

Policy Options Paper # 1: A sustainable development goal for the global ocean

What are the issues?

One of the main outcomes of the Rio+20 Conference was an agreement by United Nations member States to launch a process to develop a set of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), which will build upon the Millennium Development Goals and converge with the post-2015 development agenda. The SDGs and the post-2015 process began along parallel tracks, but many governments and observers pointed out that continuing with two separate processes was a recipe for confusion, and it now appears virtually certain that the two will merge at some point in 2014, before the 69th session of the UN General Assembly (UNGA) opens.

It was decided in Rio to establish an “inclusive and transparent intergovernmental process open to all stakeholders, with a view to developing global sustainable development goals to be agreed by the General Assembly¹”.

In Section V.B of ‘The Future we Want’, the Rio+20 declaration, UN member States agreed that the SDGs must:

- Be based on Agenda 21 and the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation
- Fully respect all the Rio Principles
- Be consistent with international law
- Build upon commitments already made
- Contribute to the full implementation of the outcomes of all major summits in the economic, social and environmental fields
- Focus on priority areas for the achievement of sustainable development, being guided by the outcome document
- Address and incorporate in a balanced way all three dimensions of sustainable development and their inter-linkages
- Be coherent with and integrated into the UN development agenda beyond 2015
- Not divert focus or effort from the achievement of the Millennium Development Goals
- Include active involvement of all relevant stakeholders, as appropriate, in the process.

It was further agreed that the SDGs must be:

- Action-oriented
- Concise

- Easy to communicate
- Limited in number
- Aspirational
- Global in nature
- Universally applicable to all countries, while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development, and respecting national policies and priorities.

Current status

In January 2013, a 30-member Open Working Group (OWG) of the UNGA, co-chaired by Hungary and Kenya, was established with the task of preparing a proposal on the SDGs for the 68th session of the General Assembly. The OWG has held four meetings so far and in its most recent progress report noted that “there is wide support for a single post-2015 United Nations development framework containing a single set of goals – goals that are universally applicable to all countries but adaptable to different national realities and priorities^{2,3}”.

The eighth session of the OWG, to be held on 3–7 February 2014, will be dedicated to the ocean and seas, as well as forests and biodiversity.

Current policy landscape

The ocean was given a marginal role in the Millennium Development Goals, despite its significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development⁴. In 2013, the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda⁵ emphasised that without environmental sustainability, poverty cannot be ended and that the ocean and seas should not be forgotten in the post-2015 development agenda.

In the current discussions around future SDGs, various proposals have been made to integrate ocean issues into a SDG framework. The first category of proposals takes the view that the ocean should be given a dedicated stand-alone goal. The second category proposes that the topic be addressed under other priority areas in the form of targets.

(A) A stand-alone SDG for the ocean

Supporters of a stand-alone ocean SDG recognise the importance of the ocean for sustainable development and humankind as a whole. They argue, among other things, that the ocean requires focused attention due to its complex nature and significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development. The following proposals have been put forward.

Sustainable development goal for oceans and coasts to face the challenges for our future ocean with four targets: (1) ensure basic life-sustaining and regulating functions of the oceans; (2) ensure a

healthy and productive marine environment to sustain all provisioning and non-provisioning services of oceans and coasts; (3) build resilient coastal communities through mitigation and adaptation strategies, innovation and sustainable development, by sharing benefits and responsibilities; (4) engage in integrated and multi-level ocean governance. The proposal does not contain any timelines or indicators⁶.

Ensure the health, protection and preservation of oceans, seas, and marine ecosystems with three targets: (1) establish a representative network of marine protected areas (MPAs) covering 20–30% of the ocean's area; (2) enact a moratorium on all fish stocks that are overfished, no longer resilient or in decline; (3) establish and implement an agreement concerning the protection of marine biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. No timelines and only one indicator were defined⁷.

Healthy seas and oceans (blue economy) with five priority areas: (1) protection of marine biodiversity; (2) elimination of unsustainable fishing practices; (3) reduction of marine pollution; (4) monitoring of ocean acidification; (5) conservation of biodiversity in areas beyond national jurisdiction. Each area is associated with targets and recommendations. Various timelines and indicators were proposed⁸.

A number of countries support a stand-alone ocean goal, with proposals aimed at: healthy, productive and resilient oceans; conservation of biological diversity; reduction of marine pollution; protection of marine and coastal ecosystem; and elimination of illegal, unreported and unregulated (IUU) fishing and overfishing. Some proposals include concrete timelines and make usage of indicators.

(B) Inclusion of ocean-related aspects in different SDGs

Supporters of this approach argue, among other things, that the ocean should be dealt with in a cross-cutting manner and therefore ocean-related aspects should be part of other SDGs, in the form of targets. The main priority areas identified are: food security and environmental sustainability (including management of natural resources); healthy and productive ecosystems; biodiversity protection; and respect for planetary boundaries.

Proposed targets refer, for example, to: biodiversity loss; unsustainable fishing practices; ocean acidification; marine pollution; harmful subsidies; sustainable fisheries; and livelihood protection of fishers. Few contain timelines; others include indicators⁹.

A similar approach has, for example, been put forward by the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, which includes the ocean under Goal 5, 'Ensure food security and good nutrition',¹⁰ with two targets: (1) adopt sustainable agricultural, ocean, and freshwater fishery practices and rebuild designated fish stocks to sustainable levels; and (2) reduce post-harvest loss and food waste by [x]%. Its Goal 9: 'Manage natural resource assets sustainably is also related to the ocean, with one target: (1) safeguard ecosystems, species and genetic diversity.

In most proposals, the crucial importance of the ocean for other priority areas (e.g. health, income generation/employment, energy and water) has not been included fully.

Added value of a global ocean SDG

Before considering whether to recommend a stand-alone or composite SDG for oceans, the Global Ocean Commission may wish to take into account previous initiatives in which ocean-related goals and targets were proposed, as well as experience gained in relation to previously agreed targets and indicators.

Goals regarding the ocean and related targets were proposed in the following recent initiatives and reports.

- **Agenda 21¹¹, the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (JPOI)¹²**, and various decisions of the **Commission on Sustainable Development (CSD)** have helped to set important goals and targets for the sustainable development of the ocean and its resources.
- **Millennium Development Goal (MDG) 7 (Target 7.B)** contains two ocean-related indicators: (1) proportion of fish stocks within safe biological limits; and (2) proportion of terrestrial and marine areas protected. However, the MDG did not set a numerical target for either of these, rather it named them as indicators to be used when assessing progress towards Target 7B, to “Reduce biodiversity loss, achieving, by 2010, a significant reduction in the rate of loss”.
- **The Strategic Plan for Biodiversity for 2011–2020**, adopted by Parties to the Convention on Biological Diversity, includes the oceans-related Aichi targets 6, 10 and 11, which all include timelines, while only Aichi target 11 comprises a concrete indicator measuring the proportion of marine areas protected (10% of coastal and marine areas conserved by 2020)¹³.
- **Secretary-General’s ‘Oceans compact’ (2012)** Its stated goal is: “Healthy Oceans for Prosperity: providing for sustainable use, management and conservation of the world’s oceans”, and has three targets: (1) protecting people and improving the health of the oceans; (2) protecting, recovering and sustaining the oceans’ environment and natural resources and restoring their full food production and livelihoods services; (3) strengthening ocean knowledge and the management of oceans. Only a few of the targets have timelines, and the only indicator refers to Aichi target 11¹⁴.
- **Global partnership for oceans (2012)** Its goal is defined as: “Healthy, productive oceans to help reduce poverty”, with three targets: (1) sustainable seafood and livelihoods from capture fisheries and aquaculture; (2) critical coastal and ocean habitats and biodiversity; (3) pollution reduction. All targets are to be achieved by 2022, and related indicators are defined¹⁵.
- **Blueprint for Ocean and Coastal Sustainability (2011)** Its goal is: “Ocean and Coastal Sustainability,” with four objectives related to: (1) maintenance or restoration of marine resources and ecosystems; (2) green economy concept; (3) policy, legal and institutional reforms for effective ocean governance and strengthening of the institutional framework; (4) marine research, monitoring and evaluation, technology and capacity transfer. Sub-targets were defined, but no timelines or indicators¹⁶.

- At Rio+20, numerous commitments were made by member States with regard to, among other topics, marine pollution; alien invasive species; conservation and sustainable use of marine biological diversity of areas beyond national jurisdiction; maintenance or restoration of fish stocks; preventing further ocean acidification; and ending harmful subsidies, IUU fishing and destructive fishing practices. Some of these had concrete timelines but did not contain indicators¹⁷.

Conclusions

The ocean was given a marginal role in the MDGs, despite its significant contribution to the three dimensions of sustainable development. In 2013, the report of the High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda emphasised that without environmental sustainability, poverty cannot be ended, and so the ocean and seas should not be forgotten in the development of a post-2015 development agenda. In the current discussions around the future SDGs, various proposals have been made to integrate ocean issues into a SDG framework. The first category of proposals takes the view that the ocean should be given a dedicated stand-alone goal. The second category proposes that the topic is addressed under other priority areas in the form of targets.

References

¹ Section V.B of *The Future we Want*, Rio+20, (June 2012);

<http://www.uncsd2012.org/content/documents/727The%20Future%20We%20Want%2019%20June%201230pm.pdf>.

² (A/67/941, 23 July 2013)

³ Open Working Group on Sustainable Developments Goals: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1549>

⁴ For example, in resolution 67/78 (2012), UN member States recognised the important contribution of the sustainable development and management of the ocean and seas to the achievement of international development goals, including those contained in the United Nations Millennium Declaration.

⁵ High-Level Panel of Eminent Persons on the Post-2015 Development Agenda, *A new global partnership: eradicate poverty and transform economies through sustainable development* (United Nations, New York, NY, 2013; <http://report.post2015hlp.org/>).

⁶ Prof. Martin Visbeck *et al.*, Kiel University, Germany (2013);

http://fileserver.futureocean.org/forschung/r1/ocean_sustainability_visbeck_et_al.pdf.

⁷ UNCSD Major Group for Youth and Children, UNCSD Youth Caucus (2012; <http://uncsdchildrenyouth.org/pdfs/SDGMGCY2012.pdf>).

⁸ Civil Society Organizations at 64th Annual UN Department of Public Information NGO Conference (2011);

<http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/ngoconference/resources/final>

⁹ UN Global Compact – Report to the United Nations Secretary-General (2013), Corporate Sustainability and the United Nations Post-2015 Development Agenda: http://www.unglobalcompact.org/docs/news_events/9.1_news_archives/2013_06_18/UNGC_Post2015_Report.pdf;

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<http://unsdsn.org/files/2013/06/130613-SDSN-An-Action-Agenda-for-Sustainable-Development-FINAL.pdf>; Prof. David Griggs and colleagues,

Nature Journal 495, 2013: *Sustainable development goals for people and planet*

<http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/844naturesjournal.pdf>; Centre for International Governance Innovation (CIGI) and

the Korea Development Institute (KDI) (2012): Post-2015 Development Agenda: goals, targets and indicators (Bellagio Goals)

http://www.cigionline.org/sites/default/files/MDG_Post_2015v3.pdf.

¹⁰ http://www.un.org/sg/management/pdf/HLP_P2015_Report.pdf

¹¹ Rio Agenda 21 (1992; <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/content/documents/Agenda21.pdf>).

¹² WSSD JPOI: http://www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD/English/WSSD_PlanImpl.pdf

¹³ <http://www.cbd.int/sp/targets/>

¹⁴ UN SG Oceans Compact: http://www.un.org/depts/los/ocean_compact/oceans_compact.htm

¹⁵ <http://www.globalpartnershipforoceans.org/>

¹⁶ http://www.unesco.org/new/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/SC/pdf/interagency_blue_paper_ocean_rioPlus20.pdf

¹⁷ Rio+20 voluntary commitments: <http://uncsd2012.org/voluntarycommitments.html>

Annex 1:

Draft possible elements of recommendation to the Open Working Group, to be developed pursuant to discussions at the third Global Ocean Commission meeting

Goal: A healthy and sustainably productive ocean

The goal could set as its headline 'Target 1: To put in place, by 2020, the arrangements necessary to ensure the ecological sustainability of all marine fisheries'.

2020 targets:

Subsidiary targets for 2020 would then include:

- Protecting important habitat and vulnerable species
- Rebuilding fish stocks by eliminating harmful subsidies; ensuring the rule of law on the high seas, eliminating IUU fishing; ending destructive fishing including high seas bottom trawling; and mandating Environmental Impact Assessments (EIAs) prior to licensing high seas fishing and reducing bycatch and discarding, with a view to their elimination.

Indicators for 2020: Management

These could include the following:

- The number of stocks brought to Maximum Sustainable Yields or above
- The proportion of identified Vulnerable Marine Ecosystems (VMEs) and Ecologically or Biologically Significant Marine Areas (EBSAs) protected
- The number of multi-sector MPAs established to provide comprehensive protection
- The extent of coverage of well-connected and ecologically representative MPA systems where fishing is either strictly controlled or prohibited
- The amounts of eliminated harmful subsidies
- The creations of a high seas policing regime
- A sharp reduction in IUU fishing
- Adoption of EIA requirements by Regional Fisheries Management Organisations (RFMOs)
- The adoption of a high seas bottom trawling ban
- Mandatory use of gear that minimises bycatch
- Establishment of a legal instrument for establishing and enforcing high seas MPAs
- Mandatory agreement that RFMOs must base catch quotas and other regulations on independent scientific recommendations, as agreed at the Rio+20 conference.

2030 target:

Provided that most 2020 indicators are in place, the 2030 target would be:

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- Increasing the sustainable supply of seafood from ocean capture fisheries by [xx]% between 2020 and 2030 while ensuring the integrity of all ocean species and ecosystems and maximising the social return.
 - The [xx]% figure to be determined by consultation with experts in an open and transparent process with participation of governmental and non-governmental experts.

Indicators for 2030: Food and employment creation

- A primary indicator would cover the catch level
- A second would cover adherence to EIAs and science-based management
- A third would cover extent of VME/EBSA protection and MPA coverage
- A fourth would cover increased level of employment.