



Informal Meeting of Environment Ministers

Background paper – Session I

Environment and Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)

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The year 2015 provides the world with a new opportunity to outline a more inclusive and sustainable future for all. The heads of state will adopt at a special summit at the United Nations (UN) in September the post-2015 development agenda, which is foreseen to adopt the sustainable development goals (SDGs). This new global partnership should build on, but also go beyond, the 8 millennium development goals (MDG), reflecting the paradigm shift to a universal, transformative and inclusive agenda.

Significant progress has already been achieved through various processes at the UN. The report of the Open Working Group on SDGs, the report of the Intergovernmental Committee of Experts on Sustainable Development Financing, and the UN Secretary-General (UNSG) Synthesis Report, are key contributions and show that a global agreement on an ambitious post-2015 development agenda is within reach.

In its conclusions “*A New Global Partnership for Poverty Eradication and Sustainable Development after 2015*” of 26 May 2015, the Council of the European Union (EU) set out the EU's position to proceed in a universal and transformative manner incorporating all three dimensions of sustainable development: social, economic and environmental.

As guiding principles for a new global partnership, the EU endorsed environmental sustainability and respect for planetary boundaries together with human rights, equality, non-discrimination, democratic institutions, good governance, rule of law, as well as inclusiveness.

The Council conclusions of May 2015 develop further aspects of the new global partnership to achieve the 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) by 2030 and the December 2014 Council conclusions “*A transformative post-2015 agenda*”.

In the latter the EU agreed that “*the agenda must also recognise that environmental sustainability is fundamental to ensuring the sustainable prosperity and well-being of all people within planetary boundaries. It must unlock the drivers of the green economy, make our economies and lifestyles more equitable and sustainable and more effective in reducing poverty.*”

In the SDGs the role of environment for sustainable development is reflected indirectly in a range of goals and targets:

- in goal 1: *the need for access for all women and men to land and resources;*
- in goal 2: *maintain ecosystems, that strengthen capacity for adaptation to climate change and for sustainable agriculture;*

- in goal 3: *reduce the number of deaths and illnesses from hazardous chemicals and air, water and soil pollution and contamination;*
- in goal 4: ensure that all learners acquire the knowledge and skills needed to promote sustainable development (including the environmental dimension);
- in goal 5: *undertake reforms to give women equal rights to and natural resources;*
- in goal 6: *protect and restore water-related ecosystems including mountains, forests, wetlands, rivers, aquifers and lakes;*
- goal 7: *ensure access to affordable, reliable, sustainable and modern energy for all;*
- in goal 8: *improve progressively global resource efficiency in consumption and production and endeavor to decouple economic growth from environmental degradation;*
- in goal 9: *upgrade infrastructure and retrofit industries to make them sustainable, with increased resource-use efficiency and greater adoption of clean and environmentally sound technologies and industrial processes;*
- in goal 11: *reduce the adverse per capita environmental impact of cities, including by paying special attention to air quality and municipal and other waste management; protect and safeguard the world's natural heritage and to provide universal access to green spaces;*
- in goal 12: *achieve Sustainable management and efficient use of natural resources;*
- goal 14: *conserve and sustainably use the oceans, seas and marine resources;*
- goal 15: *protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss;*
- goal 17: develop measure of progress that complement GDP and support related statistical capacity

With the adoption of the post-2015 agenda by the international community, new challenges and opportunities will arise. The universality of the SDG's and their cross-sectorial character leads to the fact that the actions defined in the post-2015 agenda are relevant also for other policies.

Environment is an important component and essential for our common wellbeing, investing in environmental goods and services will be pivotal to achieve the objective of "leaving no one behind".

Policy coherence by mainstreaming environment issues into other policy areas and by building synergies across all relevant policies: Circular economy, mobilization and effective use of finance, elimination of harmful subsidies, sustainable consumption and production, ecosystem services, indicators and measurement, international conventions, agreements, and others will be decisive.

The 7th Environmental Action Programme (EAP) "Living well, within the limits of our planet" entered into force in January 2014 with the overall objective to tackle the persisting environmental challenges in the European Union in a structured way.

It reflects the EU's commitment to preserve natural capital by protecting biodiversity and natural resources, including ecosystem services for its intrinsic value and for its essential contribution to human well-being and economic prosperity, to set up the conditions for transforming the EU into a resource-efficient, low-carbon economy and addressing the challenges to human health and wellbeing, such as air and water pollution, excessive noise and toxic chemicals.

The 7th EAP strives at transforming the EU into an inclusive green economy that secures growth and development,

The 7th EAP recognises that measures to enhance ecological and climate resilience, such as ecosystem restoration and green infrastructure, can have important socio-economic benefits, including for public health. Priority objectives of the 7th EAP also contribute to Europe 2020, the European Union's ten-year growth strategy.

The 7th EAP has been set up to speed up the implementation of existing strategies, fill gaps in legislation and strengthen implementation of existing policies, including the 2020 Biodiversity Strategy as well as the Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources

The EU 2020 biodiversity Strategy was adopted to halt the loss of biodiversity and ecosystem services in the EU by 2020. The commitment is reflected in 6 targets that also include "restoring at least 15% of degraded ecosystems" and their services, while stepping up the EU contribution to averting global biodiversity loss.

On the global level the 10th Conference of the Parties (COP10) to the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), held in Nagoya in 2010, led to the adoption of a Strategic Plan for biodiversity 2011-2020, the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilisation (ABS Protocol), and a strategy to mobilise resources for global biodiversity. The EU 2020 biodiversity strategy responds to both mandates, setting the EU on the right track to meet its own biodiversity objectives and its global commitments.

The mid-term review of the EU biodiversity Strategy, foreseen in autumn 2015, will shed further light on progress achieved towards the biodiversity targets and will identify implementation gaps. It will provide a comprehensive assessment that lays the ground for considering possible actions on how to fill the gaps to put the EU on track for achieving its biodiversity objectives in 2020. Conclusions will be proposed to Ministers to be adopted at the Environment Council in December 2015.

The "Blueprint to Safeguard Europe's Water Resources" strives for a better implementation of current water legislation, the integration of water policy objectives into other policies to ensure sufficient water quantity of good quality water; highlighting that preserving water is not only about environmental protection, health and well-being, but it is also about economic prosperity, ensuring that all economic sectors have the water available they need for creating growth and jobs.

Biodiversity, ecosystems and their services are central pillars for all life including human life, on the planet. They are sources of food and essential nutrients, medicines and medicinal compounds, fuel, energy, and cultural enrichment. They also contribute to the provision of clean water and air, and perform critical functions that range from the regulation of pests and disease to that of climate change and natural disasters.

The success of the post-2015 agenda requires policy coherence at all levels. Aligning the actions of the post-2015 agenda to account for integrated management and protection of natural resources and biodiversity related matters will therefore be beneficial for both the post-2015 agenda, as well as the objectives which the European Union has agreed. The alignment of these policies with their synergistic effects can also have positive “spillover effects for climate change, protection of ecosystem services, sustainable consumption and production and the general concept of a low carbon economy.

In this perspective, aligning the policies and grasping of their synergistic potential would be a step towards an effective implementation. Furthermore, such a proceeding would also contribute to the effective use of financial resources of funding. An in-depth analysis of existing gaps between the SDGs and EU and national (environmental) sustainability objectives and targets would be the starting point for a common EU governance framework for implementing the SDGs at EU level, in the Member States (with acknowledgement of their national specificities) and in the relations with non-EU countries. This governance framework should include an appropriate and light EU reviewing mechanism that is able to feed into the review mechanism that will be established at global level.

The 7th EAP and the EU Biodiversity Strategy are both aiming at achieving their respective objectives for the year 2020. The divergent timelines for the SDGs and these frameworks need to be addressed, in a way that preserves the level of ambition of existing commitments. For example the biodiversity 2020 targets would need to be reviewed at an appropriate time, in light in particular of the review of the global Strategic Plan for Biodiversity 2011-2020 and the implementation of its Aichi Targets, in order to trigger further action that may be needed by 2030.

The synergistic effects of the post-2015 to environment related targets could provide the necessary financial and political assistance to reach the objectives of the 7th EAP and the 2020 EU biodiversity strategy on the medium term and in return this could be the stepping stone for the implementation of the post-2020 agenda for 2030.

Questions for the debate:

- How can the European policies on environment best contribute to meeting the objectives of the goals and targets of the post 2015 agenda? How can EU policy coherence be reinforced to maximise EU contribution to the attainment of the SDG agenda domestically and at global level?
- What governance mechanisms should be considered to support effective implementation at EU and Member State level?
- In view of the forthcoming mid-term review of the EU Biodiversity Strategy to 2020, how can the post-2015 agenda contribute to delivering biodiversity objectives domestically and globally?