



Division for Sustainable Development  
Department of Economic and Social Affairs

## The Future of Sustainable Development: A Conclave of Thought Leaders

New York, 11-12 May 2009

This is a background note for a planned conclave of thought leaders on sustainable development. The conclave will be held on 11-12 May at the United Nations, to coincide with the 17<sup>th</sup> session of the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD). The afternoon of May 12 would be allocated to a round table discussion with invited Ministers and heads of delegations to CSD17, Heads of UN agencies, and representatives of civil society organizations.

The meeting has three main objectives:

- *Substance*: To provide an occasion to review and assess:
  - the current state of conceptual thinking and applied research on sustainable development;
  - the impact of two decades of sustainable development research on policy and practice;
  - future sustainable development challenges, and the strategic direction of policy research in order to enhance its social relevance, policy impact, and capacity for integrating across disciplinary and sectoral boundaries;
- *Process*: To provide an opportunity to discuss more effective ways of communicating these findings, including:
  - direct interaction with high-level politicians gathered for CSD, as well as Major Groups;<sup>1</sup>
  - the option of establishing a formal network of policy research institutions to engage with and support the inter-governmental process;
  - identification of a common research agenda, which could be pursued through collaborative or complementary research programs; and
  - assessment of how such a network could enable more effective use of the range of communications instruments deployed by the research community, including coverage of sustainable development issues in web-based portals (e.g., wikipedia, knol, or EoE), journals, books on sustainable development, webcasts and webinars, and other media.

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<sup>1</sup> These are defined by Agenda 21 to include representatives of 9 groups: NGOs, Women, Children and Youth, Workers and Trade Unions, Farmers, Business and Industry, Indigenous Peoples, Local Authorities and the Scientific and Technological Community

- *Immediate*: To use the opportunity to review the state of knowledge on matters before the current and forthcoming sessions of the CSD, and to provide strategic guidance on these from a sustainable development perspective.

### *Context and Objective*

The term “sustainable development” came into vogue with the publication of the Report of the Brundtland Commission (also known as the World Commission on Environment and Development or WCED) in 1987. Five years later, it provided the key conceptual framework for the UN Conference on Environment and Development. The term figured prominently, either directly or indirectly, in the objectives of all the agreements signed at the conference, including the two treaties (FCCC and CBD), the Rio Declaration, the Statement on Forest Principles, the resolution on desertification (which led to the UNCCD), and above all, Agenda 21.

In retrospect, the five years between the WCED and UNCED were enormously fertile in terms of policy development and global consensus. These were years of transition. The cold war had ended, there was talk of a peace dividend, policy makers had come to appreciate the global scale of looming environmental crises, the global economy had begun to move out of a prolonged recession, and there was a renewed confidence in the development agenda. It was the period that introduced or gave global prominence to several important concepts (besides sustainable development), including the precautionary principle, governance, burden sharing, intergenerational equity, common and differentiated responsibilities, incremental costs, indigenous rights, traditional knowledge, benefit sharing, new and additional resources, sustainable use, public-private partnership, impact assessment, information sharing as a policy tool, dispute settlement, and many others. This period also saw the advent of new forms of decision making, including what is now called new diplomacy, which relies heavily on global summits and high level events, as well as the emergence of global public policy networks and global issues networks, which entailed increased interaction between governments, civil society, and the private sector. Finally, the period witnessed the emergence of several new tools for policy analysis, including integrated assessment, multi criteria assessment, scenarios, life-cycle approaches, value chains, GIS, hot spots, footprints analysis, sustainable livelihoods, participatory analysis, and others.

Two decades later, there is another period of transition. The world has been beset by several interrelated crises, some of immediate import, such as the financial crisis and the global recession, the food and energy crises, terrorism and an epidemic of civic conflict; and others of a slower moving nature, most notably climate change, but also including the growing threat to biological diversity, health impacts of air and water pollution, and the depletion of nonrenewable resources.

### *Justification*

The multiple crises confronting the world today are being addressed, by and large, in their own silos, even though there is little doubt that they are inter-related and that they require an integrated approach. Climate change is being addressed by newly established climate ministries, or by environmental ministries, almost as if it were exclusively an environmental issue. The financial crisis is being addressed by central banks and treasuries, again, as if it were purely an economic question. The food crisis is being addressed by ministries of food and agriculture from within their own areas of competence. The list could go on. But none of these are isolated challenges. They are all sustainable development challenges. The idea of sustainable development emerged precisely to overcome such fragmentation of thought and action.

Sustainable development has to be seen as a bridge, a bridge between different domains (economic, environmental, social, and political), between different nations (especially between the rich North and the poor South), between short run needs and longer term imperatives, and between different functional groups (governments, business, civil society) in a world where it is more common to lurch from one fragmented response to another.

After a short period of intellectual fertility (1987-1992), the concept of sustainable development seemed to fade in significance. Initially, it was because the revival of economic growth during the boom years of the 1990s and 2000s made it more acceptable to defer longer term concerns and diverted the energies of many bright minds. More recently, it could be because the urgency of the immediate crises has sucked up all the oxygen from the policy process.

This is not because of a lack of progress. As mentioned, the sustainable development community has several achievements to its credit, including the development of new tools for analysis, crafting of new ways of working, mobilization of new champions of change, construction of new indicators of progress, establishment of new institutions for integrating analysis and action, and the expansion of the agendas of existing institutions and processes. Yet, this progress has itself been accompanied by its own form of fragmentation and dissipation.

A visit to any of the leading knowledge sites (e.g., wikipedia) can easily demonstrate such fragmentation. The entries on sustainable development are curiously insipid, they are not connected to others, and do not give the impression of a framework for integration. As mentioned above, the policy dialogues even on questions that require an integrated approach continue to run on parallel lines. Journals and books on sustainable development are mostly about one of its pillars, environment.

This fragmentation is also visible in the policy process. In 1992, the nations of the world adopted Agenda 21 as their blueprint for sustainable development, and established the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD) to oversee its implementation. During 17 years of operation, the CSD has spawned important innovations, notably as a forum for active engagement of civil society (Major Groups) in policy making processes, for building networks and partnerships, and for considering environment and development in a balanced and integrated manner. A mid-course correction was also provided during the World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD), which sought to shift emphasis from policy formulation towards implementation through the adoption of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI).

Notwithstanding this correction, however, it is fair to say that the process has not been able to evolve systematically and promptly in response to circumstances. For example, it could not sustain the focus on longer term challenges. Similarly, it did not lead to the formation of a strong, mutually rewarding relationship with the policy research community or to the full mobilization of the creative energies of civil society towards achieving the goals of Agenda 21 and the shared vision of sustainable development.

The world could benefit from another period of intense creativity in order to be able to devise integrative and cooperative solutions to the multiple crises we currently face and to address the gaps in response.

### *Questions for Discussion*

The main questions for discussion have been set out in the opening part of this note in the form of objectives of the meeting. These include the state of the art in sustainable development analysis, an assessment of the relationship between analysis and policy, the future of sustainable development, the logistics of the way forward (towards the goal of strengthening the relationship between the research and policy communities), and the question of how the policy community can best inform policy discussions on the current and upcoming CSD agendas.

One option for enhancing the engagement between the research and policy communities could be through the formal establishment of a network of institutions as well as individuals engaged in policy research on sustainable development. It could take the form of a sustainable development policy network (SDPN), or an international sustainable development association (ISDA). The former places emphasis on bringing together both individuals and institutions, while the latter mimics the model of a professional association of experts. The Division for

Sustainable Development, in its capacity as Secretariat for the CSD, could act as a natural bridge between the sustainable development research community on the one hand and global policy-making community on the other hand.

Ideally, the network would not be restricted either to individuals or to institutions alone, but bring together leading individuals, institutions, and networks engaged in policy research on sustainable development. The participants of the meeting could decide to establish such a network or association (or both) and designate a small group to work out the details.

In order for the network to function effectively, it will need a common agenda of work. This agenda could be structured around several activities, among which:

- A sustainable development assessment (SDA) to be completed by 2012, along the lines of similar professional assessments that have taken place in such areas as climate change (IPCC), biodiversity (MEA), energy (WEA and the ongoing GEA), and others. The assessment would provide an authoritative overview of the professional literature on sustainable development.
- An annual contribution to the themes under discussion at the CSD. The themes for the current biennium are agriculture, rural development, land, drought, desertification, and Africa; those for the coming biennium are sustainable consumption and production, chemicals, waste, mining, and transport.
- An annual sustainable development conference to coincide with the CSD session, to bring together leading professionals in the field of sustainable development.
- Mobilization of the SD research community for populating the web content on this subject, starting a sustainable development book series, building a distinguished lecture series on sustainable development, and facilitating cooperation between academic journals dedicated to sustainable development.

The reflection on the substantive issues can also help flesh out the outlines of the SDA, and this in turn could provide a way of thinking about structural and process-related questions.

### *Organization of the Conclave*

The conclave is divided into four sessions over a two day period, 11 and 12 May. A draft agenda is appended to this document. Briefly, the sessions are structured as follows:

- *Session 1:* Substantive questions, including the assessment of the state of the art in sustainable development.
- *Session 2:* Process-related questions, including the idea of a formal network, the proposal of a sustainable development assessment, and a review of communication and outreach;
- *Session 3:* Discussion of the CSD and sustainable development governance, and of a sustainable development approach to the themes on the current and forthcoming agendas of the CSD;
- *Session 4:* Joint meeting with Ministers, Heads of Delegations, Heads of UN Agencies, and representatives of Major Groups, on the plans and proposals of the policy research community.

### *Additional Information*

In addition to this note, background information will be provided to the participants in the form of:

- A concept note on the sustainable development policy network, including options for membership, allocation of executive functions, secretariat, and fundraising;

- A concept note on the sustainable development assessment, including a broad outline of themes, and next steps in organizing the process.
- A concept note on the Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD), giving the background and mode of operation of the Commission.
- A concept note on publications on sustainable development, including an assessment of web content on sustainable development, academic journals on sustainable development, and the idea of a sustainable development book series.
- A concept note on the annual sustainable development conference.

### *Participants*

In addition to UN staff servicing the meeting, invitations have been sent to globally recognized experts in the field, including heads of renowned policy research institutions in sustainable development. The goal is to bring together roughly 15 to 20 experts for the first meeting.

### *Language*

The meeting will be conducted in English.

### *Expected outputs*

The conclave is expected to lead to the following outputs:

- Decision on the sustainable development policy network;
  - Designation of a steering group to work out the next steps;
  - Adoption of a draft outline of programme of work, to be detailed by the steering group in the months after the meeting;
- Discussion and decision on the proposal to undertake the SDA;
- Decision on the proposal for an annual sustainable development conference;
- Decision with regard to launching a strategic collaboration on SD publications and multi-media communications;
- Compilation of views on sustainable development governance, as well as on the topics before the current and subsequent CSD sessions;
- Exchange of views between conclave participants and high-level participants at CSD17.

<b>AGENDA OVERVIEW</b>	
<b>Conclave of Thought Leaders: The Future of Sustainable Development</b>	
<b>Session 1</b>	<b>Introduction and Substantive Questions</b>
09:00-09:30	Opening - Welcome Remarks
09:15-09:45:	Objectives of the meeting (Tariq Banuri)
10:00 -13:00	Tour de Table: 22 years of sustainable development <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>➤ What Next for Agenda 21: whither the SD agenda?</li> <li>➤ Stocktaking of contributions of SD in three main areas (governance, tools, and sectors)</li> <li>➤ How can the SD community better contribute to sustainable development policy outcomes, and especially to the CSD?</li> </ul>
<b>Session 2</b>	<b>Process and the Way Forward</b>
14:00-15:00	SDPN: purpose, objectives, activities
15:00-16:00	SDA: first ideas
16:00-17:00	Publications, Websites, and Communications
17:00 18:00	The Way Forward
<b>12 May 2009</b>	
<b>Session 3</b>	<b>Sustainable Development Governance and CSD</b>
9:00-10:00	The CSD and Sustainable Development Governance
10:00-11:00	Sustainable Development Perspective on Meeting the Challenges facing Current CSD Session, focusing on Agriculture, Rural Development, Land, Drought, Desertification and Africa
11:00-12:00	Sustainable Development Perspective on Meeting the Challenges facing next CSD Cycle: Sustainable Consumption and Production, Chemicals, Waste, Transport and Mining
12:00	Official Launch of SDPN
<b>Session 4</b>	<b>Engagement with Policy Makers</b>
15:00-18:00	Exchange with Ministers and other High-level Officials (to be structured)