensions of sustainable development; and secondly, by ensuring that they work together to maintain and restore the biological diversity and ecosystem services necessary to meet social and economic objectives.
2. *Integrated goals* – It is suggested to fill the top level of the SDGs with a limited number of integrated goals that are simple to understand, but not necessarily simple in nature. The goals would be "integrated" in the sense that they embody all three aspects of sustainable development – environmental, social and economic.
3. *A mix of targets* – Each of the integrated goals should be underpinned by a mix of targets – some integrated, and some "non-integrated" (in the sense that they concentrate on either environmental, social or economic objectives)

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