

IDEAS FOR A SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT OUTLOOK

Jorge Laguna-Celis



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Author's Contact: Jorge Laguna-Celis, Permanent Mission of Mexico to the United Nations. Email: jlaguna@sre.gob.mx and twitter: [@jorgelaguna](https://twitter.com/jorgelaguna)

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WORKING PAPER SERIES EDITOR

Ayşem Mert
Amsterdam Global Change Institute
VU University Amsterdam
(workingpapers@earthsystemgovernance.org)

ABSTRACT

The UN Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability recently recommended a Global Sustainable Development Outlook (SD-Outlook) in addition to other science-related initiatives, such as the appointment of a chief scientific adviser and the inclusion of representatives of the scientific community in relevant national bodies dealing with sustainable development. As a response, Mexico proposed the establishment of an integrated and scientifically credible global sustainable development assessment to support decision-making processes at all levels, to assist member states in identifying policy options to speed up the achievement of the sustainable development goals and to inform, including through an agreed summary for policy makers, the high-level discussions of the forum responsible of following the Sustainable Development agenda. This paper's intention is to shed some ideas on this proposal. An SD-Outlook might be a valuable addition to the sustainable development institutional arrangements. However, for such a report to go beyond the shelves of ministerial offices around the world, the SD-Outlook will have to add value to an already crowded landscape. It should: First, avoid overlapping the existing assessment landscape; second, be build around a legitimate and policy-relevant process; third, influence global, regional and national implementation; fourth, use existing structures; and fifth, it should include incentives and support mechanisms for data collection.

SERIES FOREWORD

This working paper was written as part of the Earth System Governance Project, a ten-year research initiative launched in October 2008 by the International Human Dimensions Programme on Global Environmental Change under the overall auspices of the Earth System Science Partnership.

Earth system governance is defined in this Project as the system of formal and informal rules, rule-making mechanisms and actor-networks at all levels of human society (from local to global) that are set up to prevent, mitigate and adapt to environmental change and earth system transformation. The science plan of the Project focusses on five analytical problems: the problems of the overall *architecture* of earth system governance, of *agency* of and beyond the state, of the *adaptiveness* of governance mechanisms and processes, of their *accountability* and legitimacy, and of modes of *allocation and access* in earth system governance. In addition, the Project emphasizes four crosscutting research themes that are crucial for the study of each analytical problem: the role of power, of knowledge, of norms, and of scale. Finally, the Earth System Governance Project advances the integrated analysis of case study domains in which researchers combine analysis of the analytical problems and crosscutting themes. The main case study domains are at present the global water system, global food systems, the global climate system, and the global economic system.

The Earth System Governance Project is designed as the nodal point within the global change research programmes to guide, organize and evaluate research on these questions. The Project is implemented through a Global Alliance of Earth System Governance Research Centres, a network of lead faculty members and research fellows, a global conference series, and various research projects undertaken at multiple levels (see www.earthsystemgovernance.org).

Earth System Governance Working Papers are peer-reviewed online publications that broadly address questions raised by the Project's Science and Implementation Plan. The series is open to all colleagues who seek to contribute to this research agenda, and submissions are welcome at any time at workingpapers@earthsystemgovernance.org. While most members of our network publish their research in the English language, we accept also submissions in other major languages. The Earth System Governance Project does not assume the copyright for working papers, and we expect that most working papers will eventually find their way into scientific journals or become chapters in edited volumes compiled by the Project and its members.

Comments on this working paper, as well as on the other activities of the Earth System Governance Project, are highly welcome. We believe that understanding earth system governance is only feasible through joint effort of colleagues from various backgrounds and from all regions of the world. We look forward to your response.

Frank Biermann

Ruben Zondervan

Chair, Earth System Governance Project

Executive Director, Earth System Governance Project

1. INTRODUCTION

Heads of State and Government have the option of recognizing that the interface between science and policy-making should be enhanced or they could actually do something about it in the forthcoming Rio+20 Conference on Sustainable Development.¹

The Secretary-General's High-level Panel on Global Sustainability recently draw our attention to this issue by recommending a Global Sustainable Development Outlook (SD-Outlook) in addition to other science-related initiatives, such as the appointment of a chief scientific adviser and the inclusion of representatives of the scientific community in relevant national bodies dealing with sustainable development.

Rio+20 should go beyond affirming principles and commit to action. In fact, the 1992 Rio Declaration on Environment and Development comprehensively recognized the need of scientifically informed decision-making in at least four of its Principles (9, 10, 16 and 17).

As a response to the Secretary General's recommendation, Mexico proposed the establishment in Rio of an integrated and scientifically credible global sustainable development assessment to support decision-making processes at all levels, to assist member states in identifying policy options to speed up the achievement of the sustainable development goals and to inform, including through an agreed summary for policy makers, the high-level discussions of the forum responsible of following the Sustainable Development agenda. This paper's intention is to shed some ideas on this proposal.²

An SD-Outlook might be a valuable addition to the sustainable development institutional arrangements decided in Rio. However, for such a report to go beyond the shelves of ministerial offices around the world, the SD-Outlook will have to add value to an already crowded landscape. It should:

1. Avoid overlapping the existing assessment landscape;
2. Be build around a legitimate and policy-relevant process;
3. Influence global, regional and national implementation;
4. Use existing structures;
5. Include incentives and support mechanisms for data collection.

¹ United Nations Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability (2012), Resilient people, resilient planet: a future worth choosing, New York, United Nations.

² A different view on the SD-Outlook is presented in Alex Evans (2011), "How a World Resources Outlook could build multilateral system coherence on resource scarcity issues", New York, New York University-Center on International Cooperation.

2. AVOID OVERLAPS WITH THE EXISTING ASSESSMENT LANDSCAPE

The SD-Outlook shouldn't aim at replacing the system of thematic or issue-based assessments. The current assessment landscape has evolved as a response to a decentralized institutional setting and to the need to regularly assess specialized information to guide sector-specific decision-makers and foster awareness and understanding among their constituencies.

It would be indeed difficult and unrealistic to attempt, through a thematic-based SD-Outlook, to replicate at the central level the analytical capacity accumulated by different UN system institutions on all of the cross-cutting issues related to the sustainable development agenda.

Social issues and employment are comprehensively covered by the ILO through its flagship reports on the World of Work and the Global Employment Trends. Urban issues are tackled by the Global Report on Human Settlements and the State of the World Cities prepared by UN-Habitat. Food security and sustainable agricultural development are comprehensively covered by the six flagship publications developed by the FAO most notably on food, fisheries, food security, commodity markets, land and water resources. Financial and macro-economic issues are annually covered by the IMF through the World Economic Outlook. UNDP has built an extensive analytical capacity through its flagship Human Development Report including its Human Development Index.

Gradually, as a response to their governing bodies, the assessments undertaken by different UN System agencies are highlighting the linkages and cross-cutting issues between social, economic and environmental themes and sustainable development. For example, during 2010-2011 the Report on Human Settlements focused on the linkages between climate change and sustainable urbanization while the Human Development Report centered on sustainability and equity. Rio+20 should encourage this trend. An SD-Outlook structured around “emerging issues” and the linkages between these issues will overlap valuable contributions from the system.

Needless to say that the SD-Outlook, as advocated in this paper, would not replace the assessment activities undertaken by the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP) all of which respond to UNEP's mandate of keeping under review the world environmental situation. The SD-Outlook functions would be rather complimented by the enhancement of UNEP's own environmental review and early warning capacities.

3. BUILD AROUND A CLEAR MANDATE AND A LEGITIMATE AND POLICY-RELEVANT PROCESS

A strong and legitimate SD-Outlook would benefit from a mix of a scientifically credible process, an intergovernmental mandate and interagency ownership and

support. To fill the gap in the assessment landscape, these necessary conditions could be complemented with the following:

1. Ability to track progress in achieving sustainable development goals or targets;
2. Capacity to disseminate knowledge on promising policies that could be replicated;
3. Incentives to key UN institutions and agencies to pool resources and build upon their respective strengths;

Well-known cases such as the Intergovernmental Panel for Climate Change (IPCC) have gone a long way in influencing decision-makers. Among the keys to the success of the IPCC reports that could inspire an SD-Outlook we can highlight the mandate given in 1988 through the General Assembly Resolution 45/53 (1988) endorsing the action of the World Meteorological Organization (WMO) and UNEP in jointly establishing the IPCC. This mandate was confirmed by the UNFCCC Convention, which emphasized the autonomy of the Panel with regards to the decisions of the Conference of the Parties.

The four reports released the IPCC and their summaries have gained overall legitimacy and intergovernmental ownership thanks to a careful balance between scientific credibility, scientific peer reviews, use of evidence, and international acceptance (and negotiation) of its summaries. The Inter-Academy Council has described this process as a “sustained working dialog between the world’s governments and scientists”³.

An SD-Outlook endorsed by the Rio+20 outcome document could be inspired by the sense of legitimacy conferred to the IPCC model. However, let’s not forget that an SD-Outlook will be a very different product and process from the IPCC Report, which was mandated with the task of providing internationally coordinated scientific assessments of the magnitude, timing and potential environmental and socio-economic impacts of climate change.

4. ENSURE POLICY-RELEVANCE

The scientific evidence of widespread interconnectedness between poverty and environment, between health and environmental change and between human well-being and sustainable resource management is growing. The recognition that the major "environmental problems" such as biodiversity loss, climate change, land degradation and desertification can't be solved exclusively through "environmental policies" has guided many to argue in favor of integrated sustainable development assessments.

Nevertheless, the challenge remains on how to track progress towards sustainable development without losing its meaning and relevance? How can an SD-Outlook remain a viable enterprise while attempting to simultaneously consider economic

³ The Inter-Academy Council (2010), Climate change assessments, Review of the processes and procedures of the IPCC, The Netherlands, The Inter-Academy Council.

development, social development and environmental protection at the local, national, regional and global levels?

To be consistent an integrated SD-Outlook should be policy relevant without being policy prescriptive. It must shift from addressing end-of-the-pipe problems (symptoms) and focus on the drivers of change (root causes) like income and access inequality, equity, population growth, globalization and unsustainable patterns of consumption and production and complex cross-cutting issues such as the nexus between energy, water and food requiring a multidisciplinary approach and the pooling of the expertise spread across different institutions.

The Global Environmental Outlook (GEO) case may provide us with further ideas on how to articulate a policy-relevant process and also help us to identify how the proposed SD-Outlook can attain the right level of decision makers.

The first GEO Report was launched in 1997 by UNEP as a response to the need to monitor the implementation of internationally agreed commitments. Its original emphasis was placed on assessing the state of the environment and the implementation of Agenda 21 but it has gradually evolved to look into other international environmental goals. In the course of the past 15 years, the GEO has produced 5 global reports and a sizeable number of regional, national and thematic environmental assessments.

Guided by UNEP's Governing Council, the GEO has evolved, following the blueprint of the IPCC model, in a comprehensive and credible process based on the need to ensure global relevance, national ownership and scientific credibility.

Broadly speaking, the GEO process starts with UNEP's Governing Council defining its scope and general characteristics, including its priority areas (Atmosphere, Land, Biodiversity, Fresh Water, Oceans, Chemicals and Wastes). After its conclusion, the Council usually takes note of the report and responds to the endorsed policy recommendations contained in its Summary for Policy Makers (SPM), which highlights the main policy recommendations and findings of the Report and is the outcome of an intergovernmental negotiating conference assisted by the lead authors and the secretariat. The GEO process also includes a regional process, which has evolved in assessing relevant case studies identified at the country or regional level. The global and regional drafting processes are assisted by a small secretariat based in UNEP and its regional offices.

The General Assembly recognized in 2011 in its resolution 66/203 (2011) the usefulness of the GEO Outlook and its Summary for Policy Makers. However, it also stressed the need to enhance its "policy relevance" by, inter alia, "identifying policy options to speed up the achievement of the internationally agreed goals and to inform global and regional processes and meetings where progress towards the agreed goals will be discussed, including the UN Conference on Sustainable Development".

Despite its legitimacy and a methodologically sound process, the GEO report hasn't managed yet to attain the right levels of decision makers for the very simple reason that its consideration remains within the global and national environmental spheres, hence limiting its capacity to influence and catalyze action in the financing and implementation of each pillar of sustainable development. One of the main

recommendations concerning a future SD-Outlook will be to elevate its policy recommendations to the right level of decision makers.

5. ENHANCE NATIONAL LEVEL SUPPORT AND IMPLEMENTATION

An SD-Outlook that responds both to the needs of the science-policy interface with information from national, regional and global implementation of sustainable development, could be one of the critical building blocks of a post 2015 UN (sustainable) development agenda that ultimately bridges the two-decades-old misunderstanding that there are other pathways to development besides sustainable development.

In order to track progress in the achievement of sustainable development, disseminate knowledge and experiences on promising policies and ultimately influence national and global policy processes, the proposed SD-Outlook can't be seen as an exclusive product of the environmental pillar, it needs to go beyond and effectively integrate the social and economic dimensions of sustainability. It will also have to assist the international community in identifying in a simple way how the UN system institutions (including funds, programmes, entities and specialized agencies) are delivering on the ground.

A salient institutional gap that could be used to inspire the future functions of a SD-Outlook is the need to combine a systemic approach focusing on the drivers of sustainability with information on how countries and UN development institutions are adapting to sustainability challenges. This bottom-up information could benefit from the UN country programming exercises anchored in national and global operational frameworks such as the UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF), the UN Delivering as One initiative and the Quadrennial Comprehensive Policy Review (QCPR) of the UN operational activities. A well-managed and flexible exercise, through the SD-Outlook, could assist member states and UN system entities on the ground to assess and disseminate useful experiences.

The SD-Outlook could fill a gap in our assessment landscape. It could be an integrated global sustainable development assessment that supports decision-making processes at appropriate levels; assists member states in identifying policy options to speed up the achievement of sustainable development goals; and informs the priorities of member states discussions and relevant entities within the UN System through a summary for policy makers.

The function of informing how the UN development system is delivering on the ground and hence to increase support towards national implementation would not substitute the respective work and functions fulfilled since 1990 through the Human Development Report (HDR).

The HDR is an independent publication commissioned by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). The two main characteristics of the HDR are its editorial independence and its capacity to innovate. Although it's not an official UN

publication, its contents are subject to a consultative process at the Executive Board of the United UNDP and the United Nations Fund for Population Activities (UNFPA). The HDR process also includes independent human development assessments developed by country teams working in 140 countries.

The General Assembly has recognized, through its resolution 57/264 (2003) that the HDR is an important “tool for raising awareness about human development around the world”. Its independence has granted the HDR the human development report the necessary flexibility to evolve through the constant innovation and improvement of the Human Development Index and through the correlation of issues that complement with qualitative elements the exclusively economic approach towards development.

Set as a part of a consensual and legitimate universal review and cooperation mechanism, and building through the experiences and lessons learned by UN System, the SD-Outlook could help member states and UN institutions step-up in a learning curve towards the implementation of sustainable development. It could also help all countries assess and identify the main trends on global financing for sustainable development in order to promote greater coherence among the mechanisms set in place to serve the development needs of member states.

6. INCENTIVES AND SUPPORT MECHANISMS FOR DATA COLLECTION

All of the functions and knowledge tools described above can't be achieved without data. Rio Principle No. 9 stated the international commitment to build and promote in developing countries scientific capacity and understanding on sustainable development. Despite this commitment, there is a growing need in many developing countries of capacities to systematically collect and analyze the data needed for sound and credible scientific advice for sustainable development policies. A strong SD-Outlook should motivate international cooperation to support and strengthen the capacity building mechanisms needed to collect the statistical data required to build consensual and comparable sustainable development indicators.

The UN Statistical Commission and the GEO-5 Report have both recently highlighted that the lack of reliable and consistent time-series data on the state of the environment is a barrier to increasing the effectiveness of policies and programmes.⁴

There is an urgent need for an integrated and consensual approach to statistical data collection. While countries should monitor and assess their own environment and integrate social, economic and environmental information to inform decision-making processes, a valuable finding that could inform the Rio+20 Outcome is that ad-hoc

⁴ United Nations Environment Programme (2012), Summary for Policy Makers of the Fifth Global Environmental Outlook, Nairobi, United Nations Environment Programme.

data collection mechanisms and unilateral sustainable development indicators will ultimately fail the test of time.

In order to promote a standardized approach to data collection, the UN Statistical Commission has recently made significant progress with the adoption of two major frameworks: the System of Environmental-Economic Accounting (SEEA) and the UN Framework for the Development of Environment Statistics (FDES). By strengthening the work achieved under the SEEA and the FDES and further strengthening the mandate of the UN Statistical Commission to advice on the statistical feasibility of consensual indicators, Rio+20 may set on solid and legitimate ground the future sustainable development goals for pursuing an economic transformation that generates new sources of sustainable and equitable economic growth.

7. IN CONCLUSION

The SD-Outlook could be one of the main building blocks of a future global development compact, fully integrating sustainable development and poverty eradication as its overarching focus.⁵ It could fulfill some of the following functions:

- Provide a comprehensive, integrated and scientifically credible global sustainable development assessment to support decision-making processes at appropriate levels;
- Identify promising policy options to speed up achievement of the internationally agreed sustainable development goals, including the sustainable development goals, and enhance the implementation of sustainable development;
- Engage all Governments, relevant United Nations bodies and stakeholders;
- Strengthen the on-going process of capacity building for developing countries to conduct sustainable development monitoring and assessments;
- Inform the strategic directions of the relevant UN bodies and highlight relevant information from existing social, economic and environmental assessments;
- Use the knowledge resources of relevant UN System institutions, including by setting a joint secretariat.

⁵ At the time of the writing of this working paper, the discussions on a possible SD-Outlook were still underway. Some of the most contentious issues included the overall need for a global assessment; the costs associated with the establishment of a permanent secretariat as opposed to a flexible interim internal secretariat; the linkages between the SD-Outlook and the proposed sustainable development goals; the relationship and possible competition between the SD-Outlook and existing scientific environmental platforms such as IPBES or assessments such as UNEP's GEO.

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