ENSURING SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GLOBALLY: 
EU FOLLOW-UP TO RIO+20

Summary

The UN Rio+20 World Summit was held in June 2012 and attracted a worldwide participation on a number of sustainable development issues. The European Commission participated actively in this conference and in the following months started to prepare a Communication on the EU follow-up to Rio+20. In this context a public consultation was launched in the form of an online questionnaire and gathered over 125 responses from individuals, public authorities, business and business associations, non-governmental organizations (NGOs), trade unions, and consumer protection groups. A large number of replies reflected a concern for an inclusive green economy, in particular the need for indicators beyond GDP; while others pointed out the need to eliminate environmentally harmful subsidies and to introduce environment-friendly taxation.

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) formulated by respondents included resource and energy efficiency, waste and chemicals, biodiversity, sustainable consumption and production, water and sanitation, protection of oceans and fisheries, sustainable transport, sustainable agriculture, gender equality, poverty eradication, climate change and adaptation, health, and food security. These goals match the priority areas of the inclusive green economy. The importance of clear and long-term targets and the good use of existing targets and agreements were also highlighted. Finally there was a consensus on a Post-2015 development framework that would cover together the SDGs and the reviewed MDGs.

INTRODUCTION

The Rio+20 World Summit was held 20 years after the previous UN conference held in Rio de Janeiro in 1992. The aim of Rio+20 was to secure renewed political commitment for sustainable development, by assessing progress to date, identifying remaining gaps in the implementation of past commitments and addressing new and emerging challenges.

The Summit's focus was on two intertwined themes: "a Green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication" and "the institutional framework for sustainable development". After extensive negotiations a Rio+20 Outcome document was agreed upon, with a number of defined actions and commitments. Even though the outcome was less ambitious than what the EU had aimed for, Rio+20 does offer a number of important opportunities for follow-up at EU and international level. In light of this the European Commission started to work on the follow-up to Rio+20, in particular on Sustainable Development Goals, their link to the MDG review and a post 2015 overarching framework that could encompass both aspects. The public consultation 'Ensuring Sustainable Development Globally: EU follow-up to Rio+20' was open online from 16 October 2012.

1 Gross domestic product (GDP)
2 http://www.unccd2012.org/
until 15 January 2013. The online questionnaire provided the Commission with the valuable views from stakeholders. This input to the Communication was consolidated with the contributions from a previous consultation "Towards a Post-2015 Development Framework" held from 15.06.2012 to 15.09.2012. The Communication 'A decent life for all: Ending poverty and giving the world a sustainable future\(^3\), which builds amongst others on the results of these public consultations, was adopted by the European Commission on 27 February 2013.

Out of 125 responses, 50 were sent by individuals and all the remaining are shared by various organizations, public authorities at all levels, business associations, NGOs, trade unions, consumer protection groups etc. A large number of contributors reside in the UK, France, Germany, Spain and the Netherlands, while the rest is scattered over the other EU countries. The consultation attracted many organisations of which 20 international and 8 European ones. It should be noted that 30 identical responses were sent in by individuals mainly from the UK.

An overview of the responses the Commission received is presented below. The document follows the structure used in the questionnaire and is followed by a conclusion. A table with the names of the participants who wished to be mentioned is attached.

For further details about the United Nations Conference on Sustainable Development (UNCSD) preparatory process, including official statements, background material, etc. please see: http://www.uncsd2012.org/.

1. THE INCLUSIVE GREEN ECONOMY

The Rio+20 Outcome document stated that the inclusive green economy is an important tool for achieving sustainable development to be implemented in a number of different ways in accordance with national priorities by countries who want to do so. The inclusive green economy can contribute to sustainable growth by helping to create employment and decent work, by contributing to the eradication of poverty and all the while aiming at maintaining a healthy environment. In the public consultation the questions on green economy were answered extensively and in depth as seen below.

Q 1 *What policy tools do you think are the most effective and need to be put into place to stimulate the transformation to the inclusive Green economy within the EU? How should this complement the Europe 2020 strategy and/or its implementation?*

Respondents indicated the need for several policy tools to be put in place to stimulate the transformation to the inclusive green economy. In order to achieve an inclusive green economy it is also considered important for trade to abstain from increasing pressure on the environment. Environmentally harmful subsidies should be abolished and existing environmental taxes should be increased and new ones introduced. The integration of sustainability in all policies needs to be guaranteed. The importance of indicators beyond GDP in an inclusive green economy was underlined repeatedly and the development of alternative indicators should be a priority. Furthermore, more attention should be given to mainstream green public procurement. This is also emphasized by respondents under section 2 'Action in Priority Areas'. It can be concluded that

\(^3\) COM(2013) 92.
respondents consider that environmental friendly services need to be valued and accounted for in the economy.

Finally it should be noted that some responses highlighted the role of the EU Sustainable Development Strategy (EU SDS) and EU 2020. In general, these two documents appear to have played an important role for the public. The inclusive green economy concept and the Rio+20 Outcome are considered by some respondents not to be adequately represented in the EU 2020 Strategy.

**Q 2 What policy tools do you think are the most effective and need to be put into place to as part of the EUs interactions with developed countries, emerging economies, and with developing countries? How should this complement EU external policies and their implementation?**

The respondents consider primarily that the EU should strengthen the policy coherence for development with third countries, particularly for trade agreements between EU and developing countries. The EU should also ensure a fair level playing field between the Union and third countries. Focusing on the advantages of an inclusive green economy could help avoid that developing countries would see green economy as a threat rather than as an opportunity. Emphasis was also put on the EU's supportive role, to allow economies in developing countries to become self-sustaining.

**Q 3 What policies need to be put into place to further encourage and engage EU business and stakeholders?**

The need to establish clear targets was clearly seen as a necessary encouragement for EU business and stakeholders. Binding targets were thought to be fundamental to drive innovation and new business models. Ambitious, coherent and binding post-2020 targets would be aimed at, among others, emission reductions, energy efficiency and renewable energy. The long-term aspect is considered important. The efficient use of existing targets is also important. Furthermore, a number of respondents emphasized that more attention should be paid to partnerships. This is not only mentioned under the section 'inclusive green economy', but also under the section 'Action in Priority Areas' in question 6.

**Q 4 What specific actions could be foreseen in this area? How could such actions contribute to growth and jobs?**

Answers to this question overlap to a large extent with answers already given under questions 1, 2 and 3. The content of the answers varies greatly, from the phasing out of market distorting and environmentally harmful subsidies, to organic farming, the enhanced cooperation between states, the development of green cities and the energetic transformation towards renewable sources.

**2. ACTION IN PRIORITY AREAS**

The Rio+20 Outcome document contains a large number of actions in the section "Framework for action and follow-up". Following the request of the European Council⁴, the EU proposed goals and

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⁴ Conclusions of the European Council, 1-2 March 2012 (article 28), and Environment Council Conclusions, 12 March 2012 (articles 17, 18).
targets to advance the transition to the green economy in key areas, essential for social and economic development.

**Q 5 Which key areas do you think are the most important and should be given the highest priority (for the EU/at global level)? Please give reasons for your choices.**

Generally respondents prioritise climate change, energy, food security, education, biodiversity, sustainable production and consumption, sustainable agriculture and land use, sustainable transport and cities, gender equality, water (and sanitation) and poverty eradication. Each of these areas is mentioned by at least 15 respondents. Other frequently mentioned areas are health (and to a lesser extent population), chemicals and waste and the reduction of inequalities. The various key areas should be addressed by a holistic approach.

**Q 6 Are there specific ways in which an area needs to be followed up (within the EU/at global level)? Should the EU promote and enter partnerships for action, and if so, in which area specifically? Are there specific barriers to implement actions in a given area? What could be done to overcome these barriers?**

It was underlined that the EU should act as a leader in areas set up as priorities. A specific tool in this regard is the use of alternative indicators beyond GDP already mentioned by respondents under the section 'inclusive green economy'. Furthermore the weakness of the Rio+20 Outcome document on the issue of global standards for corporate sustainability reporting was hinted at by a few respondents. Other participants see here an opportunity for the EU to be encouraged to work closer with the private sector and civil society in order to strengthen current initiatives, improve the consistency in reporting and make early moves towards a common global framework. Public-private partnerships were suggested as an efficient follow-up: the EU should develop partnerships to advance strategies, initiatives, measures for sustainable resource use and adaptation to climate change. Another suggestion made by respondents is that the EU could establish joint learning platforms to share ideas and experience from different regions.

**Q 7 Do you think it is useful for the EU to develop targets to drive the inclusive green economy? If so, what aspects do you think should be covered and how should economic, social and environmental aspects be addressed?**

The general outcome of the consultation is that targets, whether binding or non-binding, are essential for all stakeholders to develop a common vision. However, targets only make sense if they can be met. Accompanying measures for those working in the inclusive green economy (e.g. for smallholders, for secure food chains) as suggested by respondents, might be more effective than the sole focus on new targets. Several respondents indicated that the focus should be to achieve existing targets, for example by reaching the targets defined in the EU2020 strategy.

The concern for already existing targets has to be accompanied by several other elements such as additional targets, regulation, standards and clear guidelines which are crucial for any successful policy framework. These should stimulate investment and help focus on areas for innovation. Clear communication of the targets to the stakeholders is vital. The EU should take the lead in developing international standards, best practices and legal protection measures and is encouraged to move forward in setting new, stronger renewables and emissions targets for 2020 and to establish ambitious targets for 2030 as soon as possible.
With regard to the content of the targets it was suggested by some respondents that targets and indicators should be both quantitative and qualitative and should cover the three dimensions of sustainable development in a balanced manner.

Q 8 What additional tools and indicators for the measurement of progress should be applied?

As mentioned under question 1, respondents suggested that indicators for progress must go beyond GDP and that the indicators already in place relating to MDGs could be used too. The targets and indicators should take into account different national specifications and circumstances (respect the principle “no one size fits it all”) and should be linked to the objectives in the Europe 2020 strategy.

3. SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT GOALS

The Rio+20 Outcome document outlined key principles for developing SDGs. It states that the SDGs should reflect all three dimensions of sustainable development (economic, social and environmental) in a balanced way; and that they should be action-oriented, concise, easy to communicate, limited in number, aspirational, global in nature and universally applicable to all countries while taking into account different national realities, and that they should be guided by the Rio Outcome document. The Rio+20 Outcome document also states that the SDGs need to be coherent with and integrated into the UN development agenda beyond 2015, and that the process to establish SDGs needs to be coordinated and coherent with the processes for the post-2015 development agenda.

Q 9 In your opinion, what specific themes or topics should SDGs cover? In what way could the EU build on existing or proposed goals and targets?

Recurring themes or topics mentioned by the respondents were: resource and energy efficiency, waste and chemicals, biodiversity, sustainable consumption and production, sustainable use of water and sanitation, protection of marine areas, sustainable transport, sustainable agriculture, gender equality, poverty eradication, climate change and adaptation, health care, fish stock status and food security. A certain degree of overlap can be found with the above-mentioned priority areas, and also for SDGs the importance of a holistic and multi-disciplinary approach has been emphasized. Social, economic and environmental aspects should be addressed together.

Q 10 What form and structure should SDGs have? How should economic, social and environmental dimensions, as well as the inter-linkages between them be addressed?

Respondents stated that it is important to build on existing agreements and EU policy orientations; SDGs should not necessarily be created but rather build on existing goals set up under the 7th EAP and the EU 2020 Biodiversity Strategy. The goals could also build on the many existing relevant international agreements such as the Millennium Declaration, the Rio Principles, the outcomes of Johannesburg in 2002, the Rio+20 Outcome document and the CBD Aichi targets. Different views exist on the question whether SDGs should be aspirational or legally binding. It is agreed that it is essential that the goals should be clear and easy to communicate and understand.
Q 11 How can it be best ensured that SDGs and their monitoring are science based?

To ensure that SDGs would be science based the establishment of a scientific consultation board supporting the SDG Open Working Group (OWG) was proposed. Some respondents also drew the attention to the necessary compromise between scientific rigor and the required simplicity of the indicators that are used to monitor the SDGs.

Q 12 How can one make sure that the SDGs will be relevant and will act as a stimulus to all countries (developed, emerging, developing)? How will they contribute to mobilizing action?

Participants agreed on the importance of universal SDGs. They should however allow for differentiated and nationally relevant targets to take into account various contexts and stages of development differentiation. There is no one-size-fits-all model. Public involvement at the national and local level will contribute to mobilising action.

Q 13 In what way should the SDGs relate to stimulating the inclusive green economy?

Different views were presented on the relation between the SDGs and the inclusive green economy. Some respondents think that SDGs should foster the transition to inclusive green economy by giving a common long-term vision, targets and guidelines. Other respondents indicated that the inclusive green economy should be reflected as one of the aspects of SDGs while other responses state that the inclusive green economy already encompasses all three dimensions of sustainable development and should therefore be seen as an overarching goal or a cross-cutting issue of the SDGs.

Q 14 How do you see the relationship of SDGs to future goals following up on the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) that are likely to be developed under the post 2015 development agenda?

Opinions of respondents vary on the exact relation between SDGs and follow up to the MDGs: 1) SDGs could be used to fulfil MDGs, 2) MDGs could be considered part of the SDGs, 3) SDGs and MDGs should be converged or 4) SDGs should build on or complement to MDGs. Most respondents agreed that one framework should be created including both MDGs and SDGs; thus integrating MDGs, and that SDGs should not merely be extending MDG 7.

4. FINANCING STRATEGY FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

The Rio+20 Outcome document underlined "Means of Implementation" as crucial for achieving sustainable development. It established an intergovernmental process under the UN General Assembly to produce options for a sustainable development financing strategy to facilitate the mobilization of financial resources and their effective use. Such a strategy should promote a single comprehensive approach to development financing, building on the Financing for Development agenda and promote an integrated approach to the various global financing processes, including Rio+20, climate change and biodiversity financing.

5 http://www.un.org/esa/ffd/
Q 15 What should be the main elements covered in financing strategies for sustainable development? Could, for example, thematic strategies such as the Biodiversity Resource Mobilization Strategy\(^6\) be a useful starting point?

The respondents underline the need to aim at an overarching financing strategy for sustainable development (such as the Monterrey Consensus). The overarching strategy could include references to existing agreements and EU policy orientations. The Biodiversity Resource Mobilization Strategy is considered an interesting example.

Q 16 What are some of the most effective financing and resource mobilisation schemes to date, such as public or private schemes, micro-financing, climate change and biodiversity financing? How can they be scaled up?

Two aspects already mentioned under ‘inclusive green economy’ were also discussed under this question. First of all the importance of partnerships was stressed, however some respondents emphasized that the EU should be careful not to support any public-private partnerships that risk limiting access to fundamental goods and services for all members of society. Secondly phasing out harmful subsidies, such as fossil fuel subsidies, is considered an urgent first step in ensuring that financing is in line with policy objectives.

Q 17 What are the most effective ways of encouraging investment? Where possible, link your replies to questions on the inclusive green economy.

To encourage investment, stability and a robust and transparent framework for policies should be provided. These would ensure the transition to the inclusive green economy based on the three pillars of sustainability. The expected and preferred major source of financing remains public funding for most respondents. Coherence and coordination are required. Several propositions suggested that finance for sustainable management would be promoted through other mechanisms such as the development and application of standards (e.g. Forest Stewardship Council, Marine Stewardship Council) and thus leveraging private sector investment. Other respondents indicated that an inclusive green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication requires major structural and technological changes in key sectors such as infrastructure, industry and energy, agriculture/fisheries and transportation to render them climate and biodiversity-proof. This transition will require the identification of new sources of investment.

Q 18 How should coherence, coordination and non-duplication of efforts be ensured with regard to the Financing for Development process and other relevant processes?

Policy coherence and coordination need to be strengthened according to the views gathered, and the importance to remain committed to enhancing synergies, cooperation and coherence for environmental governance is underlined. As an example, accountability for Policy Coherence for Development (PCD) should be an integral element of all future development strategies. An effective framework of measuring and reporting on all development finance is also desired. There are systems that allow for a transparent access to information on development aid; and all development finance programmes should use similar systems.

\(^6\) [http://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=11654](http://www.cbd.int/decision/cop/?id=11654)
Another concrete suggestion is to bring Financing for Development (FFD) under the umbrella of sustainable development financing. The EU should use already established channels to develop strategies in cooperation with other international actors while building a clear and consistent sustainability policy inside the EU.

5. INSTITUTIONAL FRAMEWORK FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

An important theme of Rio+20 was to further expand/on furthering the institutional framework for sustainable development. Rio decided to strengthen the functions of UNEP. Rio also decided to establish a High Level Political Forum (HLPF) on sustainable development.

Q 19 What measures would you see best taken to ensure that the EU effectively contributes to the implementation of these outcomes?

With regard to the implementation, some respondents suggested that the HLPF should be mandated to work on issues related to the environment as well as to take on several issues that are clearly linked to environmental concerns such as trade. Furthermore, the EU should continue to take the lead and demonstrate its contribution through its own domestic reforms. Several respondents suggested that the EU could actively support the strengthening of UNEP and increase its influence in the HLPF.

Q 20 Do you think the participation of civil society, social partners, and other stakeholders should be strengthened? If so, how internationally and within the EU?

The majority of the respondents emphasized that strengthening the participation of civil society, social partners and other stakeholders is fundamental to the sustainable development process. Several suggestions were given. Respondents indicated for instance that the EU should advocate the benefits of instruments such as the Aarhus Convention. Models like the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) process or the Committee on World Food Security (CFS) are mentioned as an example as they are considered to have shown a clear inclusive approach to stakeholder engagement. Another concrete suggestion given by respondents is that at country level an institutional link between sustainability and society should be created similar to the German Council for Sustainable Development.

Respondents point out that civil society and stakeholders should be involved as early as possible in EU legislative thinking. More dialogue and collaborative approaches should be promoted by the EU on global issues at all levels. Consultations such as this one and those towards the 2015 UN Post Development Agenda are considered vital. A broad civil society debate on sustainable development within the EU is necessary; however the voice of NGOs from other parts of the world should not be ignored. Transparency is considered crucial for all the participants involved in this type of discussions.

A follow-up suggestion to this public consultation has been made: after the publication of the Communication on the follow up to Rio, the Commission could launch a public debate open to many actors on several levels; the collaboration with the European Economic and Social Committee could prove useful in that regard.

6. CONCLUSIONS

The questions on inclusive green economy in this public consultation drew a lot of attention and generated quite a few suggestions. The most prominent points are that an inclusive green economy needs to be encouraged, that it should happen with the help of indicators that go beyond the traditional GDP oriented ones. Next, trade has to encourage sustainability. Environmentally harmful subsidies should disappear and environmental taxes should be introduced. The next important step is the integration of sustainability in all policies, and the promotion of green public procurement. Another aspect that has been repeatedly underlined is the importance to foster (multi-stakeholder) partnerships to achieve an inclusive green economy. The fact that for a few participants the inclusive green economy concept and the Rio+20 Outcome are not adequately represented in the EU 2020 strategy should be noted too.

Regarding the priority areas that came forward, they are in line with most areas already included in the concept of Green economy. However it has been observed that addressing all those different areas with a holistic approach would ensure better results.

On targets, respondents underlined the need to use existing targets as well as new clear, ambitious, coherent and binding post 2020 targets; these would play a fundamental role in motivating business and stakeholders to invest, thus driving innovation towards a greener future. The SDGs highlighted by the respondents mostly overlap with the mentioned priority areas of the inclusive green economy; here also the importance of a multi-disciplinary approach has been emphasized. Social, economic and environmental aspects are interlinked and would better be addressed from a holistic point of view. The universal quality of SDGs, as well as the possibility to fine tune them locally to allow country level differentiation, has been put forward. Opinions differed on the exact relation between SDGs and MDGs but it is agreed that one framework should be created including both MDGs and SDGs.

With regard to finance, the importance of partnerships is stressed while phasing out harmful subsidies, is considered an urgent step in ensuring that financing is in line with policy objectives. An overarching financing strategy for sustainable development is wished for, largely relying on public funding. It was suggested that Official Development Assistance (ODA) can be used to leverage additional resources and private sector investment. In general a trend similar to the one on targets was underlined by the respondents, namely that coherence and good coordination are of essence, and good use should be made of existing structures such as funds and fora.

It is suggested that the HLPF should have a mandate to work on issues related to the environment as well as work on several issues that are clearly linked to environmental concerns such as trade, security and health.

Strengthening the participation of civil society, social partners and other stakeholders is considered fundamental to the sustainable development process. Another important aspect emphasized by many respondents is the need for transparency.

A broad range of responses to this public consultation were received. The much appreciated feedback of all respondents provided useful input for the elaboration of the Communication.