

Embedding the Environment in Sustainable Development Goals – A regional perspective

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Introduction and background

Out of the Rio+20 call to develop sustainable development goals (SDGs) came the opportunity for countries to contribute to the articulation of the new SDGs to focus their development pathway towards sustainable development. An important message is that this new set of goals should carefully consider and balance the three dimensions of sustainable development namely environmental, social and economic, a balance that has not always been seen in policy development and implementation in the Arab region and across the world as a whole.

UNEP is working closely with Economic and Social Commissions at the regional level to support work with the countries in elaborating regional perspectives and positions on the SDGs, with UNEP in West Asia working closely with the Economic and Social Commission of Western Asia (UN-ESCWA) and the League of Arab States (LAS) in the development of a number of papers as well as convening multi-stakeholder consultations for their discussion¹.

This paper is developed to provide a synthesis of the UNEP's White Paper on *'Embedding the environment in Sustainable Development Goals'*², with the aim of stimulating dialogue on the integration of SDGs, and the inter-linkages of sustainable development in the Arab world. It does not seek to propose specific goals, but rather provide some ideas for consideration as such discussions take place.

The Regional Context in terms of environmental sustainability

The Arab region is unique. It embraces a common language, shared culture, history and a long-standing record of cooperation and collaboration with efforts dating as far back as to the 1950s.³ With the newly unfolding global development framework, it is timely for the region to discuss its perspectives and priorities to help shape an agenda that works for the region.

Notably, there is widespread recognition that security is a prerequisite to development as *'in the Arab region, persistent shortfalls in governance and economic exclusion contribute to explaining why some countries, although having done well in achieving in the MDGs, have spearheaded social unrest'*.⁴ Nonetheless, following the latest MDG progress report for the Arab region highlights an interesting

¹ Related consultations include: the Arab Regional Consultation on the post-2015 UN Development Agenda (Beirut, March 2013), the Arab Regional Implementation Meeting for the Twentieth Session of the Commission for Sustainable Development (Dubai, May 2013), the Arab Consultative Meeting on the Sustainable Development Goals (Tunisia, November 2013), in addition to two workshops on Updating the Sustainable Development Initiative in the Arab Region, and Developing an Arab Regional Roadmap for Green Economy Investment (Amman, August 2013).

² UNEP 2013. Embedding the environment in Sustainable Development Goals. UNEP Post-2015 Discussion Paper 1. United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), Nairobi. <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/2037embedding-environments-in-SDGs-v2.pdf>

³ World Bank (2012) From Political to Economic Awakening in the Arab World: The Path of Economic Integration, The World Bank, available at: http://www-wds.worldbank.org/external/default/WDSContentServer/WDSP/IB/2012/05/25/000333038_20120525021154/Rendered/PDF/688320vol020ES05023020120Box369244B.pdf

⁴ United Nations and LAS (2013) The Arab Millennium Development Goals Report: Facing Challenges and Looking Beyond 2015, http://www.escwa.un.org/information/publications/edit/upload/E_ESCWA_EDGD_2013_1_E.pdf

anomaly in MDG progress in the region in which some leading states performers are countries that have experienced social upheaval and political unrest⁵.

In addition to that, the Arab region has made significant progress towards some regional development targets, notably primary school enrolment and literacy and gender parity in education. However, when looking at the environmental platform, the region faces many common challenges including shortages of arable land, food and water and therefore lags behind on important targets relating to hunger, food insecurity, access to water, improved sanitation, and child and maternal mortality.⁶

As the region has the lowest freshwater availability per capita of any region in the world combined with declining availability of arable land, land degradation and worsening climate change impacts⁷, this raises serious concerns on food security issues as the agricultural sector is not able to perform under these conditions. Energy resources such as oil and gas have for long been the backbone of most the regional trade and production. However, it is important to note that not all countries in the Arab region are energy rich, also raising energy security concerns due to volatile and increasing oil prices in addition to inefficiencies in use and production. It is further projected that there will be 100 million MENA youth by 2035,⁸ and the constant population growth in the region is faced by one of the most critical social development challenges, which includes rapidly rising unemployment and job creation.

Whilst the vast majority of the countries of the region have ratified at least some regional and multilateral environmental agreements, and have clear national legislation, enforcement remains weak in a number of countries and governance structures not always inclusive.

Key considerations for embedding environment in the SDGs (from the UNEP White Paper)

1. Lessons learned from a review of environmental goals and targets

The international community has adopted an impressive number of environmentally related international agreements with one count⁹ at more than 500 such treaties, some being successfully and fully implemented others not quite so successful. To see why, UNEP examined progress in achieving 90 important goals from these treaties and found only 4 that showed significant progress¹⁰ with the following factors playing a key role in the treaties successfully meeting their goals:

- ✓ Consensus and support from the scientific community and society.
- ✓ Availability of solutions to environmental problems, which increases political confidence and enables the raising of funds for implementation.¹¹
- ✓ Linkage of goals with specific and measurable targets.
- ✓ Effective financing and economic incentives.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ AFED (2011) Arab Environment 4: Green Economy – Sustainable Transition in a changing Arab world, <http://afedonline.org/Report2011/PDF/En/Full-eng.pdf>

⁸ Assad, R and Roudi-Fahimi, F (2007) Youth in the Middle East and North Africa: Demographic Opportunity or Challenge? Population Reference Bureau <http://www.prb.org/pdf07/youthinmena.pdf>

⁹ Jabbour et al., 2012. Internationally agreed environmental goals: a critical evaluation of progress. *Environmental Development*, 3, 5-24.

¹⁰ The four goals showing significant progress are the goals on protection of the ozone layer, the phasing out of lead in gasoline, the MDG on halving the proportion of people without sustainable access to safe drinking water by 2015, and improving research in order to prevent, eliminate and reduce pollution of the marine environment. On the other hand, 40 showed some progress; 24 showed little to no progress; 7 showed further deterioration; 14 had insufficient data; and for one, it was too soon to assess its status. More details in the two references above.

¹¹ An example is the case of the Montreal Protocol, in which it is thought that the availability of economical substitutes for ozone-depleting substances was a factor in leading to an agreement on controlling these substances. See for example, Peloso, C. 2010. Crafting an international climate change protocol: applying the lessons learned from the success of the Montreal Protocol and the ozone depletion problem. *Florida University Journal of Land Use and Environmental Law*, 25, 305-329 and UNEP 2012. *Global Environment Outlook – 5*. United Nations Environment Programme (<http://www.unep.org/GEO/geo5.asp>).

- ✓ Common but differentiated responsibilities.¹²
- ✓ Embedding processes in effective governance regimes that ensure their implementation, follow up, independent monitoring, evaluation, accountability, and compliance.

2. Considerations for a Framework for Embedding Environment in SDGs

Current international environmental goals have made some, but limited, progress in achieving their targets, creating the call at Rio+20 for goals for *sustainable development* rather than just development. These SDGs have the dual purpose of increasing human wellbeing through development while protecting and strengthening the ecosystem services that underpin this wellbeing. A four-point framework could be used for the task of embedding the environment in the SDGs (Figure 1).



Figure 1: A framework for embedding the environment in SDGs

a) Rationale and Overarching Vision

Countries at Rio+20 conference set an overarching vision for the SDGs stating that they should incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their linkages. The SDGs should be coherent with the UN development Agenda beyond 2015; action oriented; concise and easy to communicate; built on existing commitments; limited in number; aspirational; global in nature; and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities and consistent with international law.

The overarching rationale for embedding environment in the SDGs is that, the environment is prerequisite for socio-economic development, human health and wellbeing, which depend on good environmental quality and services, alongside the consideration of the intrinsic value of the environment. It is clear that there is a link between environment and development, since the payment for higher standards of living can be seen as the steady depletion of natural resources and increasing environmental degradation due to the pressure paced upon the natural environment. This degradation should become a focus of the next generation of development goals and the key challenge humanity faces is decoupling socio-economic development from this overuse of resources and growing degradation.

b) Integrated approach for embedding the environment in SDGs

A systematic approach is recommended to embedding environment as a balanced aspect of sustainable development. The approach consists of having integrated sustainable development goals underpinned by

¹² This principle assigns different obligations to developing and developed countries for tackling environmental problems based on their historical responsibility for these problems and their current capacity to address these problems.

mixed targets, which in turn are supported by clear measurable indicators (Figure 2). Together they work as a coherent set to fulfill the objectives of sustainable development. The elements of the approach include:

- A **complementary set of goals** that reinforce and complement each other.
- **Integrated Goals** that combine all three dimensions of Sustainable Development.
- A **mix of integrated and non-integrated targets** to ensure incorporating inter-linkages and measurable targets for specific problems.

c) Criteria for embedding environmental sustainability in SDGs.

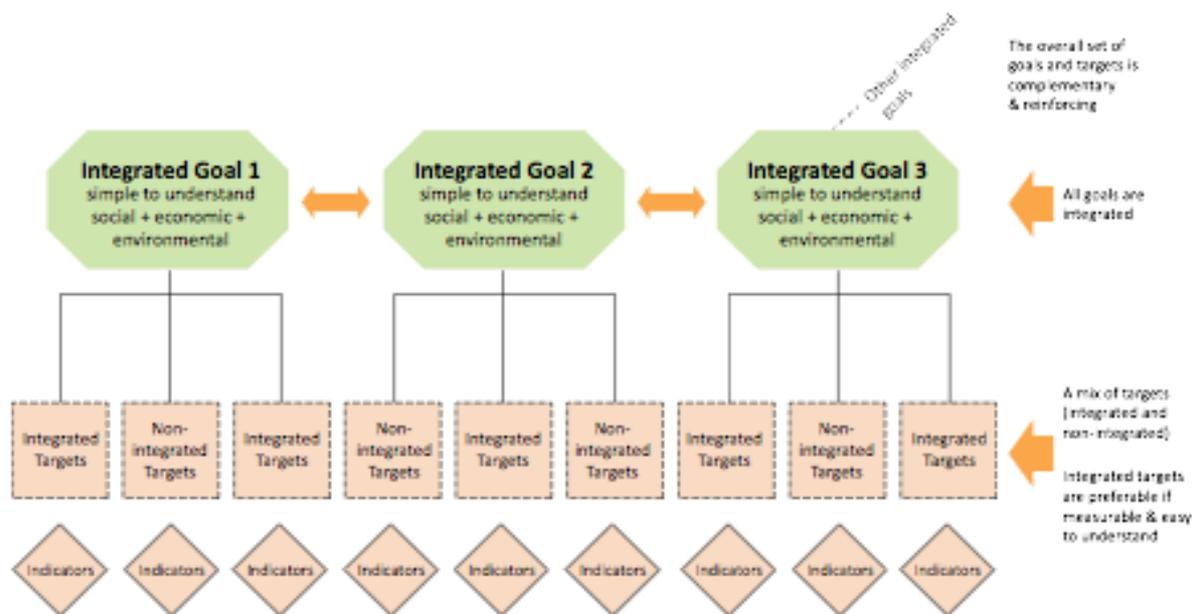


Figure 2. Illustration of an integrated approach to SDGs

Within the above goals and targets the following criteria are given as a guide to ensure that environment is embedded within SDGs:

- Strong linkage with other developmental goals which help formulate integrated goals and targets.
- Decoupling of socio economic development from escalated resource use and degradation.
- Addressing critical issues of environmental sustainability such as important irreversible changes in the global environment.
- Taking into account current global environmental goals and targets.
- Scientific credibility and verifiability with support from the scientific community.
- Progress tracking by specific, measurable, trackable targets and indicators.

d) Indicators for tracking progress

Countries made it clear at Rio+20 that progress towards the achievement of the SDGs needs to be assessed and accompanied by targets and indicators. Indicators are a measure that can be used to illustrate and communicate complex phenomena relevant to the environment in a simple way, including trends over time. Based on what is said to be best practice for selecting indicators learnt from previous lessons, it is vital to consider the characteristics of indicators, methodologies for selecting indicators and types of sustainability indicators.

a. Characteristics of Indicators

Although a complete discussion of desirable characteristics of indicators is outside the scope of this paper, the following is a short list of recommendations. The indicators should be:

- Limited in number and be coherent, consistent and complementary to each other.
- Specific and measurable.
- Understandable, clear and unambiguous in their interpretation.

- Relevant to policy making and flexible in response to policy interventions.
- Non-duplicates of indicators in other agreements.
- Linked to recognised cost-effective tracking and monitoring systems.
- Inclusive of both absolute and relative changes.
- Inclusive of the inter-linkages between indicators of biophysical state and relationships with socio-economic drivers and impacts.

b. Types of Sustainability Indicators

The following is a brief review of different types of indicators related to sustainability issues and relevant to underpinning targets.

- **Outcome and process indicators:** In order to measure progress, the typical metric used is an 'impact/outcome' indicator. However, in some cases, it is also useful to employ 'process' indicators that track the rate of implementation of a target.
- **Qualitative indicators:** Most indicators underlying current international goals and targets are quantitative, which has the advantage of making them measurable. However, from the MDGs, we have learned that not only quantitative indicators but also qualitative indicators of perception, satisfaction and attitude are purposive.
- **Composite indicators:** In some cases it is convenient and feasible to consolidate several indicators into a meaningful single index or 'composite indicator'. These are combinations of different parameters with different numerical scales weighted to provide a single value which could be useful for communicating the state of SDG progress to a wide and varied audience in a simple way.
- **Topical indicators:** Indicators can also be sorted according to the sustainability-related topics they cover. A target for sustainable consumption and production could be underpinned by various indicators of material productivity and material consumption. In the context of the SDGs, such indicators could focus on those resources of critical importance to poverty eradication and human welfare – energy, water, land, soil fertility and biodiversity.

Strengths and Weaknesses of the Framework

When considering the above approach, the benefits that would likely be achieved include:

- A higher level of integration of the three aspects of sustainable development.
- Departure from the silo approach to solving challenges of sustainable development.
- Greater balance between environmental, social and economic considerations with environmental sustainability a foundation for socio-economic development.

Weaknesses that would need to be grappled with include:

- Inadequate consideration that ecosystem services and healthy biodiversity are prerequisites for sustainable development.
- Difficulty and relevance of nesting some environmental issues within social and economic developmental goals.
- Perception of lower priority of the environment by embedding the environment within developmental goals, rather than given equal weight to these goals.

The Regional Perspective so far

Member states are the ultimate decision-makers in terms of the development and agreement on the set of SDGs. A number of thematic areas which may lead to the formulation of the SDGs is already emerging through discussion that have been ongoing since Rio+20. For example, the Secretary General's Open

Working Group on the SDGs has held thematic discussions for consideration in the SDGs, the High Level Panel on the Post-2015 Development Agenda has tentatively suggested broad themes for the SDGs¹³ with related targets and indicators.

Arab countries¹⁴ have been engaged in the Open Working Groups on a rotational basis, and have been fairly active in their participation, especially Saudi Arabia, Tunisia, Egypt and the UAE. Key areas of intervention from the representatives of countries of the Arab region have related to the fact that the SDGs should be action-oriented, concrete and accompanied by means of implementation, with particular importance given to poverty and hunger eradication, job creation, environmental sustainability, education and training, good governance and strengthening national institutions. Partnerships for expanding opportunities through finance, training and technology were also highlighted. The water-energy- food nexus was again highlighted as a priority for the region, as well as the suggestion for a stand-alone goal on water, and that these priorities should move forward as a basis for building on MDG 7 and taking it further as an absolute minimum.

Energy was highlighted as a unique area and suggestions included the promotion of cleaner fossil fuel technology and diversification of energy sources by all countries and the use of nuclear power for peaceful purposes. Infrastructure, industrial development, enhanced agricultural practices and improved public services to reduce inequality and achieve sustainable development and poverty eradication were also addressed.

A strong message came for the countries of the Arab region represented on the Open Working Group that respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms should be linked to the right to development, the importance of the right to self-determination, which includes those under occupation and the right to a healthy environment along with the need to address the obstacles and challenges that hinder sustainable development and the alleviation of poverty.

Alongside the global discussions, a number of processes have taken place in the Arab region itself engaging a wide variety of stakeholders. These include the ESCWA-UNEP-LAS convened consultations, the Post-2015 national consultations and the Arab Development Forum (Jordan, April 2013) convened by the Regional UN Development Group and the contributions of the representatives from the region to the Open Working Groups on the SDGs.

The outcomes of the Regional Implementation Meeting (Dubai, May 2013) addressed the sustainable management of national renewable and non-renewable resources, with a focus on the nexus of energy, water and food security. It also emphasised a number of themes for consideration and inclusion in the SDGs, including poverty eradication, land degradation, drought and desertification, maintenance of biodiversity, disaster risk reduction and waste management. Green Economy initiatives were welcomed and the increasing implementation of such strategies in the region acknowledged. It was emphasised that the achievement of sustainable development should be in a balanced manner in accordance with common but differentiated responsibilities and with strengthened institutions. Peace and security was also seen as a pre-requisite for sustainable development.

The UNEP convened Working Group on Environmental Sustainability Post Rio+20 at the Arab Development Forum (Jordan, April 2013) highlighted that the SDGs provide the opportunity to define clear goals for Green Economy, for full-cost accounting, to become more efficient and reduce the burden of waste on the environment, and also to ensure that MDG8 is re-visited as there is a definite need to articulate the funding for sustainable development and support to the development of partnerships. It highlighted the need for data and information and that criteria developed are scientifically verifiable and take into account environmental quality as well as quantity of resources and that governance is not just about those

¹³ <http://report.post2015hlp.org/digital-report-chapter-3.html>

¹⁴ Algeria, Egypt, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, Tunisia and the United Arab Emirates

governing, it is about those who are governed and their responsibilities. To address the issue of poverty and its intrinsic link with the environment, goals and targets which make water, food, health, etc. accessible to all, recognizing these as an essential part of human rights and human dignity were emphasized.

These priorities are reflected in the outcomes of national consultations on the Post-2015 Development Agenda that have been held across the region, with environment as a theme ranking highly in the consultations, and the role of civil society in governance for sustainable development also being emphasised.

The MyWorld Survey, a global survey led by the United Nations and partners to allow citizens to share their views with global leaders, was launched in December 2012 and aims to capture people’s voices, priorities and views, so that world leaders are informed with the priorities and concerns of world citizens as they work towards defining the SDGs.

Out of the 1.2 million plus participants of the MY World survey, a total number of 77,715 votes (6.08%) were collected from the Arab World¹⁵. Results so far show that the top three priorities of citizens in the Arab World are similar to the world’s priorities: good education, better job opportunities and better healthcare whilst an honest and responsive government, protection against crime and violence, affordable and nutritious food were considered to be higher up the priorities list within the top six of sixteen priorities (Figure 3).

Arab States Priorities

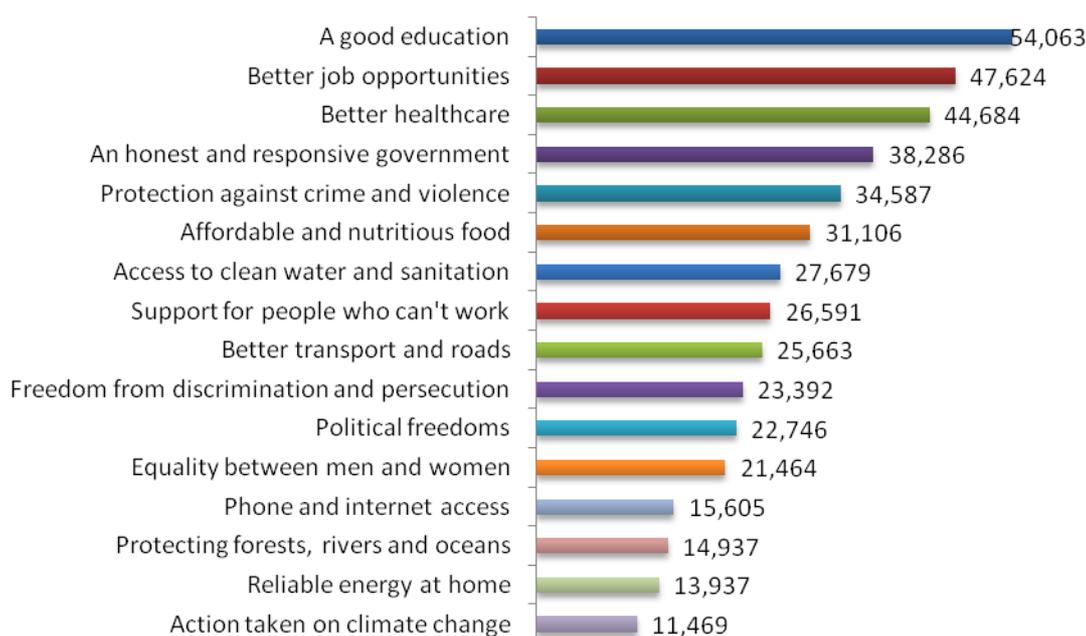


Figure 3: Arab States Priorities as seen in the MyWorld Survey (9 December 2013)

The remaining of the priorities list was also seen to be a similar match to that of the world’s list with the exception of protecting forests, rivers and oceans that is ranked at #8 in the list of priorities by the world whilst the Arab World has it listed in the bottom of its priorities at #14. All Arab States listed action on climate change and reliable energy at home as the least of their priorities.

¹⁵ Figures as at 9 December 2013

The Way Forward

To focus on a way forward it is valuable to look at the primary challenges facing the region. These have been articulated in the narrative of the first section of this paper. Alongside these are other challenges, such as the relatively low priority given to environment against a backdrop of high unemployment and social concerns, with recovery measures often looking at short term solutions that do not fully consider the environment (a silo approach). The integration of the environmental dimension into response strategies in the region as well as investment policies could become an opportunity rather than a cost if the Green Economy potential of the region is fully considered.

The complex and interlinked web of economic, social and environmental challenges faced by the region points towards the need for a truly transformative, integrated and long term regional development agenda. Environmental goals considered could aid in ensuring food security as it interlinks through the agricultural and environmental health state, in turn decreasing poverty and improving health conditions. Furthermore, this approach would create more employment opportunities that contribute towards the transition to a greener economy.

The wide support for a single post-2015 development framework containing a single set of goals that are universal but flexible enough to ensure ownership by countries¹⁶ allows countries to set targets most relevant to them. The question of how to combine a universal framework with nationally relevant targets is a key conceptual issue that should be considered by Arab stakeholders to ensure that the global outcome works for the Arab region.

Given the great level of diversity between Arab countries and differing national circumstances and priorities some proposed perspectives for consideration by Arab governments include that the SDGs should balance a top-down and bottom-up approach. Prioritisation of the SDGs should be left to individual countries, which will assess their own stage of development gaps, and the objectives they have set out in their own national development strategies. Equity considerations in the articulation of goals and targets should be guided by the principle of common but differentiated responsibilities. The framework should also facilitate aggregation of data for monitoring and measurability purposes at the regional and global levels. The dashboard approach would provide a suitable option for achieving this balance.¹⁷

In conclusion, giving the environment equal footing to social and economic considerations within integrated goals conveys the message that environmental sustainability and investing in environmental goods and services provides a foundation for socio-economic development. Conversely, it recognises that poor environmental quality leads to loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services and subsequent risks to socio-economic development. It encourages a type of development that minimises unintended environmental consequences and strengthens adaptation and resilience to environmental and other changes. How these will translate into the SDGs and the future development path depends on the ongoing discussions at national, regional and global levels and the voices of member states as representatives of us all.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ These recommendations were taken from The Arab Regional Consultative Dialogue on the Sustainable Development Goals, ESCWA Discussion Paper.