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The role of the United Nations system in implementing the ministerial declaration of the high-level segment of the substantive session of 2008 of the Economic and Social Council

Theme of the coordination segment: the role of the United Nations system in implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to sustainable development

Report of the Secretary-General

Summary

The 2009 coordination segment will focus on the role of the United Nations system in promoting the implementation of the 2008 ministerial declaration entitled “Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to sustainable development”.

The present report provides an overview of United Nations system efforts to further the sustainable development agenda against the backdrop of current challenges. In particular, it assesses progress and challenges in priority areas identified in the 2008 ministerial declaration; identifies lessons learned from country-level experience to strengthen support for national sustainable development strategies; and assesses the impact of current challenges on those efforts.

The report makes a number of recommendations in the areas of energy, climate change, water, agricultural and rural development, sustainable urbanization, social equality and institutions for sustainable development.

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I. Introduction

1. The Economic and Social Council has decided that, at its coordination segment, the Council should review the implementation of the ministerial declaration adopted at the high-level segment of its substantive session in the previous year.¹ Accordingly, at the 2009 coordination segment, the Council will review the implementation of the 2008 ministerial declaration entitled “Implementing the internationally agreed goals and commitments in regard to sustainable development”, and the present report will facilitate such consideration.

2. The 2008 ministerial declaration reiterated the need for an integrated approach to the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, in line with Agenda 21, the Plan of Implementation of the World Summit on Sustainable Development (“Johannesburg Plan of Implementation”) and the goals and objectives of the United Nations development agenda. It reaffirmed that effective development strategies for poverty eradication, sustained economic growth and sustainable development should focus on tackling climate change; promoting affordable, cost-effective and efficient energy supply; ensuring integrated water resource management; promoting sustainable urbanization; investing in rural and agricultural development; enhancing social equality, including the empowerment of women; and strengthening institutions for sustainable development.

3. The declaration also recognized that efforts to achieve sustainable development face multiple challenges, including food insecurity, financial and economic crises and the impact of environmental degradation and climate change. Achieving sustainable development in these challenging times will require comprehensive approaches and concerted action.

4. Despite the considerable progress made in recent decades to reduce overall poverty and increase global economic growth, many countries continue to experience extreme poverty, growing economic and social inequalities, rapid depletion of their natural resources and a decreasing ability to provide basic nutrition for their population. Those trends have demonstrated that current paths to development are neither adequate nor sustainable.

5. The United Nations conferences of the past decade have produced a comprehensive normative and policy framework for the achievement of sustainable development. The 2008 ministerial declaration reaffirmed that consensus and recognized that efforts to achieve the objective face multiple challenges.

6. While national Governments have the primary responsibility for formulating and implementing their own sustainable development strategies, the international community, including the United Nations system, has a critical role to play in supporting those efforts through global programmes, measures and policies aimed at promoting sustainable development globally and supporting developing countries in their sustainable development efforts. The 2008 ministerial declaration stressed, in particular, the role of the international community in helping developing countries to (a) mobilize adequate and sustained levels of resources; (b) facilitate and finance access to and the transfer of key technologies; and (c) build capacity at all levels.

¹ See Economic and Social Council resolution 2008/29, para. 10.

7. The present report examines the role of the United Nations system in supporting national efforts to achieve sustainable development. The report will (a) provide an overview of the efforts of the United Nations system to embrace the sustainable development framework; (b) assess its work in the priority areas identified in the 2008 ministerial declaration; (c) identify lessons learned from country-level experiences regarding the system's support for national sustainable development strategies; and (d) assess the impact of emerging challenges on those efforts to promote sustainable development.

II. Overview of the work of the United Nations system

A. Trends in sustainable development

8. The term “sustainable development” was popularized by the 1987 report of the Brundtland Commission and provided the key conceptual framework for the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development, held in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, in 1992. The expression embodied a holistic approach to policymaking. It was that approach which gave global prominence to such concepts as the precautionary principle, burden-sharing, intergenerational equity, common and differentiated responsibilities, incremental costs, benefit-sharing, sustainable use, public-private partnership and information-sharing as a policy tool, to name but a few. The “sustainable development” decision-making process led to more intensive interaction among Governments, civil society and the private sector, as well as the emergence of several new tools for policy analysis, including, inter alia, integrated assessment, multicriteria analysis, scenarios, life-cycle approaches, value chains, hot spots, footprints analysis, sustainable livelihoods and participatory analysis.

9. During the following decade, only halting progress was made on the sustainable development agenda, which is why the World Summit on Sustainable Development, held in Johannesburg in 2002, focused on what could be done to accelerate the implementation of commitments made in Agenda 21 and the Rio Declaration on Environment and Development. With regard to the global challenges identified in the Rio Conventions, in particular with respect to climate change, little progress had been made by 2002 in the process of reviewing disturbing global trends. The Kyoto Protocol had been adopted in 1997, but without the participation of the world's largest emitter of carbon dioxide.

10. Given the global financial and economic crisis, the current period is one of intense re-examination of conventional wisdom on the workings of markets, especially financial markets, the role of government in regulating those markets and requirements not just for economic recovery, but for long-term sustainable development. It provides a backdrop for fresh thinking on reconciling the goals of growth, equity and environmental sustainability. The concept of a “global green new deal” for sustainable development is one that links the short-term imperative of protecting the vulnerable from the worst impacts of the current crises, putting people back to work and restoring economic growth, with the longer-term imperative of moving economies onto low-carbon growth paths and towards the broader realization of the Millennium Development Goals and socio-economic development for all. The question remains whether the current moment of multiple crises will serve to galvanize the political will of the world's leaders to act together.

The climate change negotiations, to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009, will provide a litmus test.

11. While sustainable development is a widely recognized framework to balance economic, social and environmental objectives in the formulation of national development strategies, the framework has yet to be translated into comprehensive, integrated approaches leading to sustainable development.

12. Among the reasons for that are political time horizons, which often favour short-term over long-term policy objectives; the inherent complexity of policymaking processes which must account for and balance multiple objectives, economic, social and environmental; limited understanding of the interlinkages and interactions among different policy areas relevant to sustainable development; organizational inertia in government and other systems which have been built or evolved on the basis of specialization rather than integration; and a shortage of human, financial and technical resources for implementing a sustainable development approach. The 2008 ministerial declaration has identified a number of priority areas that deserve greater attention (see section III below).

B. Efforts of the United Nations system to embrace the sustainable development framework

13. Sustainable development represents a comprehensive, coherent and integrated approach to the work of the United Nations. For this reason, it is closely related to the “one United Nations” concept advocated by the United Nations System Chief Executives Board for Coordination (CEB) in its report — prepared by the High-level Committee on Programmes — to the 2005 World Summit and in the report of the Secretary-General’s High-level Panel on System-wide Coherence, which states: “The essence of our vision is for the United Nations to deliver as one in the areas of development, humanitarian assistance and the environment” (see A/61/583).

14. Since the United Nations Conference on Environment and Development in 1992 and the World Summit on Sustainable Development in 2002, the United Nations system has made consistent efforts to embrace the sustainable development framework in its work. In particular, the United Nations system has played a critical role in expanding the notion of economic performance to include the social and environmental dimensions of development in economic planning decisions. The consensus around the Millennium Development Goals and their respective targets for accelerated progress in human development has further advanced those efforts by establishing an overarching framework for United Nations activities, one that addresses the strong interlinkages between poverty, environment, health, nutrition and other areas.

15. United Nations system organizations have increasingly embraced more comprehensive strategies and mechanisms to implement their mandates and promote the integration of social and environmental concerns into national development plans. The past several years have witnessed a sea change in this regard. In the spirit of “one United Nations”, system organizations, within their respective mandates, have made important strides in increasing coordination and cooperation in their activities related to different aspects of sustainable development, as demonstrated by the numerous joint activities and programmes undertaken.

16. More needs to be done, however, to (a) mainstream the notion of sustainable development into all areas of work of the United Nations system; (b) align and coordinate, within a sustainable development framework, the multiplicity of United Nations system activities at the policy, programme and operational levels across the areas identified in the 2008 ministerial declaration; and (c) ensure that existing mechanisms and strategic frameworks for system-wide support to national development planning fully integrate the three dimensions of sustainable development.

III. Assessment of United Nations system efforts to implement the 2008 ministerial declaration

A. Affordable, cost-effective and efficient energy supply

17. Global demand for energy services is expected to increase from 1990 levels by as much as an order of magnitude by 2050, while primary-energy demands are expected to increase by between 1.5 and 3 times, raising concerns about environmental impacts, for example, air pollution, acid precipitation, forest destruction and climate change, and the sustainability and affordability of energy supplies. Those concerns have generated a growing consensus on the need to increase energy efficiency and invest in renewable energy sources and low-carbon technologies as cost-effective and environmentally responsible alternatives to conventional energy generation.

18. Although technical and market potential exists to significantly increase the contribution of alternative sources for meeting countries' energy demands, a variety of barriers or conditions may limit their deployment. Those barriers continue to limit prospects for widespread deployment of such technologies in developing countries without financial support from developed countries.

19. The United Nations has an important role to play in helping to remove economic, regulatory and institutional barriers to the deployment of renewable energy sources. In particular, it plays an important role in promoting national energy policies that integrate environmental, economic and social concerns and international policies that enable easier access to advanced technologies and external resources.

20. As no single entity in the United Nations system has primary responsibility for energy, in 2004, as a result of an initiative of the High-level Committee on Programmes, an ad hoc task force of United Nations energy experts established UN-Energy as an inter-agency mechanism to coordinate and facilitate the follow-up by the United Nations system of the energy-related decisions of the World Summit on Sustainable Development. The mechanism's objective is to promote system-wide collaboration in the area of energy and develop a coherent and consistent approach to energy challenges affecting the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals. This integrated approach takes into account the fact that energy is a prerequisite for sustainable development, providing essential input into the full range of economic and social activities.

21. UN-Energy promotes coordination among major ongoing energy initiatives carried out by various system agencies and encourages joint efforts at the global,

regional, subregional, national and local levels. UN-Energy focuses on energy access, renewable energy, energy efficiency and instruments for policy integration, capacity-building and awareness-raising at the country-level. It also interacts with non-United Nations stakeholders to ensure their effective engagement in implementing the energy-related decisions taken at the World Summit on Sustainable Development.

22. While the initiative has made clear progress in enhancing United Nations system cooperation to follow up the energy agenda of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, it has not been able to establish a more ambitious system-wide approach on energy. There are, nevertheless, indications that, by working together, the entities of the system could achieve significant results in this regard, particularly in the areas of access, renewable energy, efficiency and energy security. The success of UN-Energy will depend on whether it will be able to provide a broad strategic direction to guide the policy and operational work of United Nations agencies on energy.

Recommendations

The United Nations system should:

- Actively promote a global energy access initiative which would seek to eliminate energy poverty in the world within the next decade and a half.
- Strengthen its overall capacity to assess international and domestic barriers to clean technology development and transfer and suggest policy options to overcome them.

UN-Energy should:

- Promote system-wide policy coherence, including through joint initiatives and programmes, in relation to energy access, efficiency, security and renewable energy technologies, in ways that promote industrial activities, job creation, transportation, commerce, micro-enterprise and agricultural development.

B. Climate change

23. The United Nations system is increasingly taking the approach that climate change is a sustainable development issue that requires the involvement of a wide range of sectors, including finance, energy, transport, agriculture and health. Actions supported by the United Nations system address both adaptation to the adverse impacts of climate change and greenhouse gas mitigation.

24. Climate change is projected to have increasingly negative effects on food production, infrastructure and the livelihoods of many people. Reducing vulnerability and increasing the capacity of economic and social systems to adapt to climate change has become an urgent policy priority. The risks associated with climate change call for a broad spectrum of policy responses at the local, regional and global levels. A consensus has emerged on the need to integrate adaptation issues into core development strategies and practices and develop an integrated approach to climate change. A key current United Nations contribution to adaptation is the development of integrated national development plans and strategies, including climate screening of national strategies, country-level vulnerability and

adaptation assessments and capacity-building at the country level. For instance, a partnership between the United Nations Environment Programme and the United Nations Development Programme focuses on mainstreaming climate change concerns into national development strategies by means of a three-pronged approach: (a) assisting countries in assessing their vulnerabilities and incorporating adaptation concerns into national policies and investment plans; (b) assisting United Nations country teams in integrating climate risk into the formulation of the United Nations Development Assistance Framework; and (c) conducting pilot projects in key affected sectors, together with relevant United Nations agencies. The United Nations system has also supported the preparation by least developed countries of national adaptation programmes of action, which are intended to identify urgent and immediate adaptation needs, to be supported by multilateral climate change funds and other sources.

25. Mitigating climate change requires a multifaceted approach, spanning all areas of policy and decision-making. Comprehensive national development strategies are a key tool for mitigating climate change. Energy is critical to climate mitigation, and the United Nations system is active in promoting renewable energy. Another example of system action relates to the provision of technical support on afforestation and reforestation programmes and support for the development of equitable mechanisms to realize the co-benefits of reducing emissions from deforestation, conserving biodiversity and ensuring environmental sustainability.

26. The United Nations system helps countries to develop supportive legal and regulatory frameworks integrating climate change concerns into Government policies regulating various sectors of the economy; facilitating the adoption of cost-effective, environmentally sound technologies; mobilizing adequate and predictable resources; and building human capacity to mitigate and adapt to the effects of climate change and environmental degradation.

27. The Secretary-General has undertaken a number of initiatives to instil a sense of urgency in the international community with regard to the issue of climate change, in particular with a view to the successful outcome of the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change, to be held in Copenhagen in December 2009. In September 2007, the Secretary-General hosted, in New York, a high-level event on climate change to advance the global climate change agenda and build momentum for a post-2012 international climate change framework. At present, the Secretary-General is deeply engaged in efforts to contribute towards the successful outcome of the fifteenth session of the Conference of the Parties. In this connection, the Secretary-General will host an all-day high-level event in New York on 22 September for Heads of State or Government.

28. The Secretary-General has also worked towards mainstreaming climate change in the work of the United Nations system. In 2007, as Chairman of the CEB, the Secretary-General spearheaded a CEB process to reinforce the United Nations system coordination framework for climate change with the objective of (a) strengthening the system's contribution to the intergovernmental negotiations within the Framework Convention process; and (b) developing a comprehensive United Nations system approach to climate change that addresses the interconnected issues of economic growth, climate change, food and agriculture, and energy. In this regard, the High-level Committee on Programmes of the CEB established a working

group on climate change to develop an action-oriented approach that brought to bear the expertise of the entire United Nations system with a view to addressing the global and multifaceted challenges of climate change, including adaptation, mitigation, financing and technology development and transfer.

29. That initiative builds on existing coordination mechanisms, such as UN-Energy, UN-Water and UN-Oceans, to demonstrate in practice how climate change and sustainable development are interlinked. Going forward, a major challenge for CEB will be to ensure a broad strategic direction for the United Nations system's work on climate change that will guide the activities of all United Nations agencies. This will help to mainstream climate change issues in United Nations system sectoral activities and promote climate change concerns more broadly in the system's support for national development and poverty eradication strategies.

30. Working in collaboration with the High-level Committee on Programmes, the United Nations Development Group, now a pillar of CEB, is expected to focus on strengthening country-level implementation of a United Nations system strategy on climate change. In this regard, a Development Group Task Team on Climate Change and Environmental Sustainability has been established to mainstream environmental issues, including environmental degradation, climate change and sustainable development, into the United Nations Development Assistance Framework and United Nations country team activities.

Recommendations

- United Nations system organizations should strengthen existing collaborative mechanisms and capacity to address the socio-economic and environmental impacts of climate change in order to assist countries in integrating climate change and environmental issues into their core policy and decision-making processes.
- The United Nations system strategy on climate change should guide the activities of all United Nations entities in support of key sectors — e.g., clean energy, rural energy, water resources management, sustainable agriculture, ecosystem infrastructure, coastal zone management and sustainable cities — and promote joint assessments/programmes.

C. Integrated water resource management

31. By 2025, 1.8 billion people will be living in countries or regions with absolute water scarcity, while two thirds of the world's population could face water-stressed conditions with respect to access to drinking water and water for food, energy and industrial production. These trends indicate that problems in the water sector will become increasingly more complex and intertwined with those in other development sectors, such as agriculture, energy, industry, transportation and communication, as well as in social sectors, including education, environment, health, and rural and regional development. Water professionals and water ministries alone will no longer be sufficient to resolve a country's water problems. A more holistic and strategic approach will be needed to deal with issues related to water scarcity.

32. The World Summit on Sustainable Development reaffirmed integrated water resource management as a fundamental principle to ensure sustainable development, and called for improved frameworks in that regard. In paragraph 26 of the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation, all countries are called on to develop integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans by 2005.² Despite a growing international recognition of the need for a more holistic approach to water resources management, sectoral approaches continue to prevail, resulting in uncoordinated water development and management. In many countries, there are still a number of barriers to the implementation of a more integrated approach, including inadequate water policies, strategies and institutional and legislative frameworks that reflect the principles of sustainable water management; lack of necessary knowledge on the part of stakeholders, including Governments, to fully apply integrated water resource management in a way that balances social, ecological and economic considerations so as to ensure equitable allocation and sustainable usage; and lack of reliable and sustained financing to ensure the successful implementation of integrated water resource management processes. As a result, disputes over limited and vulnerable water resources continue among rural, industrial and urban users.

33. The United Nations system plays an important role in helping countries to overcome such barriers and achieve the more integrated and effective management of water resources. Specific support provided by United Nations agencies involves the promotion of water governance, assistance in the development of policies, laws and regulations for integrated water resource management, capacity-building in regional, national and local institutions and the facilitation of information exchange.

34. In 2003, the High-level Committee on Programmes launched UN-Water, an inter-agency mechanism aimed at adding value to existing United Nations initiatives supporting water resources management and at mobilizing the system's resources in an efficient and integrated manner so as to tackle global water and sanitation challenges, including water-caused disasters, emergencies and other extreme events, and help countries to meet their developmental and environmental targets. The key objectives of UN-Water are to promote the effective exchange of information system-wide; facilitate mutual support between United Nations global and regional activities; and encourage inter-agency networking arrangements among United Nations agencies and outside partners concerning the follow-up to the decisions related to water taken at the World Summit on Sustainable Development. In response to the call of the World Summit to develop integrated water resources management and water efficiency plans, UN-Water conducted a survey of 104 countries to assess progress in the planning and implementation of integrated water resource management plans and proposed a road map for advancing such processes. The *World Water Development Report* is a successful example of the joint effort of the entities that make up UN-Water.

35. The efforts of UN-Water to coordinate United Nations system activities promoting integrated water resources management is having a positive spin-off effect on the coordination of local government agencies, as well as on donor coordination in the area of funding and investment within countries. However, there

² *Report of the World Summit on Sustainable Development, Johannesburg, South Africa, 26 August-4 September 2002* (United Nations publication Sales No. E.03.II.A.1 and corrigendum), chap. I, resolution 2, annex.

is scope for UN-Water to evolve further from its current coordination role to play a more prominent role in addressing emerging issues such as climate change and in providing a platform for developing inter-agency responses to tackle them. There would also be benefits to closer collaboration with UN-Energy and UN-Oceans in areas where there are synergies.

Recommendations

- The United Nations system should promote greater understanding of the impact of global development challenges such as climate change on the demand and supply of water and identify ways to prevent future shocks, increase resilience and adaptive capacity and mitigate environmental impacts.
- The United Nations system organizations should strengthen efforts to build national water management capacity, e.g., in the areas of promoting education and awareness-raising; information resources for policymaking; regulations and compliance; dispute-resolution; basic infrastructure; and market stability.
- The UN-Water initiative should promote the participation of all water stakeholders in the design and implementation of strategic elements of evolving integrated water resource management processes and the provision of effective responses to emergency issues affecting water management.
- The work of UN-Water at the regional and local levels should be integrated into United Nations country-level efforts to support national sustainable development strategies.

D. Sustainable agriculture and rural development

36. In the aftermath of the food crisis, there was widespread agreement that agricultural productivity, rural livelihoods, the sustainable management of natural resources and food security were inextricably linked to development and climate change challenges and thus needed to be addressed comprehensively in order to avert another food crisis. In particular, sustainable agriculture and rural development practices were deemed crucial to reducing hunger and poverty while sustaining the ecosystems that poor rural people rely on for their livelihoods. Poverty, limited access to land and other resources, poor infrastructure and political and social constraints restrict the ability of rural people, especially the most disadvantaged, to adopt sustainable practices to secure or improve their own livelihoods.

37. The United Nations plays a critical role in increasing access and capacity of poor rural people to implement sustainable agricultural and rural practices. In 2002, at the World Summit on Sustainable Development, the concept of sustainable agriculture and rural development was launched as a contribution to the implementation of Agenda 21 (chapter 14). The initiative recognized sustainable agriculture as fundamental for poverty reduction and environmental protection and outlined programmes and actions to enhance food security in a sustainable way.

38. Since then, thanks to several initiatives and alliances that promoted the multi-disciplinary nature of sustainable agriculture and rural development — for example, the United Nations System Network on Rural Development and Food Security, the International Alliance Against Hunger (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations (FAO), International Fund for Agricultural Development (IFAD),

World Food Programme (WFP) and other partners) and the Memorandum of Understanding between the International Labour Organization and FAO to promote rural employment — the concept has evolved to include social, institutional and economic sustainability. Current definitions of sustainable agriculture and rural development are generally concerned with the need for agricultural practices to be economically viable, to meet human needs for food, to be environmentally positive and to be concerned with quality of life.

39. The United Nations system follows a twin-track approach to addressing short- and long-term challenges to sustainable agriculture and rural development. This approach was reflected most recently in the Comprehensive Framework for Action developed by the Secretary-General's High-level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis, established in April 2008. The short-term approach addresses hunger and malnutrition through immediate and direct action to alleviate their impact. It also provides the basis for sustainable livelihoods, as well as resilience to climate events, for the most vulnerable communities. Interventions focus on putting in place and scaling up emergency feeding programmes and other social protection schemes targeted at vulnerable populations, including school feeding programmes, vouchers, cash transfers and food-based employment programmes. Measures to ensure that small farmers are able to afford and access farm inputs in a timely manner so as to meet planting schedules have also been important in the context of the short-term response.

40. The long-term approach focuses on increasing investment in agriculture, which has been neglected for many years by both Governments and donors; developing agricultural value chains, including improved storage and distribution; building up farmers' marketing cooperatives and other organizations to enhance farmers' market power; enhancing farmers' access to credit; and strengthening agricultural extension services with a focus on training farmers in sustainable agricultural practices, including in the area of land and water management. Also important are the provision of support to small- and medium-sized agro-industry enterprises in rural areas to generate employment and diversify rural economies and the building of rural infrastructure, such as irrigation, water storage, roads and electricity grids.

41. Such initiatives by multiple United Nations agencies, in particular the Rome-based agencies, require strong coordination, and one of the key objectives of the Secretary-General's High-level Task Force has been to enhance such coordination. Meanwhile, the United Nations System Network on Rural Development and Food Security has helped to continue the dialogue among United Nations agencies to promote a system-wide approach to sustainable agriculture and rural development.

42. The global food and financial crises have overstretched the capacity and resources of system organizations such as WFP to deal with the increased number of people requiring food assistance. WFP has recently issued an urgent appeal for a "human rescue package" to provide the \$5.2 billion needed to feed some 100 million people in 2009. Climate change is likely to worsen the situation by increasing uncertainty regarding food production and prices. Future interventions will require a better understanding of the effects of such crises on the stability and sustainability of food production and will need to build resilient agricultural systems that can adapt to stress and changes and absorb disturbances.

43. Some progress in this regard has already been made. WFP has developed a vulnerability analysis and mapping mechanism to assess risks and better understand

the impact of the financial crisis on food security. The model looks at food and fuel prices, growth in gross domestic product, trade, wage rates, employment, remittances and social safety net spending. It will help identify which countries are most vulnerable to increased hunger as a result of the financial crisis. It might also help in monitoring and tracking changes at the global and country levels, building on the experience gained in dealing with the food crisis. IFAD has begun introducing safeguard procedures for environmental management and sustainable development. FAO has included the concept of vulnerability to food insecurity in its work. Food security has four dimensions besides production: availability, accessibility, stability of food supply and utilization of food. In this model, socio-economic factors, for example market forces, may dominate impacts on food security in the short term, but environmental factors become crucial to ensuring stable and sustainable food production over the long term.

Recommendations

- United Nations organizations should find innovative ways to coordinate and integrate the broad range of activities related to sustainable agriculture and rural development under the sustainable agriculture and rural development approach.
- The United Nations system should strengthen its capacity to assess and analyse the impact of current crises and risks on the stability and sustainability of food production.
- The system should support national efforts to build resilient agricultural systems that can adapt to stress and changes and absorb disturbances.

E. Sustainable urbanization

44. In recent years, cities have acquired a central role in driving economic development in many developing countries. Today, 3 billion people — half of the world's population — live in cities. Fast, unregulated urban growth, however, has also increased urban poverty; 1 billion urban residents live in slums, condemned to a life of poverty and ill health, because of a lack of decent employment, inadequate infrastructure and exposure to air pollution. Cities have also increased environmental degradation, as they often encroach on land, forests and watersheds, threatening biodiversity beyond national and regional borders, and they are becoming major emitters of greenhouse gases.

45. Reducing the negative impact of cities and improving the lives of urban dwellers is inextricably linked to achieving the Millennium Development Goals, Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation. Several major constraints, however, stand in the way of sustainable urbanization: a largely sectoral view of policymaking and allocation of resources, resulting in uncoordinated economic, social and environmental strategies; failure to recognize the spatial dimensions of sustainable development, resulting in the dispersion of resources, especially in urban areas; weak local governance, especially in developing countries, for land-use planning, housing and the provision of basic infrastructure and services; and competition for investment between urban, peri-urban and rural jurisdictions, resulting in the irrational use of land, water and other natural resources.

46. The United Nations system has played a critical role in drawing the attention of the international community to the issue of urbanization, urban poverty and environmental sustainability. The United Nations-Habitat, in collaboration with other partners, has underscored the dynamic nature of the sustainable urbanization process, including the environmental, socio-economic and political-institutional dimensions. This has contributed to the promotion of a sustainable development approach that links the alleviation of the conditions of the urban poor to the achievement of Millennium Development Goal 7 and other Millennium Development Goals. Such an approach, however, has yet to be operationalized.

47. The integration of sustainable urbanization and urban poverty reduction in the activities of all United Nations organizations, in particular in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework process, continues to be a key challenge. The CEB framework on climate change, which is based on studies of the socio-economic and demographic impact of climate change on countries and cities, is a step in that direction. The High-level Committee on Programmes also agreed to table a thematic discussion on “Urban poverty or urbanization: challenges and opportunities”, for a future CEB session.

Recommendations

- The United Nations system organizations should mainstream sustainable urbanization, urban poverty reduction and slum upgrading in their efforts to achieve the Millennium Development Goals in urban areas.
- The United Nations Development Group should facilitate the inclusion of sustainable urbanization concerns in the United Nations Development Assistance Framework guidelines and in system programmes supporting national poverty eradication and sustainable development strategies.

F. Enhancing social equality, including the empowerment of women

48. Poverty, income inequalities, unequal rural-urban development, distribution of assets, access to social services and security and direct or indirect discrimination based on gender, race, disability or ethnicity are all major causes of social exclusion. Poverty and social exclusion deprive the economy of precious human resources to promote sustained economic growth and increase environmental degradation as a result of the suboptimal or inefficient use of natural resources. Recent global crises and socio-demographic changes have exacerbated the problem of social exclusion by increasing unemployment, worsening labour conditions, intensifying economic insecurity and adding tens of millions to the ranks of people living in poverty worldwide.

49. A growing international consensus is emerging on the need for comprehensive development strategies to address the economic, social and environmental impact of these crises in an integrated manner. The World Summit for Social Development, held in 1995, recognized that poverty eradication, full employment and decent work, and social integration are all interrelated and mutually reinforcing objectives. Achieving those objectives requires coordinated and mutually reinforcing social, economic and employment policies that promote social justice, economic recovery and growth and are economically and environmentally sustainable.

50. United Nations system organizations have long been committed to those objectives. Many agencies have actively supported mainstreaming employment, social protection, access to basic social services and gender equality into national development and poverty eradication strategies and creating legal and institutional frameworks promoting social inclusion. The *Toolkit for Mainstreaming Employment and Decent Work*, developed to assist all system agencies integrating the goals of the ILO decent work agenda into their work in support of national development strategies, is the most comprehensive system-wide effort in this regard. The agenda constitutes an important step towards the integration of social equality and social justice concerns into economic planning decisions. The collaboration between FAO and ILO to promote decent rural employment is another important effort, as is the Global Gender and Climate Alliance, aimed at ensuring gender-responsive climate change decisions and initiatives.

Recommendations

- The United Nations system should promote a greater understanding of the social impact of current crises in order to support national efforts to build more equal and inclusive societies.
- System organizations should continue to integrate social equality and social justice concerns into the formulation and implementation of programme and activities supporting national sustainable development strategies.

G. Strengthening institutions for sustainable development

51. While there is no shortage of regimes, institutions and other arrangements at the global, regional and national levels dedicated to addressing the broad range of economic, social and environmental challenges of sustainable development, a coherent and integrated institutional underpinning capable of balancing competing interests and fostering economic, social, and environmental assets is still lacking.

52. Effective sustainable development institutions at all levels should be able to integrate the concept of sustainability across the whole range of economic, social and environmental activities in ways that stimulate innovation and economic growth without compromising the environment and social cohesion; deliver decisions based on long-term sustainability rather than short-term demands only; and ensure that the true cost of natural resource depletion is reflected in market and other economic interactions.

53. At the international level, multilateral environmental agreements have addressed particular environmental problems, including ozone depletion, climate change and biodiversity loss. Other regimes related to trade, finance, development and other fields of policymaking also play a key role in addressing some aspects of sustainable development. The coordination between those regimes, however, is weak, resulting in weak sustainable development governance, which also reflects the persisting disagreement about what constitutes an effective and appropriate approach to sustainable development. The Commission on Sustainable Development and the Economic and Social Council have played and continue to play a critical role in building consensus and operationalizing the concept of sustainable development by fostering coherence and coordination across policy areas and promoting integrated mechanisms to manage critical sectors. Their implementation of those efforts, however, continues to be a challenge.

54. At the national level, the governance of sustainable development tends to be dispersed among various government institutions and regimes, which often do not coordinate with each other. The role of Governments is central to ensuring a comprehensive approach for meeting national goals, balancing competing interests and picking up signals of economic decline, social exclusion and environmental degradation. This requires all parts of government to come together in formulating and implementing national strategies to address sustainable development challenges. Governments, however, often lack the human and financial capacities, as well as the political commitment, to promote sustainable development objectives and provide meaningful checks and balances to enforce them, including rules and norms limiting access to and the use of assets central to human well-being.

55. The United Nations plays a critical role in setting the global sustainable development agenda and supporting the efforts of Governments to implement it through their national development strategies. United Nations system organizations and coordinating mechanisms, such as CEB, the Environmental Management Group and the United Nations Development Group, have made considerable progress in strengthening the United Nations system support in that regard by enhancing policy coordination across environmental activities; mainstreaming the environmental dimension across all system activities; and addressing issues of environmental governance. At the national level, United Nations country teams and various United Nations agencies have also focused on promoting the environmental dimension in national sustainable development strategies.

56. Despite those efforts, the environmental dimension still remains somewhat separate from the economic and social activities of the system. Mainstreaming environmental concerns in all system activities will require removing existing institutional barriers to allow the system to come together in all three dimensions of sustainable development. The creation of issue-based clustering arrangements across environmental, economic and social dimensions could be one way to overcome institutional barriers, promote collective thinking and action, enhance coordination and encourage accountability towards the implementation of the sustainable development agenda.

Recommendations

- The Economic and Social Council should play a stronger role in mainstreaming the concept of sustainable development in the work of the United Nations.
- The Commission on Sustainable Development should play a central role in revitalizing the concept of sustainable development and in enhancing its relevance as a guiding framework for all United Nation system activities.
- The United Nations system should promote special initiatives to help develop sustainable development institutions, such as national and local sustainable development councils and other coordinating mechanisms.
- The United Nations system should support national efforts to build human resources capacity to analyse, formulate and implement a sustainable development approach.

IV. Lessons learned from national sustainable development strategies

57. Sustainable development is a long-term goal that needs to balance competing interests and priorities. Recent global crises and the growing impact of climate change have underscored the urgency of finding new and more effective ways to reconcile different priorities and deal with the challenges of sustainable development. At the 2002 World Summit on Sustainable Development, countries were called on to take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation by 2005. Although that target has not been fully achieved, 82 States Members of the United Nations reported to the Commission on Sustainable Development or the Department of Economic and Social Affairs that they were implementing a national sustainable development strategy as of 2007. Moreover, in the past decade several countries have developed innovative mechanisms, including economic, regulatory, expenditure or institutional mechanisms, that have promoted more comprehensive and strategic approaches to sustainable development.

58. Some countries have developed innovative ways to monitor the various aspects of their economy, analyse the inherent trade-offs and interlinkages among the three dimensions of sustainable development and make critical and necessary adaptations to their policies and strategies. The United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, for example, has used various approaches and tools to examine the linkages between economic, social and environmental systems. The integrated policy appraisal process was introduced to encourage the use of environmental appraisals as part of policymaking and review processes. It was designed to assist government departments in assessing the potential economic, social and environmental impacts of their policy proposals.

59. Other countries, including Mexico, have been able to make significant progress in achieving their sustainable development objectives by integrating sustainable development principles directly into their national development planning and budgetary processes, rather than creating a separate process. Others have established cross-sectoral institutional arrangements to lead their sustainable development process across government departments. The Philippines, for example, has established a Council for Sustainable Development, chaired by the National Economic Development Authority, to lead its sustainable development process, which has kept sustainable development objectives at the centre of governmental decision-making. In the United Kingdom, several Government departments, including in the areas of trade and industry, health and defence, have published their own sustainable development strategies to complement national and regional ones, strengthening their overall impact. On the other hand, in countries where the sustainable development process was led by the environment department only, the sustainable development approach has had more limited impact on governmental decisions.

60. Several countries were able to promote sustainable development effectively when they coordinated their national, subnational and local efforts. In the Republic of Korea, for example, the National Action Plan for Agenda 21 fostered the adoption of local Agenda 21 initiatives (adopted in 213 out of 249 regional government units) through the provision of financial and capacity support and led to the establishment of the Council for Local Agenda 21 to better coordinate the implementation process.

This helped to establish a comprehensive framework for long-term sustainable development planning, both cross-sectoral and sectoral, with a high degree of spatial diversification (national, regional and local).

61. Most countries use participatory multi-stakeholder approaches in the elaboration of national sustainable development strategies, even though the extent of the engagement of business organizations, civil society organizations, including non-governmental organizations, trade unions, academia and other major groups varies. At the same time, public participation in the monitoring and, in particular, the implementation of such strategies remains limited.

62. Some countries have successfully adopted cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary approaches, such as integrated water resource management, to manage their natural resources, often as a component of their sustainable development strategies. Such approaches have encouraged maximizing economic and social welfare in an equitable manner without compromising the sustainability of vital ecosystems.

63. Most countries are addressing major cross-cutting issues such as climate change in their national sustainable development strategies, but the scope and focus vary across countries. Generally, climate change mitigation is covered more prominently and specifically than adaptation. Integrating climate change into such strategies enables countries not only to harness the co-benefits of climate change response measures for other sustainable development objectives, but also to realize and highlight the climate change benefits of measures aimed at, inter alia, increasing energy security, ensuring sustainable forest management, implementing integrated water resource management or strengthening disaster risk management. A national sustainable development strategy also provides a natural framework for simultaneously incorporating intergenerational and intragenerational equity concerns into national climate change response measures.

64. Despite the increasing reliance on markets to allocate resources and the potential impact of market users on environmental and social systems, economic instruments have been underutilized in tackling key sustainable development issues. Very few countries, for example, leverage instruments such as environmental fiscal reform and emissions trading to achieve sustainable development.

65. The United Nations system can learn some important lessons from this broad range of experiences for its support for national strategies for sustainable development. For example, the systematic development of quantifiable and measurable targets for sustainable development helps to increase the focus on and commitment to that goal; understanding the linkages between economic, social and environmental issues facilitates the formulation of more comprehensive and effective sustainable development strategies; a clear mandate and institutional arrangements across government departments to lead the sustainable development process helps to place sustainable development objectives at the centre of government decision-making; assessing policy initiatives in an integrated manner with a view to understanding their economic, social and environmental impact helps in identifying leverage points to influence sustainable development objectives, identify emerging issues and learn from and adapt to change; coordination between sectors (for example, departments) and cross-sectoral strategic approaches (for example, poverty reduction strategy papers and environmental management plans) is essential to ensuring that national strategies and issue-specific policies are mutually reinforcing; and institutionalized cross-sectoral participation is essential to understanding and addressing the complex interdependence of economic, social and environmental systems.

Recommendations

The United Nations system should:

- Encourage and facilitate the participation of countries in shared learning and review mechanisms on national sustainable development strategies.
- Promote cross-sectoral approaches in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development.
- Encourage and facilitate the incorporation of sustainability principles into sectoral policymaking and strategic plans, including through integrated appraisal mechanisms.
- Promote cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary, participatory networks to address and find solutions to specific sustainable development challenges (e.g., water scarcity, desertification, land degradation).
- Help in building the national capacity of statistical offices to develop and implement quantifiable and measurable targets for sustainable development and integrated sets of sustainability indicators.
- Help countries to understand and use effectively a mix of policy instruments, including regulatory, economic and information disclosure instruments, to address sustainable development challenges.

V. Emerging challenges

66. National efforts to promote sustainable development face multiple and interconnected challenges, amplified by recent global crises. The dramatic increase in food prices has considerably reduced the purchasing power of low-income, food-deficit countries, increasing their poverty and hunger levels. The intensification of climate change events and environmental degradation is putting at risk the safety and livelihood of a growing number of people. Unsustainable patterns of production and consumption and the growth of the population, which is projected to reach 9 billion in 2050, are accelerating environmental degradation and the depletion of natural resources, while unregulated urban growth is significantly increasing urban poverty. Widening inequalities, unemployment, underemployment and poor working conditions are becoming a major obstacle to achieving sustainable development worldwide, while slow economic growth, export declines and loss of foreign exchange earning are reversing the economic and social gains already made by many countries.

67. Facing these challenges will be difficult and costly. The High-level Task Force on the Global Food Security Crisis estimates that in the current scenario the cost of facing short- and long-term sustainable development challenges will be an additional \$25 billion to \$40 billion to be invested every year for food and nutrition security, social protection, agricultural development and the better functioning of food markets. Approximately one third of the additional resources would be needed for immediate food assistance and short-term budgetary and balance-of-payments support, with two thirds needed for investments in rural infrastructure, education, clean water and agricultural research.

68. The United Nations has made important strides in devising a coordinated, comprehensive and strategic approach to current crises (for example, the establishment by the Secretary-General of the High-level Task Force) to promote a unified response globally and nationally to the broad range of challenges posed by the crisis and address the immediate funding shortfalls for food emergencies. Recently, CEB formulated a number of system-wide initiatives — so-called joint crisis initiatives — to respond to the multiple crises currently faced by Governments and the international community, including the financial crisis and global recession. The aim is to form a broad-based perspective on the economic, environmental and social impact of the crisis and its implications for the work of the United Nations system from a policy and programme angle and to identify actions required in response. CEB has developed a similar approach to deal with climate change.

VI. Conclusions

69. The United Nations system has made important strides in strengthening its role in support of sustainable development, as evidenced by several system initiatives in some of the key areas identified in the ministerial declaration. The system was able to adopt cross-sectoral, interdisciplinary approaches to address a number of specific challenges, including climate change, water resource management, energy supply and agricultural and rural development, and their economic, social and environmental dimensions. The participatory nature of those approaches has also facilitated greater coordination within the system, as well as among government agencies and departments dealing with these challenges, and strengthened understanding of the interlinkages among different dimensions of sustainable development and policy trade-offs.

70. Those efforts could be scaled up to involve all relevant partners. Similar issue-based system-wide approaches could also be applied to the broad range of challenges and sectors that have an impact on sustainable development, including urbanization, social equality and institutional development. This might also require closer cooperation between the High-level Committee on Programmes of the CEB and the United Nations Development Group to ensure that such cross-sectoral, issue-based approaches become an integral part of United Nations system efforts in support of national development and poverty eradication strategies.
