

The Global Sustainable Development Report: Emerging issues for the attention of policy makers

United Nations Expert Group Meeting

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Organized by

Division for Sustainable Development, United Nations
Department for Economic and Social Affairs
(DESA/DSD)

The present document is the report of the UN Expert Group Meeting for the Global Sustainable Development Report: Emerging issues for the attention of policy makers, held at UN headquarters, New York City, USA, on 5 to 6 April 2016.

Background material on the Global Sustainable Development Report is available at:
<https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/globalsdreport>

The opinions expressed in this report are those of the authors of the report and do not necessarily reflect the views of the UN.

Contents

Context and objectives of the meeting.....	1
Opening remarks	1
Session 1: Approaches to identifying emerging issues.....	1
Session 2: Emerging issues for policy makers.....	2
Session 3: Getting started.....	2
Session 4: Break-out group discussions.....	3
Annex 1: Meeting participants.....	4
Annex 2: Meeting agenda	6

Context and objectives of the meeting

The Global Sustainable Development Report (GSDR) is a United Nations publication aiming to strengthen the science-policy interface at the High Level Political Forum (HLPF), which serves as the United Nations platform providing political leadership and guidance on sustainable development issues at the international level.

The identification of new and emerging issues is one function of the science-policy interface. While many approaches exist, common features include the involvement of experts and formalized processes drawing on scientific evidence, assessments, and projections. The ultimate objective is to support policy deliberations on the GSDR at the High-level Forum in July 2016, with a view to strengthening the science-policy interface for sustainable development.

As noted above, the identification of emerging issues forms part of the science-policy interface. In this context, scope exists to inform policy-makers of new opportunities as well as risks, including slow changes and sudden shocks. To this end, one chapter of the GSDR has been dedicated to emerging issues in science in the context of sustainable development. At a very basic level, an emerging issue may be defined as one that has very recently been identified and considered as important by scientists, but did not yet received proper recognition by policy makers, or where an effective policy response has not yet been put in place.

Policymakers are exposed to a broad range of analyses, rankings, and advice concerning emerging issues, prepared from a multitude of perspectives. However, the available material varies widely in terms of scales – geographical and temporal – and in the thematic coverage of issues. As such, it is not readily accessible for policy-makers in the HLPF. There is thus a need

to systematize the existing material, informed by a sustainable development perspective.

To this end, building on the work done for the 2015 GSDR, the aim is to discuss approaches and methodologies for systematically identifying the range of issues for possible consideration by policymakers, in particular at the HLPF. In preparation for the meeting, an open call for online contributions was sent to various actors and networks, gathering a list of possible emerging issues. For illustrative purposes, the potential emerging issues were divided between five categories: social, technological, economic, ecological, and political (STEEP) framework, which is commonly used in the emerging issues and horizon-scanning literature.

Tuesday, 5 April

Opening remarks

The meeting was opened by Thomas Gass, Assistant-Secretary-General, DESA with an introduction by David Le Blanc, Officer-in-Charge, Policy Analysis Branch, Division for Sustainable Development, DESA.

Session 1: Approaches to identifying emerging issues

The first session of the meeting was dedicated to highlighting approaches to the identification of emerging issues and understanding risks as well as review and validation of proposed approaches to systematization and representation of emerging issues.

Presentations in context of emerging issues were held by Carl Dahlman, Head of Global Research, OECD Development Centre; Lud Coppens, Acting Head of Unit, SDG Information and Knowledge; and Richard A. Roehrl, Senior Economic Affairs Officer, UN Division for Sustainable Development.

In an adherent discussion, the experts focused on criteria for identifying emerging issues, the reasons they are emerging, possible criteria for their selection, and ways to address the issue.

Suggested criteria were: regional relevance; policy relevance; urgency; evidence-based; probability and impact of event; persistence; irreversibility; latency/delayed response; ubiquity; novelty; potential for mobilization; and distribution of the issue across the world.

Session 2: Emerging issues for policy makers

This session was dedicated to the discussion of approaches for systematizing and presenting emerging issues, including the STEEP framework. This session was set to consider possible criteria that could be used to capture emerging issues that may be appropriate for consideration by the HLPF. Friedrich Soltau, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, UN Division for Sustainable Development, gave introductory key points from the background paper. Stewart Lockie, Director, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University, presented reflections on possible frameworks for key emerging issues.

In the following discussion, it was considered that an emerging issue was an issue that is not yet generally recognized, but could have major impact on sustainable development if not addressed. Although often perceived as risks, emerging issues could also be positive, meaning that there was a need to recognize potential opportunities. There is often an element of newness, but the issue would not necessarily be considered as unheard of or surprising.

Some current emerging issues identified by the UNEP for 2016 based on these criteria include microplastics, illegal trade in wildlife, loss and damage to ecosystem services, role of financial sector in advancing environmental sustainability, climate variability and toxin

accumulation in crops, zoonosis, dust and sandstorm. Moreover, some potential issues suggested for 2017 included extractives, environment and displacement related issues but was not determined.

The following challenges were identified: a) how to identify emerging issues; b) how to incentivize policy makers to close the time lag between finding a problem and acting upon it; c) how to engage the scientific community at the HLPF; d) how to spur action on issues at the grassroots level. Furthermore, the actual emergence of the listed issues was questioned, as some had been present for decades, and it was discussed that there was rather an increased intensity of effects. Bringing the issues to policymakers was identified as the toughest challenge.

Session 3: Preparation and expectations for prioritization exercise

The participants discussed the preparations for the next second day. It was decided to discuss the top 20 issues from the list 85 issues, which had been shared with the participants before the meeting. Prior to the meeting, the list of emerging issues had been drawn up using an open-ended online survey that was distributed to members of the sustainable development and scientific communities. As a next step, an electronic survey containing 85 issues was circulated to the participants and the larger group of expert, who were invited to score the issues on the basis of importance. Mean scores were calculated and a ranking list was generated

Wednesday, 6 April

Session 1: Getting started

This session was dedicated to the organization of break-out groups for an indicative prioritization exercise of potential emerging issues. Two groups of ten experts were to discuss ten emerging issues, in unranked order.

Sessions 2-4: Break-out group discussions and report back

The two groups discussed their respective emerging issues. The value that could be sustained under each topic was defined, leading to a discussion on the complications of measuring sustainability, social stability, and intrinsic or moral value and the lack of integration of these variables into economic models due to these difficulties. Furthermore, the threats and opportunities posed by each topic were discussed, and it was found that overlaps occurred, since an initial struggle could be transformed into an opportunity if the right political response was applied.

Causal mechanisms were also discussed en route to determining potential responses or

actions that would assist in achieving sustainable development of the key issues. Overlapping responses for the emerging issues included the exposure of various interlinkages to facilitate political action, the integration of the general public in the decision making process through shared knowledge and technology, as well as the development and availability of technology for all countries to achieve overall access to big data even in remote areas where necessary.

In concluding remarks, participants were invited to follow up on their interests in contributing to these actions by contacting UNDESA in writing.

Annex 1: Meeting participants

Gueladio CISSE

Head of the Ecosystem Health Sciences Unit,
Department of Epidemiology and Public Health,
Swiss Tropical and Public Health Institute
(Swiss TPH), Basel

William COLGAZIER

Senior Scholar in the Center for Science
Diplomacy,
American Association for Advancement of
Science (AAAS)

Carl DAHLMANN

Head of Global Research,
OECD Development Centre

Roberta D'ALLESANDRO

Professor of linguistics and Chair of Italian
language and culture,
Leiden University

Zachary DONNENFELD

Researcher,
African Futures Programme, ISS, Pretoria

Gerlis FUGMANN

Director, Association of Polar Early Career
Scientists (APECS),
Arctic University of Norway

Claudio Alberto HUEPE MINOLETTI

Economist, Renewables & Environment, Centro
de Energía y Desarrollo Sustentable,
Universidad Diego Portales,
Santiago de Chile

Stewart LOCKIE

Director,
The Cairns Institute,
James Cook University

Cheikh MBOW

Senior Scientist on climate change and
development,
World Agroforestry Centre (ICRAF),
Nairobi

Manual MONTES

Senior Advisor on Finance and Development
South Centre, Geneva

MantaDevi NOWBUTH

Dean, Faculty of Ocean Studies
University of Mauritius

Muhammad SAIDAM

Chief Science Officer (CSO),
Applied Science Royal Scientific Society (RSS),
Jordan

Anita SHANKAR

Medical anthropologist and public health
researcher,
Johns Hopkins University,
Bloomberg School of Public Health

Oyewale TOMORI

President,
Nigerian Academy of Science

Patrick Paul WALSH

Professor of International Development Studies,
University College Dublin, Ireland

Robert LINDNER

Research Associate, Governance for Sustainable
Development Project (GSD),
Institute for the Advanced Study of
Sustainability,
United Nations University (UNU-IAS)

Stewart LOCKIE

Member, CSPR, ICSU
The Australian National University
Research School of Social Sciences
Canberra, ACT 0200
Australia

Nicholas ROBINSON

Distinguished Professor of Environmental Law
Emeritus
Co-Director, Center for Environmental Legal
Studies
Pace University Law School

UN System

Chantal line CARPENTIER

Head,
UNCTAD New York Office

Lud COPPENS

Acting Head of Unit.
SDG Information and Knowledge
Management Unit,
DEWA, UNEP

Ana PERSIC

Science Officer,
UNESCO New York Office

Dino CORELL

ILO New York Office

UN DESA

David LE BLANC

Officer-in-Charge,
Policy Analysis Branch,
Division for Sustainable Development,
DESA

Richard Alexander ROEHRL

Senior Economic Affairs Officer,
Policy Analysis Branch,
Division for Sustainable Development,
DESA

Friedrich SOLTAU

Senior Sustainable Development Officer,
Policy Analysis Branch,
Division for Sustainable Development,
DESA

Anastasia KEFALIDOU

Consultant,
Division for Sustainable Development,
DESA

Esther LHO

Intern,
Division for Sustainable Development,
DESA

Lina ROESCHEL

Intern,
Division for Sustainable Development,
DESA

Annex 2: Meeting agenda

Expert group meeting for the Global Sustainable Development Report: Emerging issues for the attention of policy makers

UNHQ

5 - 6 April 2016

Programme

Day One – 5 April	
8:30 – 9:00	<i>Registration</i>
9:30 – 10:15	<p><u>Opening</u></p> <p>Opening remarks, Mr. Thomas Gass, Assistant-Secretary-General, DESA</p> <p>Welcome and context of the meeting, Mr. David Le Blanc, Officer-in-Charge, Policy Analysis Branch, DSD/DESA</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of participants • Introduction to the meeting: expectations, objectives and working methods for the EGM (DESA/DSD)
10:15 – 10:30	<i>Coffee/Tea</i>
10:30 -12:30	<p><u>Session 1: Approaches to identifying emerging issues</u></p> <p>This session will highlight approaches to the identification of emerging issues and understanding risks, as well as Review and validation of proposed approaches to systematization and representation of emerging issues</p> <p>Presentations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Dr Carl Dahlman, Head of Global Research, OECD Development Centre • Ms. Lud Coppens, Acting Head of Unit, SDG Information and Knowledge Management Unit, DEWA, UNEP • Richard A. Roehrl, Senior Economic Affairs Officer, DSD/DESA <p>Discussion – experts encouraged to share views and perspectives.</p>
12:30 – 14:00	<i>Lunch break</i>
14:00 – 16:00	<p><u>Session 2: Emerging issues for policymakers</u></p> <p>This session will discuss approaches for systematizing and presenting emerging issues, including the STEEP framework. This session will also consider possible criteria that could be used to capture emerging issues that may be appropriate for consideration by the HLPF</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of key points from the background paper, Mr. Friedrich Soltau, Senior Sustainable Development Officer, DSD/DESA • Reflections on possible frameworks, Professor Stewart Lockie, Director, The Cairns Institute, James Cook University <p>Discussion – experts encouraged to share views and perspectives.</p>
16:00 – 16:15	<i>Coffee/Tea</i>
16:15 – 17:00	<p><u>Session 3: Preparation and expectations for prioritization exercise</u></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction of emerging issues prioritization exercise • Key points from the day's discussion • Discussion of outline the methodology to be used and distribution of material.

Day Two – 6 April	
09:00 – 9:30	<i>Coffee</i>
09:30 – 10:00	<u>Session 1: Getting started</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Run-through of plans and discussion • Organization of break-out groups
10:00 – 11:00	<u>Session 2: Break-out group discussion – tentative prioritization</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Participants engage in an indicative prioritization exercise of potential emerging issues.
11:00 – 11:15	<i>Coffee Break</i>
11:15 – 12:30	<u>Session 2: Break-out group discussion – tentative prioritization</u>
12:30 – 13:30	<i>Lunch break</i>
13:30 – 15:00	<u>Session 3: Report back from break-out groups</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Groups will report back on their respective ranking exercises and begin collective ranking exercise
15:00 – 15:15	<i>Coffee Break</i>
15:15 – 16:45	<u>Session 4: Development of tentative prioritization</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Facilitated, consensus-based effort to prioritize issues, based on criteria to select issues for possible attention of policymakers in the HLPF
16:45 – 17:15	<u>Session 5: Reflections and next steps</u> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Lessons learnt and reflections on the exercise • Possible interest and uptake of methodologies and concepts
17:15 – 17:30	<u>Closing</u>