

Sustainable development goals and oceans-related issues

7 November 2012

Summary report of discussion

Introduction

The Foundation for International Environmental Law and Development (FIELD) organized a small informal discussion among civil society organizations to discuss how oceans-related issues might be incorporated in the proposed new global sustainable development goals (SDGs).

Representatives of organizations working on issues such as environment, animal welfare, law, health, and local fisheries participated. This included groups working at the local, national, EU and international levels.

The meeting was held under the Chatham House Rule of non-attribution. This report provides a summary of the discussions.

Proposed new sustainable development goals

Participants noted that the international discussions about the proposed sustainable development goals, following from the Rio + 20 Conference, are at an early stage. The structure of the SDGs is not clear yet, nor is their content. For example, it is not clear if and how oceans issues will be covered.

The UN General Assembly has established an open-ended working group (OWG) to develop a proposal for SDGs. In parallel, discussions about the UN's post-2015 development agenda are being taken forward by a [UN Task Team](#) and the [UN Secretary-General's high level panel](#) on the post-2015 development agenda, co-chaired by UK Prime Minister David Cameron. A participant noted that the high-level panel is expected to focus on eradicating poverty "in our lifetime", a formulation which does not contain a clear end date.

A participant noted that the [Millennium Development Goals](#) (MDGs) were a UN system-driven initiative, primarily led by Kofi Annan, UN Secretary-General at the time, rather than one driven by member states and that in the current discussions member states are aiming to take the lead.

Participants noted that strengths of the MDGs include being simple, quantifiable and limited in number.

International decision making

One participant emphasized the urgency of oceans-related issues such as over-exploitation of fisheries, and argued that there is a need to challenge the UN and to enforce existing international law – including exploring the feasibility of legal challenges.

It was suggested that states have a tendency to agree to as little as possible at the international level and that the international community's track record on oceans management does not inspire

confidence. Participants discussed the influence of financial flows and for example subsidies and noted that financial incentives for positive change are needed.

Referring to the failed international target to achieve a significant reduction in the rate of biodiversity loss by 2010 a participant argued that states repeatedly fail to meet international targets, raising questions about the value of such targets. A participant suggested that when the political will is there, international cooperation can work, mentioning the international space station as one example. Other participants noted that change often happens at the national level, while international processes and fora lag behind.

A participant pointed out that to a large extent the UN is based on peer pressure, rather than legally binding commitments. Participants recognized the value of “naming-and-shaming”. A system of ranking countries could help to achieve progress, which to some extent may have been achieved through the MDGs and the related reporting by countries.

The role of business in defining the SDGs was discussed. It was noted that the UN Secretary-General’s high level panel has held meetings with business representatives. One participant reflected on a recent meeting with a major food company, which is considering the implications of a potentially reduced supply of fish through global markets, noting the importance and influence of business.

Oceans, food security, poverty reduction, health

Participants noted that the connections between fisheries, food security and poverty reduction need to be articulated more clearly, demonstrating their interdependence.

Participants discussed the importance of human health, noting for example the importance of water quality to health, recreation and tourism, and consequently livelihoods. The importance of research on oceans-related issues, for example changes caused by climate change, was emphasized.

A potential “oceans SDG”

Several participants were of the view that an oceans SDG should be “ecological” in character. It was argued that the scale of the oceans challenges and the importance of oceans to food security make the case for an oceans SDG. It was suggested that an ecological oceans SDG would be measurable and would underpin other SDGs, for example an SDG related to food security.

A participant suggested that the [Rio + 20 Outcome document](#) already contains elements of a potential oceans SDG in the paragraphs that deal with oceans and seas.

A participant suggested considering the Aichi targets, agreed under the UN Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) in 2010, and whether they could be incorporated in the SDG framework, rather than developing new targets or indicators that might address the same issues. The [20 Aichi targets](#) form part of the CBD’s Strategic Plan and address biodiversity and issues such as reduction of subsidies and safeguarding the traditional knowledge, innovations and practices of local and indigenous communities.

Participants discussed the potential impact of an oceans SDG, noting that states ignore many international commitments. A participant suggested that there may be a greater willingness to consider international commitments now, as pressures on ecosystems have increased. It was

suggested that a quantifiable goal with a clear end date might help to create a structure that states would feel compelled to conform with.

Climate change was identified as one priority issue for a potential oceans SDG. For example, it was pointed out that certain diseases are shifting into temperate waters as a consequence of climate change.

The importance of marine protected areas (MPAs) to protecting biodiversity and maintaining fish stocks was raised by several participants.

Participants noted that indicators for an oceans SDG should be developed in a discussion that includes discussion of monitoring and measurability, which would help it to result in credible and measurable indicators.

Using effort-based rather than success-based indicators was suggested as one way forward, which might not be biased against countries with a low starting point. The value of simple goals and the importance of formulating an oceans SDG in a way that can be understood by “the person on the street” was highlighted.

It was emphasized that an oceans SDG should be defined and implemented from a human perspective, even if the oceans SDG were ecological in nature.

Challenges

A participant questioned if a transition from the MDGs which address mainly developing countries, to the proposed SDGs which would apply to all countries, could result in less support for developing countries if developed countries target increased resources towards their own efforts to achieve the SDGs. Another participant pointed out that for example the Aichi targets include commitments related to financial resources and that the SDGs could include commitments related to supporting developing countries.

A participant was of the view that the [UN Convention on the Law of the Sea \(UNCLOS\)](#) focuses on dividing resources between states for the purposes of exploitation and that an oceans SDG should instead focus on dividing resources between states for the purposes of maintaining the resources.

A participant questioned whether the SDGs are worth the effort and whether it might instead be better to focus on improving existing frameworks, such as regional fisheries management organizations (RFMOs). The need to maintain pressure on RFMOs was highlighted as crucial to ensuring the sustainability of the world’s fish stocks.

It was suggested that a “power analysis”, which maps the blockages against effective action to safeguard the oceans should be undertaken as a basis for articulating an oceans SDG.

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