

What Role Can National Sustainable Development Councils and Similar Bodies Play in the Design and Delivery of the Sustainable Development Goals?

Jack Cornforth and Juliette Becuwe, Stakeholder Forum

1.0 Introduction

Rio+20 saw world leaders agree to develop a set of new global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) that are “global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, capacities and levels of development and respecting national policies and priorities” (United Nations, 2012, p. 47). Subsequently, an intergovernmental Open Working Group (OWG) on SDGs¹ has been set up by the UN General Assembly to guide this process. The OWG is due to submit a report to the General Assembly with its recommendations on SDGs prior to September 2014. The SDGs will be an integral component of the Post-2015 Development Agenda, a United Nations-led initiative to create a new global framework to eradicate poverty through sustainable development that will replace the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs), which expire at the end of 2015.

It is generally acknowledged that governments cannot achieve sustainable development through their own actions alone. Civil society and other stakeholders need to be strongly involved in the process of setting, implementing and monitoring SDGs and targets at both the international and national levels.

At the country level, national councils for sustainable development (NCSDs) and other similar bodies could be important partners for governments in this process of setting national sustainable development targets, supporting implementation and monitoring progress. The Global Network of NCSDs and similar bodies (GN-NCSDs) therefore hopes to make a useful contribution to the ongoing discussions on SDGs by drawing on the views and experiences of its members and other relevant national-level actors.

¹ See a description of their work at: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1549>

In order to explore this potential role, Stakeholder Forum, acting as facilitator of the GN-NCSDs, has undertaken a preliminary survey inviting NCSDs to share views and experiences on existing national goals, targets and indicators, as well as the SDGs going forward. Responses to the survey have provided insights into existing mechanisms for setting and measuring progress towards national-level objectives, challenges faced, the extent of stakeholder participation, current sustainable development priorities and possible roles for NCSDs regarding the SDGs going forward.

The following comparative analysis aims to help NCSDs develop their thinking on how their priorities and possible roles in developing and monitoring national targets could be integrated into the SDG framework. It also hopes to inform the intergovernmental discussions on SDGs, primarily through the OWG, the United Nations High Level Political Forum,² and other relevant sustainable development processes and mechanisms.

The analysis will also be used as a background paper for the 2014 Regional Sustainable Development Transition Series, organized by SDplanNet with Stakeholder Forum and other partners (February–April 2014), and to inform the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development’s global Sustainable Development Transition Forum in Incheon, Republic of Korea (April 2014).

This analysis is based on responses to a survey for NCSDs in Armenia, Belgium, Benin, Chile, Croatia, Estonia, Germany, Hungary, Mauritius, Mozambique, Panama and the Philippines. The full names of each responding NCSD are listed in Annex A.

2.0 Current Mechanisms for Incentivizing and Measuring Sustainable Development Progress at the National Level

2.1 Current National-Level Sustainable Development Objectives, Strategies and Targets

All survey respondents except for Chile currently have a national sustainable development strategy (NSDS). Some NSDSs have been introduced by legislative bodies (parliament or congress) and others as the result of executive (government) decisions. Strategy objectives are diverse. Some focus on broadly promoting sustainable development, whereas others formulate quantified targets on specific sustainable development issues, such as energy consumption and greenhouse gas emissions. A comparison of these characteristics is displayed in Table 1.

Government involvement in NSDSs varied across respondent countries. In most, such as Chile, Estonia, Germany and Panama, governments are directly involved in monitoring sustainable development progress. In Germany, the monitoring of the NSDS is even taken into consideration in the evaluation of the government’s political performance. Indeed, the monitoring of sustainable development progress is led by the Chancellor’s Office and considered part of the national mid-term political review. However, in Belgium and Hungary, the government delegates this role to external agencies.

² For more information on the forum, see: <http://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/index.php?menu=1556>

TABLE 1: NATIONAL SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND TARGETS

COUNTRY	NSDS?	NSDS SET BY?	SPECIFIC TARGETS AREAS
Armenia	Yes	Executive	Poverty reduction, promotion of small and medium-size enterprises and improvement of public services.
Belgium	Yes	Legislature	Social cohesion and equity, sustainable economy and protection of the environment.
Benin	Yes	Legislature	Protection of the environment (integrated into economic development targets).
Chile	No*		
Croatia	Yes	Legislature	Gender equality, social justice and solidarity, rule of law, respect for fundamental rights, preservation of natural resources, cultural heritage and human environment.
Estonia	Yes	Legislature	Viability of the Estonian cultural space, growth of welfare, societal coherence and ecological balance.
Germany	Yes	Executive	Intergenerational equity, quality of life, social cohesion and international responsibility.
Hungary	Yes	Legislature	Sustainable environment for future generations.
Mauritius	Yes	Executive	Energy conservation and renewables; cleaner, greener and pollution-free Mauritius; green economy; and ocean economy.
Mozambique	Yes	Executive	Natural resources protection and management, urban environment, atmospheric pollution, human health and climate change.
Panama	Yes	Executive	Potable water coverage and sanitation.
The Philippines	Yes	Executive	Inclusive growth, employment opportunities, poverty reduction, ecological integrity, and advancing peace and national security.

* But works towards the MDGs.

2.2 The Challenges of Realizing NCSDs and Monitoring their Progress

2.2.1 The Challenges of Realizing NCSDs

A number of NCSDs pointed to financial difficulties as the main challenge to realizing sustainable development strategies. Other NCSDs also listed a range of structural issues (such as inflexible institutions, short-term thinking, lack of government cooperation, etc.) that are preventing progress in this regard.

Problems Related to Finances

Both the overall levels of financing required to successfully implement NSDSs and the ways in which such funds are allocated have been raised as challenges by respondent countries.

The Armenian NCSD stated that, although substantial sustainable development progress has been registered, economic crisis, low income and migration remain major challenges to realizing the NSDS. Benin agreed and explained that one of the most important challenges it faces is “the lack of financial resources necessary to carry out the activities listed in the annual Work Plan.”

The Croatian NCSD underlined that it is the lack of financial resources in addition to organizational limitations and human capacity issues that hinder the coordination of joint actions between different stakeholders who should be involved in achieving NSDS goals. In Panama, one challenge raised by the NCSD is how to prioritize the allocation of funds between different sustainable development program areas—something also likely to be related to structural difficulties associated with joined-up planning. Issues around comprehensively addressing sustainable development in a coordinated manner are discussed further when examining different NCSD priorities in the “Structural Challenges” section.

Structural Challenges

Within respondent countries, there are institutional and behavioural barriers between government departments/bodies, ranging from misaligned policies and programs that make it difficult to apply an overarching sustainable development strategy, to outright resistance to integrating a sustainable development approach.

The German NCSD stated that the most significant challenges faced are structural, such as getting ministries and members of parliament to develop a feeling of ownership over the sustainable development strategy and its implementation. Similarly, the Chilean response pointed out the inadequacy of institutions to perceive social and economic realities and their impacts on sustainable development. Other respondents went even further, with Panama suggesting that there is actual institutional resistance to the changes associated with NSDSs. The Benin NCSD stated that the implementation of efforts working towards the national sustainable development targets, even if indicators do exist, remains problematic because of difficulties in coordinating policies and initiatives. Moreover, the Benin NCSD does not have full institutional recognition, which therefore makes it difficult to ensure that relevant ministries are complying with its recommendations and the NSDS.

In Mauritius, a primary challenge lies in balancing the need to change policies and behaviour to implement the strategy with the pressure to deliver renewed economic growth. Another problem identified by Mauritius is ensuring that all ministries give priority to the realization of the NSDS, while being required to use significant proportions of their budgets to do so.

2.2.2 Challenges Related to Monitoring Sustainable Development Progress

The effectiveness of measurement systems and the heavily interrelated issue of data quality were identified as the main challenges associated with monitoring progress towards sustainable development.

NCSDs from Chile, Croatia, Mauritius, Mozambique and Panama all observed that the main challenges related to monitoring sustainable development processes lie with the quality of monitoring data. Mozambique and the Philippines emphasized the difficulties in relying on ad hoc measurement of sustainable development in the absence of more permanent mechanisms. Similarly, Mauritius and Panama stated that they struggle to collect reliable and adequate data on the effectiveness of policies and initiatives, with the lack of systematic data collection and the fragmented nature of the sustainable development sector (in Panama) given as a key reason for this being the case. The Croatian NCSD explained that data collection and verification can slow down the whole reporting and progress assessment process.

2.3 The Impact of Monitoring Sustainable Development Progress

Aside from the Beninese and Mozambican NCSDs, all respondents explained that sustainable development monitoring is conducted at the government level and influences sustainable development policies. Benin does not conduct sustainable development monitoring due to financial constraints, and the monitoring of the Mauritian NSDS will only commence in early 2014. Mozambique does undertake sustainable development monitoring; however, these efforts do not inform policy development because the results of these assessments are not extensively published or effectively communicated across government.

Other respondents agreed that monitoring does inform policy development and action in order to meet targets or strengthen implementation. In Estonia, Chile and Panama, monitoring is conducted in parallel with sustainable development policy formulation processes and is therefore of primary importance to decision making. For instance, in Panama, monitoring determined that the rural areas around Panama City required greater investment in water and sanitation, and the government consequently allocated more financial resources to these locations to help achieve these targets.

The Belgian NCSD's response was particularly interesting. They stated that, despite that the results of monitoring are intended to inform decision making, the translation of this information into more effective policies often fails due to systematic factors such as a lack of political will. An NCSD-led review of Belgian members of government noted that no real attention was given to results of sustainable development monitoring efforts, and that even with the presence of an institutional framework for sustainable development framework in the country, the issue is still not really a priority.

3.0 The Role of NCSDs in Incentivizing and Measuring Sustainable Development Progress at the National Level

NCSDs have been allocated various responsibilities with regards to advising, implementing and monitoring sustainable development strategies and policies. A summary of these responsibilities is displayed in Table 2.

In Belgium, Estonia and Germany, NCSDs advise on sustainable development strategy and provide opinions on various national sustainable development-related programs, plans and indicators. NCSDs in Armenia, Croatia and Hungary appear to be slightly more involved in NSDS setting in the sense that they participate at the drafting stage.

In Benin, the NCSD is involved in the integration of the environmental dimension in all governmental projects and programs, whereas in Panama, by order of the government, the NCSD is directly responsible for the design and implementation of the national sustainable development objectives.

In Mauritius and Chile, NCSDs monitor sustainable development progress. Comparatively, the Mauritian NCSD seems to be the body with the most responsibility in this regard. It is institutionally set up to coordinate and monitor the "Maurice II Durable" (MID) SD plan and provide policy advice to government, ensure its timely implementation, enforce MID compliance and manage the MID fund.

TABLE 2: NCSD RESPONSIBILITIES FOR ADVISING, IMPLEMENTING AND MONITORING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES AND POLICIES

COUNTRY	ANALYZE/ADVISE ON NSDS?	DESIGN NSDS AND/OR POLICY?	IMPLEMENTATION OF NSDS AND POLICY?	MONITOR/TRACK PROGRESS ON NSDS AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT POLICY?
Belgium	✓			
Benin	✓			
Chile*	✓			✓
Croatia	✓	✓		
Estonia	✓			
Germany	✓			
Hungary	✓	✓		
Mauritius	✓	✓	✓	✓
Mozambique	✓			
Panama	✓	✓	✓	
The Philippines**	✓	✓		✓

* This information has been obtained as a result of additional research rather than from the survey. See Ministerio del Medio Ambiente de Chile (2014).

** This information has been obtained as a result of additional research rather than from the survey. See Philippine Council for Sustainable Development (2014).

3.1 NCSD Priority Thematic Areas

Overall, there seems to be a difference between some NCSDs striving to address the three dimensions of sustainable development—the environmental, the economic and the social (such as Hungary, Germany, Philippines)—and others that seem to instead be prioritizing particular dimensions or issues over others (such as Estonia with its apparent focus on human capital and cultural heritage and Mozambique with its focus on valuing and monitoring natural resources). This could perhaps point to a failure to understand the interconnected nature of different sustainable development issues and the need to address them in a coordinated manner; however, it is more likely that this is simply because addressing such issues in a holistic way remains a difficult prospect both intellectually and in practice (as some councils alluded to in Section 2.2.2 above). Furthermore, the apparent connection between geographical location and NCSD priorities, in which a country's environment (i.e., oceans, forests, mountains, etc.—or lack thereof) can be the main source of economic prosperity and human well-being, highlights the dangers of presuming that a country favours one dimension of sustainable development over another.

In terms of specific thematic priorities, energy, green economy, spatial/urban planning and natural resource management are all common areas of interest for a number of the NCSDs participating in the survey. Both energy and transitioning to a green economy are priorities for the Armenian, Estonian and Mauritian NCSDs. The Armenian NCSD aims to encourage the development of alternative energy sources while its Estonian counterpart concentrates on energy efficiency in households. The Mauritian NCSD listed various components of a green economy that it is tasked with furthering, such as green industry and jobs, sustainable agriculture and waste management, whereas the Armenian NCSD disclosed that it is focusing on developing the legal mechanisms that underpin a green economy.

Spatial/urban planning and resource management are priorities for the Armenian, Estonian and Filipino NCSDs. In particular, Armenia focuses on the development of organic agriculture, “green” architecture and on sustainable regulation of water resources. Estonia listed sustainable transport as a priority whereas the Philippines highlighted environmental sustainability, climate change and disaster preparedness.

In addition to its aforementioned environmental priorities, the Filipino NCSD placed a strong emphasis on more structural aspects of sustainable development, such as constructing a stable state, encouraging peace and security, respect for international law, participatory governance and the accountability of state institutions—many of which are priority areas shared by Estonia. With social inclusion and poverty reduction also being important to the Philippines, it would appear that this NCSD has perhaps the most comprehensive agenda considering the broad scope of its priority thematic areas.

Apart from these relatively loose trends, respondents’ other priority thematic areas varied greatly. This is perhaps because some NCSDs’ priority areas appear to be dictated by the geographic and topographic characteristics of their country, like Mauritius’ focus on “ocean and blue economy” and Croatia’s similar priorities in integrated coastal zone management and marine ecosystems. Others appear to have priorities that correspond with national economic development strategies or adopt a similar agenda to their governments (e.g., Belgium and Hungary)—which interestingly does not necessarily correspond directly with the closeness of the NCSD to government ministries and representatives.

Unsurprisingly, many NCSD priorities also appear to reflect the level of their country’s development. For instance, the Panama NCSD focuses on water and sanitation, food production and education, whereas the Belgian Council prioritizes governance, innovation and financing of the transition to a low-carbon society.

3.2 Stakeholder Engagement

Survey responses reveal that stakeholders are engaged at different stages of the NCSDs’ work; however, this most commonly occurs at the strategy development stage rather than during the implementation or review processes. There are also differences in the methods used for stakeholder engagement and consultation, ranging from participation in workshops to individuals taking up advisory positions and being involved in drafting and/or monitoring of NSDS.

In most NCSDs, stakeholders have formal advisory positions as members of the body. In Benin, Hungary and Croatia, however, stakeholders generally only participate in workshops organized by the NCSD; in the latter two countries, this engagement includes stakeholder involvement (including the private sector) in the development of NSDSs and target-setting processes. In Belgium, stakeholders are represented within the NCSD; however, they can also independently present general opinions and suggestions on sustainable development to the government through this body.

Interestingly, members of the Armenian NCSD, such as representatives from non-governmental organizations, academic institutions and independent experts, provide background research on the government’s key priority areas and participate in the drafting of policy papers. Similarly, in Croatia and Estonia, stakeholders (including the private sector) are directly involved in the development and drafting of NSDSs.

BOX 1: STAKEHOLDER ENGAGEMENT GOOD PRACTICE IN MAURITIUS

The Mauritian NCSD follows a participatory approach that aims to address the aspirations of the whole society in order to create a strong sense of national ownership. Stakeholders in Mauritius are organized in an MID Strategic Committee (private sector, civil society organizations and academia) and advise the MID Commission on emerging sustainability and compliance issues. The MID Strategic Committee was established in order to incorporate the concerns of stakeholders into sustainable development strategy—an institutionalized mechanism that would suggest that the views of stakeholders are taken seriously.

Whereas all NCSDs seemed to agree on the value of stakeholder engagement in incentivizing and measuring progress towards sustainable development, there was little discussion in survey responses about the effectiveness of these efforts. The Mauritian NCSD touched upon this issue, observing that the elaboration of a clear pathway to achieve national targets remains challenging despite its extensive stakeholder engagement efforts, suggesting that it must be coupled with other factors, such as political will and financial backing, for sustainable development to be realized. Similarly, despite the German NCSD's efforts to engage stakeholders, the body observed that greater support from the public is required for some of the national sustainable development targets to be achieved, which could imply the need to further develop public outreach efforts.

4.0 Possible Roles for the NCSDs in Working Toward the SDGs at the National Level

4.1 Thematic Areas That NCSDs Would Like the New Global SDGs to Address

The thematic areas that survey respondents would like to see included in the new global SDG framework are also relatively diverse. Nevertheless, we can identify some shared themes. The Filipino and Panamanian NCSDs would like to see their own national priorities included as SDGs. The apparent focus of the Croatian NCSD on environmental issues is also reflected in its list of priorities for the SDGs. Similarly, the Armenian NCSD proposed that creating the structural “architecture” for a green economy should be included in the SDGs—a topic that was explicitly listed as a current national priority.

Interestingly, the Mozambican NCSD listed the importance of enabling factors for the achievement of the SDGs rather than putting forward a clear list of thematic priorities. These included identifying complementary investment opportunities with the private sector and facilitating environmental entrepreneurship (especially within the context of climate change), also emphasizing the need to get the indicators right. In addition to specific thematic areas, Hungary and Belgium also made broader recommendations on the goal framework itself, with the former calling for the SDGs to include sub-goals that reflect regional differences, and both emphasizing the need for targets to be measured using a small number of well-defined, internationally agreed and relevant indicators (therefore echoing Mozambique).

Also, the German NCSD expressed that their priority thematic areas for the new global goals are already included in the MDGs and that the focus should remain on achieving these goals. Given that the primary focus of the MDGs is on social issues in developing countries, however, it is unclear what role the German NCSD foresees the SDGs playing with regards to furthering sustainable development within its own country.

More specifically, the most commonly listed thematic area was water. The Chilean NCSO stated that it hopes to see universal access to water become a new global SDG, with Croatia and Panama stating that both water and sanitation should be included in the goal framework.

Chile and Croatia also advocated for the protection of biodiversity and fragile ecosystems, with the former specifying the importance of oceans and mountains in this regard. The Croatian NCSO wanted to see the inclusion of integrated coastal zone management and marine ecosystem protection in the SDGs. Chile also stated that climate change should be incorporated, which is an interesting assertion when considering the reluctance of many countries to discuss this issue outside of the separate United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC).

The Croatian and Belgian NCSOs emphasized the importance of sustainable consumption and production and sustainable agriculture, with the former being a particularly illuminating choice given the implications this would have for developed countries such as themselves to change their own systems and behaviour. In addition, sustainable energy and the environmentally sound management of chemicals and waste was put forward by both the Chilean and Croatian NCSOs. Through calls for a focus on green urban development, the Armenian response could be seen as supporting calls for SDGs focused on cities.

Regarding the more social aspects of sustainable development, poverty eradication (Chile, Belgium), education (Panama, Croatia) and food security (Panama, Belgium) were the commonly raised areas for inclusion. Chile pointed out that poverty should be taken into account when considering ecosystem services and should also influence economic development policies. In addition to promoting learning, more broadly speaking, Croatia encouraged specific education on sustainable development.

4.2 Lessons Learned and Recommendations to Achieve the SDGs at the National Level

Some of the main recommendations NCSOs proposed for achieving the SDGs at the national level include:

- Revising NSDS to integrate new national SDGs targets which should be:
 - o Challenging but realistic and correspond with national circumstances
 - o Financially viable for local communities
 - o Linked to regional objectives
 - o Measurable and verifiable
- Adopting a participatory approach:
 - o Stakeholders should be involved as early as possible in the preparation of strategies and/or policies to try and achieve national SDG targets.
 - o Instruments and mechanisms aimed at raising wider public awareness and involvement should be developed.
 - o Stakeholders should be involved in the assessment of progress towards targets.
- Importance of utilizing existing knowledge:
 - o International cooperation and exchange of knowledge should not be neglected.

- Clearly articulating the economic benefits of working towards national SDG targets.
- Implementing in-depth government strategies at all levels (national and subnational) and ensuring coordination between them:
 - o Strategically integrate sustainable development to all sectors.
 - o Key actor and administration capacity building should be involved through the whole process.

Belgium emphasized that the achievement of the SDG targets at the national level will depend upon the adoption of a new NSDS differentiated at the federal/national level, as well as being linked to regional objectives (European Commission, 2010). This emphasis on coordination between different levels of governance—sometimes referred to as “vertical alignment”—will undoubtedly be crucial to the success of the SDGs.

Nevertheless, the Beninese NCSD warned against the uncoordinated duplication of structures dealing with sustainable development, instead recommending the strengthening of existing bodies and actors working on these issues. Both the Croatian and Estonian NCSDs seemed to agree with this assertion, underlining the need to strengthen knowledge and skills within key government institutions so more informed decisions on SDG target setting, implementation and monitoring can be made at the highest administrative level. Similarly, Chile stated that for national SDG targets to be adequately measured and verified, poorer countries will require support for capacity building, especially at the local level.

For new NSDSs to be successful, the German and Armenian NCSDs stressed the need to ensure that existing knowledge is utilized and that sustainable development policies are mainstreamed into everyday decision making. Furthermore, the Armenian NCSD alluded to the need for a change in political culture if more successful implementation of national SDGs-related strategies is to be achieved. To achieve this, Chile’s assertion that national SDG targets should be challenging but realistic and respond to national circumstances would seem to be a complementary approach.

The Hungarian NCSDs emphasized the value of dialogue and cooperation between national-level sustainable development bodies through the likes of international networks such as that of the European Environment and Sustainable Development Advisory Councils, which many of the survey respondents are members of. Similarly, the Chilean NCSD emphasized the important role of its government’s International Cooperation Agency in ensuring other countries’ efforts to achieve their SDG targets are complementary to those it is undertaking.

The Filipino NCSD also underlined the importance of identifying mutual benefits and fostering cooperation between different national stakeholder partners. This will involve improving the dialogue between state, civil society and private sector actors in order to seek pragmatic ways forward in achieving national SDG targets. The Hungarian NFFT agrees that in order to achieve the national targets, the SDGs should be well understood by all at the national level, with Armenia placing specific emphasis on the need for programs to enable wider public awareness and involvement.

Both the Mauritian and Belgian NCSDs agree on the importance of adopting a participatory approach that engages civil society in particular, with the latter underlining the importance of involving NCSDs as early as possible when creating strategies and policies. Governments, however, must be willing to take into account suggestions from such bodies and provide detailed reporting on how they have addressed these opinions. Furthermore, the Filipino NCSD recognized that results at the national level are significantly influenced by the active participation of local entities in development planning and the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of development initiatives. Similarly, the Estonian NCSD emphasized the need to engage stakeholders in processes of sustainable development progress assessment

4.3 The Role of Your Body or Network Going Forward

Somewhat curiously, respondents provided less detailed and smaller amounts of information on this subject than they did for other parts of the survey. This could be attributed to the fact that NCSDs may have only just begun to think about their possible roles in relation to the SDGs. Alternatively, there may be a reluctance to comment in too much depth prior to their respective governments deciding on their own priorities and preferred plans of action. Or, more simply, NCSD involvement in the setting, implementation and/or monitoring of the SDGs may have been considered beyond the mandate of some respondents.

Nevertheless, it was apparent that some NCSDs want to be involved (in some capacity) in the preparation of their country's national SDGs-target setting (Belgium, Panama). Others indicated a desire to be more involved in the implementation and monitoring of sustainable development policies in the SDG context (Chile, Croatia and Panama). In practice, however, the Estonian NCSD stated that its role within the context of the SDGs will depend upon the mandate and resources allocated to them by the government.

Ideally, however, the Estonian NCSD sees widening its scope of work to incorporate SDG-related roles to be an important evolution for the body and thinks that the SDG targets should specifically be integrated into the sectoral sustainable development strategies it advises the government on. Similarly, the Beninese NCSD hopes that it is allocated more responsibility and power in order to better coordinate SDG-related efforts across different government bodies.

Armenia stated that its primary objective going forward would likely be around supporting the drafting of an updated NSDS that seeks to specifically incorporate the new SDGs, as well as supporting efforts to increase coordination (and therefore effectiveness) among different national actors involved in efforts to implement this strategy. In addition, the Armenian NCSD foresees a role for itself in framing and promoting a new SDGs-era sustainable development strategy to stakeholders and the wider public.

The Hungarian NCSDs expressed an interest in helping to adapt global SDGs to national-level targets. Interestingly, however, this seems to be envisaged as taking place via their inclusion in existing national thematic strategies and programs rather than through creating a new NSDS or additional institutional frameworks for its design, delivery or implementation. This would appear to echo the recommendation made by Benin in the last section to strengthen existing structures rather than creating new ones.

5.0 Conclusions

All respondent countries bar one have some form of NSDS, with a more or less equal split between these being set by central government or wider legislatures. Similarly, almost all countries use indicators to track progress towards sustainable development, on specific issues ranging from gender equality to ecological integrity.

A number of NCSDs pointed to financial difficulties as the main challenge to realizing these sustainable development strategies. Some also listed a range of structural issues that are preventing progress in this regard. Irrespective of finances, however, there seemed to be a general challenge around addressing and/or prioritizing all aspects of sustainable development in a coordinated manner.

The effectiveness of measurement systems and the heavily interrelated issue of data quality were identified as the main challenges associated with monitoring progress towards NSDSs. The majority of countries undertake sustainable development monitoring in some capacity, with respondents in general claiming that the results do indeed influence national sustainable development policies. Nevertheless, the extent of this influence would seem to require further examination, given the frank response from one NCSD about its limited impact in practice.

All NCSD respondents play an advisory role in the development of the NSDSs, with a significant number of these actually participating in the design of the strategy and subsequent policies for its implementation. Much fewer NCSDs are involved at the implementation and monitoring stages, however.

A relatively diverse range of thematic areas for the new SDGs were suggested by respondents, many of which, somewhat unsurprisingly, reflecting their own national priorities. As developed countries, Belgium and Croatia's support of sustainable consumption and production seems to be noteworthy, as do those recommendations stressing the importance of addressing water, education, food security and ecosystem protection. The German NCSDs' support for finishing the job on the MDGs is also an interesting insight.

Some of the main lessons learned for achieving the SDGs at the national level included revising NSDS to integrate new targets, and utilizing existing knowledge and expertise in the process, while also taking a participatory approach to continuously engage stakeholders. Another included winning the economic argument for action on and commitment to sustainable development, and the interrelated need to get actors at all levels of government on board to undertake the setting, implementation and monitoring of goals in a coordinated way.

Going forward, NCSDs are generally keen to be involved in the design and implementation of efforts towards achieving the SDGs at the national level; however, many appear to not yet be clear on their exact role in this process. Despite this, some respondents did assert that strengthening the capacities and broadening the roles of NCSDs and other related sustainable development mechanisms that already exist would be preferable to creating new ones.

6.0 References

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Annex A: List of NCSDs That Participated in the Survey

Republic of Armenia National Council on Sustainable Development

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Belgian Federal Council for Sustainable Development

Federale Raad voor Duurzame Ontwikkeling / Conseil Fédéral du Développement Durable (FRDO-CFDD)

National Commission for Sustainable Development (Benin)

Commission Nationale du Développement Durable

Council of Ministers for Sustainability (Chile)

Consejo de Ministros para la Sustentabilidad

Sustainable Development and Environmental Protection Council (Croatia)

Savjet za održivi razvoj i zaštitu okoliša (SORZO)

Estonian National Commission on Sustainable Development

Keskkonnaministeeriumi

German Advisory Council on the Environment

Sachverständigenrat für Umweltfragen

Hungarian National Council for SD

Nemzeti Fenntartható Fejlesztési Tanács (NFFT)

Maurice Ile Durable (MID) Commission (Mauritius)

National Sustainable Development Council (Mozambique)

Conselho Nacional para o Desenvolvimento Sustentável (CONDES)

National Council for Sustainable Development (Panama)

Consejo Nacional del Desarrollo Sostenible (CONADES)

Philippine Council for Sustainable Development

Annex B: Survey: What role should National Councils for Sustainable Development (NCSDs) and similar bodies play in the design and delivery of new global Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

1. The current situation in your country

- A) Does your country have an overarching development/sustainable development strategy? If so, please provide details.
- B) (i) Please list any national level development/sustainable development goals, targets and indicators that currently exist in your country, providing time-frames where appropriate.
(ii) What are or have been the primary challenges to achieving these goals and targets?
- C) (i) What approaches, programs and instruments are or have been put in place to try and measure progress towards achieving these goals and targets?
(Please specify the body or department responsible for these actions)
(ii) What are or have been the primary challenges to effectively monitoring progress towards achieving goals and targets?
- D) Does monitoring inform policy development and action in order to meet goals or strengthen implementation?
(Please specify successful examples if possible)

2. The current role of your body or network

- A) What experiences has your body or network had in designing, implementing and monitoring these national goals, targets or indicators?
- B) What lessons have been learned from these experiences that could be applied in the future or elsewhere, including at the international level?

3. Stakeholder engagement

- A) How have stakeholders (including the private sector) been involved in the process of setting targets, creating strategies and the delivery of policies and/or programs for sustainable development? (Please specify examples if possible)

4. Priority thematic areas for your body or network

- A) What are the priority sustainable development-related themes or topics for your body or network?
- B) What themes or topics would you like to see included in the new global SDGs?

5. Recommendations for implementation at the national level

- A) What do you foresee as being essential to the achievement SDGs targets at the national level? (E.g. strategies and policies for action, instruments or mechanisms for measuring progress, institutional frameworks, key actors, capacity building, participatory approaches etc.)

6. The role of your body or network going forward

- A) What are the potential roles of NCSDs and similar multi-stakeholder bodies in setting, implementing, and monitoring progress towards the SDGs at the country level?

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Contact:

INTERNATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT (IISD)

75 Albert Street, Suite 903, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada K1P 5E7

INSTITUTE FOR GLOBAL ENVIRONMENTAL STRATEGIES (IGES)

IGES Regional Centre, 604 SG Tower, 6th Floor, 161/1 Soi Mahadlek Luang 3, Rajdamri Road, Patumwan, Bangkok 10330, Thailand

Email

info@SDplanNet.org

About SDplanNet

SDplanNet is a sustainable development planning network created to help government professionals at the national and sub-national levels share good practices and build capacity in the preparation and implementation of strategies for sustainable development or development plans that incorporate sustainable development principles.

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