

# Strengthening the Role of Information and Indicators at the Rio +20 Summit

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## INTRODUCTION

The outcome document of the UN Conference on Sustainable Development held in Rio de Janeiro in June 20–22 (Rio +20 Summit) is called “The Future We Want” (FWW). Several months before the Summit, the Report of the UN Secretary-General’s High-Level Panel on Global Sustainability entitled “Resilient People Resilient Planet: A Future Worth Choosing” (RP) was launched. In both of these two important documents and within the preparatory process and several follow-up activities the role of science-based quantitative information, analysis and indicators was stressed. We would like to focus on four areas. Our analysis will be based primarily on the appropriate paragraphs from the aforementioned documents.

## 1 STRENGTHENING THE ROLE OF SCIENCE-BASED ANALYSIS

It is emphasized in many places that decision making should be supported by data, information and assessment. *Governments, international institutions and international development banks should step up their efforts to promote sustainable development and to assess and monitor adequately the consequences of their policies in the social and environmental spheres* (RP, recommendation 33).

Reliable data and information are particularly important for promoting one of the major goals of the Summit, namely the green economy: *We acknowledge that it will be important to take into account the opportunities and challenges, as well as the costs and benefits, of green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, using the best available scientific data and analysis...* (FWW, § 63).

One of the important features of the Rio+20 Summit was its focus on an adequate balance between and among the three pillars of sustainable development. At the outset of the Conference it was stressed in particular that less attention is given to the environmental pillar than the other two. This was reflected in the efforts to strengthen the United Nations Environmental Programme (UNEP). The whole IC section of the outcome document is entitled “Environmental pillar in the context of sustainable development”. A special feature of the UNEP is its strong association with science. This is also stressed by the Rio+20 recommendation: *Promote a strong science-policy interface, building on existing international instruments, assessments, panels and information networks, including the Global Environmental Outlook, as one of the processes aimed at bringing together information and assessment to support informed decision making* (FWW, §88d). *Disseminate and share evidence-based environmental information and raise public awareness of critical as well as emerging environmental issues* (FWW, §88e).

The document Resilient People Resilient Planet recognizes that many critical natural systems are under severe stress. It recommends that *Governments and the scientific community should take practical steps, including through the launching of a major global scientific initiative, to strengthen the interface between pol-*

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icy and science. This should include the preparation of regular assessments and digests of the science around such concepts as “planetary boundaries”, “tipping points” and “environmental thresholds” in the context of sustainable development... (RP, Box 2, recommendation 51). A key element here is developing a reliable set of indicators quantifying the individual boundaries, thresholds and tipping points.

The development and promotion of geospatial information is another important area of work emphasized by the outcome document, as geographic considerations are uniquely important for environmental decision making. The Conference therefore recognized *the importance of space-technology-based data, in situ monitoring, and geospatial information for sustainable development policymaking...* (FWW §276).

A large part of the outcome document was devoted to action and follow-up under the various thematic areas and/or cross-sectoral issues. Mention was made in many places of the value and importance of observation, monitoring, data collection, use and analysis of indicators, and the setting of goals and targets: *We recognize that goals, targets and indicators, including where appropriate gender-sensitive indicators, are valuable in measuring and accelerating progress* (FWW §104). The importance of such information is specifically stressed within the sections on sustainable cities and human settlements (FWW §136), health and population (FWW §138), oceans and seas (Global Reporting and Assessment of the State of Marine Environment, FWW §161), disaster risk reduction (the importance of early warning systems and geospatial information, FWW 187), biodiversity, desertification, land degradation and drought (§204), and chemicals and waste (science-based assessment of the risks posed by chemicals to human beings and the environment, FWW §220).

## **2 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT CRITERIA**

The document Resilient People Resilient Planet promotes an important instrument for assessment relevant to various activities focused on sustainable development. Governments should establish price signals that value sustainability to guide the consumption and investment decisions of households, businesses and the public sector by:

- *Establishment of natural resource and externality pricing instruments,*
- *Schemes for payments of ecosystem services* (RP recommend 27),
- *Sustainable development criteria for public institution procurement* (RP recommend 28),
- *Long-term sustainable development criteria in investment* (RP recommend 30).

Sustainable development criteria should be also applied by financial institutions, stock market regulators, and credit ranking agencies (RP recommend 32). An indispensable prerequisite for developing such criteria within various contexts is solid data and an indicator framework. However, sustainable development criteria should be understood with appropriate caution as they may be seen as an instrument of green conditionality by some sectors or countries.

## **3 “BEYOND GDP” INDICATORS**

It is generally accepted that the fundamental economic indicator of Gross Domestic Product was not designed to measure prosperity and human wellbeing. However, in many cases it is taken as an appropriate proxy even if several alternatives already exist, such as the Human Development Index of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP 2012). There is a growing need to develop an indicator or set of indicators that are more inclusive of social and environmental aspects to cover the concept of sustainable development in its totality. The document Resilient People Resilient Planet devotes a lot of attention to this issue in section D “Establishing a common framework for measuring progress”. Several international initiatives are mentioned here, including the Report of the Commission on the Measurement of Economic Performance and Social Progress established by Nicolas Sarkozy (Stiglitz et al., 2009). Hák and Janoušková (2012) provide a detailed analysis of efforts of OECD and European Commission (Eurostat) in this respect. These organizations have proposed indicators/indices presuming

to give politicians the lacking information on worthy elements of development (wellbeing and possibility of its lasting in the future). All the findings might be summarized in the following recommendation: *To measure progress on sustainable development, a Sustainable Development Index or set of indicators should be developed by 2014. To this end, the Secretary-General should appoint a technical task force, including relevant stakeholders* (RP, recommend 39).

The same question is addressed in *The Future We Want* in § 38: *We recognize the need for broader measures of progress to complement gross domestic product in order to better inform policy decisions, and in this regard we request the United Nations Statistical Commission, in consultation with relevant United Nations system entities and other relevant organizations, to launch a programme of work in this area building on existing initiatives.* Here we see a concrete request promoting a specific UN body to work on this issue. Many national statistical offices around the world are working in this direction. Eurostat and the European Commission, who started a broad process called GDP and Beyond (EC 2009), are very active in this respect.

#### 4 SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

Following the proposals made by Colombia and Guatemala, the participants at Rio+20 agreed to establish a set of sustainable development goals (SDGs). These should guide the post-2015 development agenda, as that is the date the Millennium Development Goals expire. The SDGs should address and incorporate the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced, holistic, coherent and synergistic way while capturing inter-linkages and cross-cutting issues. The SDGs should be focused on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development. According to *The Future We Want* SDGs *should be action-oriented, concise and easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities...* (FWW §247). It is clear enough that without appropriate measurement, data, and statistics such goals cannot be meaningful. This is fully acknowledged: *We recognize that progress towards the achievement of the goals needs to be assessed and accompanied by targets and indicators...* (FWW §250). *We recognize that there is a need for global, integrated and scientifically based information on sustainable development...* (FWW §251).

#### 5 RIO+20 FOLLOW-UP

The most important result of the Rio+20 Summit is the decision to establish the Sustainable Development Goals. To this end, a process of preparation was started: *We resolve to establish an inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process on sustainable development goals that is open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly. An open working group shall be constituted...* (FWW §248). Responding to this request, the Secretary-General prepared an Initial Input into the open working group. This document stresses that the development of SDGs should be linked to assessing progress. To this end, it was suggested that a system for monitoring and accountability and a well-functioning set of indicators would need to be created (UNS-G 2012).

The European Union fully accepted the outcomes of the Rio+20 Summit. At its European Council (Environment) session on 31 October 2012 it adopted the Conclusions reaffirming all the main results of Rio+20. In particular, *it stressed the need to further develop science-based and rigorous methods of measuring growth, natural wealth and social well-being and calls on the UN Statistical Commission to launch the programme of work on broader measures of progress towards sustainability to complement GDP* (Council 2012, §15). It also states that the SDGs *should be global in nature and universally applicable to all countries, limited in number, action-oriented, easy to communicate and linked to concrete targets and indicators* (Council 2012, §30).

## CONCLUSION

The outcome document of the Rio+20 Summit was criticized for not being ambitious enough, and not setting any concrete commitments or new bold initiatives. However, within the realm of measurement, scientific assessment and policy-relevant information it represents an important stimulus and challenge for the scientific community in general, and for statisticians and other data and information providers in particular. The need for developing and using scientifically based information and analysis for decision making is stressed in many places. In particular, probably the most important decision of the Summit, namely to launch the Sustainable Development Goals, is closely linked to concrete goals and targets. Without rigorous methods of monitoring and assessing progress towards these goals – including new measures to assess human well-being – the SDGs are not conceivable.

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