Jump-starting the SDGs: Lessons from Early Adopters on Policy Shifts to Accelerate Progress
9:00am – 11:00am, Sunday, 27 September 2015
Side Event Summary Report prepared by World Resources Institute

The World Resources Institute (WRI), Colombia and Switzerland co-hosted a Side Event on ‘Jump-starting the SDGs: Lessons from early adopters on policy shifts to accelerate progress’ on 27 September alongside the UN Sustainable Development Summit 2015. The event featured a high-level panel of government representatives from a diverse set of countries that have demonstrated early and strong political will to align their national strategies and institutional processes with the ambition of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The event aimed to: (1) showcase the experiences of these ‘early adopters;’ (2) spur reflection on the challenges of and opportunities for accelerating SDG implementation; and (3) highlight the need for open and in-depth learning and exchange of experiences to help generate the momentum necessary for successful uptake of the SDGs.

Key messages:

1. The 2030 Agenda demands universal action, which requires new policies by all countries across the globe and contextualization to country level realities. Learning from early adopters is key; a platform for exchange on best practices is essential to avoid ‘learning by doing’ in isolation.

2. An integrated approach is needed, going beyond a traditional sectoral approach within “silo-ed” line ministries to a more holistic and transparent “whole of government” approach, complemented by a “whole of society” approach that engages and facilitates collective action by the public sector, the private sector and civil society.

3. Considering both the domestic and transboundary impacts of policy measures is not only vital to effective development cooperation, but also for aligning private sector incentives and actions with the SDGs and safeguarding the central tenets of a transformative development agenda, i.e. universality, integration, leaving no one behind.

4. Integrated decision-making and policy frameworks are needed to balance inclusive economic growth with environmental protection and good governance, and to create the enabling conditions for shared prosperity.

Mr. Manish Bapna (Managing Director and Executive Vice President, World Resources Institute) moderated the discussion. He opened the event by underscoring the transformative nature of the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs; that within 15 years we aim to eradicate extreme poverty whilst respecting planetary boundaries. Mr. Bapna pointed to the importance of policy coherence for sustainable development and the need for a “whole of government” approach to SDG implementation. He cited the example of the energy sector, where policies and investments need to be coherent with those in water, agriculture and other sectors across multiple levels of governance, from municipal to national and beyond. This will need to be complemented by a “whole of society” approach that engages civil society, the private sector, local municipalities and other non-state actors in planning and implementation.
H.E. Mr. Simón Gaviria (Minister for Planning, Colombia) outlined Colombia’s policies and actions. Colombia played a leadership role in developing the SDGs since well before Rio+20 in 2012. Rather than wait for final global agreement on the SDGs, Colombia decided to move forward and ‘learn by doing.’ However, Minister Gaviria acknowledged that governments alone cannot manage the breadth, depth and scope of the 2030 Agenda, and that a “sandwich approach” is needed, working both bottom-up and top-down.

To assess needs, the Colombian government evaluated the 169 targets and the best ways to implement them: first, they picked the targets that have already been met or are part of the current strategy and put these to the side; then they picked out the targets where information is lacking or Colombia cannot achieve them alone; the remainder, he noted, need to be translated to their national development context. Doing so may require institutional reforms so that agencies and policy processes are more ‘fit-for-purpose’ for achieving sustainable development outcomes. Minister Gaviria also described how government officials overcame key challenges in adapting the targets to the national context. For example, because they cannot plan budgets beyond the presidential term, Colombian officials converted the SDGs to intermediary targets – to be met by 2018 – aligning with presidential elections. Doing so allows governments to operate within their political constraints and closely track progress.

H.E. Ms. Isabella Lövin (Minister for International Development Cooperation, Sweden) focused her remarks on Sweden’s extensive experience in applying a policy coherence approach across government. To facilitate uptake of the Millennium Development Goals, Sweden’s Policy for Global Development, enacted in 2003, ensures political commitment to policy coherence for development at the highest level. She noted that this “old” policy coherence has lost some energy, but that with the new government and SDGs in place, each ministry has been formulating action plans on how to contribute to the 2030 Agenda, using policy coherence for sustainable development (PCSD) as an instrument, both nationally and internationally.

Minister Lövin also spoke to means of implementation, cautioning that innovative finance cannot replace ODA, which is critical in fragile states where the private sector will not invest. Sweden currently puts 1.1 percent of gross national income (GNI) toward ODA. With such a high level of investment in developing countries, upholding policies that go against the aim of their development cooperation would be counterproductive. At regional level, she indicated that Sweden has been pushing for the European Union to re-launch PCSD efforts. Finally, recognizing the importance of both whole of government and whole of society approaches, she highlighted a need for governments to exchange best practices and partner with non-state actors to communicate the Goals and innovate on solutions.

Minister Lövin also spoke to PCSD vis-à-vis migration. She emphasized a need to address the root causes of poverty and conflict that cause people to flee their homes. She noted that aid alone will not fix the problem, but that policy actions – such as reform of subsidies that adversely impact developing country markets – can drive positive outcomes.

H.E. Mr. Régis Immongault (Minister of Economy, Gabon) outlined Gabon’s policy choices for sustainable development, focusing on the country’s integration of economic and environmental objectives, particularly through the lens of forests, which cover 88 percent of the country. He drew on their National Land Use Plan, part of the Emerging Gabon Strategic Plan, which utilizes objective sustainable development criteria to weigh decisions and promote a diversified circular economy that increases incomes and well-being for all.
Minister Immongault recognized that even the poorest can make significant progress while achieving better environmental governance, citing WRI’s *Environmental Democracy Index* as inspiring action. He also discussed how Gabon’s 2014 environmental protection and sustainable development laws are succeeding in enabling progress towards other international agreements such as the UNFCCC, and can leverage strategic means of financing sustainable development such as the Green Climate Fund.

**H.E. Mr. Manuel Sager** (State Secretary and Director-General of the Swiss Agency for Development and Cooperation, Switzerland) said one could argue that there is actually little new content in the goals themselves, but rather what is different is their combination and complexity. He delineated two main policy shifts: universality, stating that we are no longer following a North-South logic, and inclusiveness, articulating a need to rally the people and call upon all to effectuate change.

State Secretary Sager covered a number of domestic priorities, such as protecting biodiversity and promoting gender equality within Switzerland, as well as the importance of aligning policies with the 2030 Agenda more broadly, in agreeance with the previous speakers. In connecting Switzerland’s sectoral priorities to policy coherence and universality challenges, he underscored the importance of governments asking themselves how domestic policies impact the rest of the world, and how external factors affect their citizens’ lives. On inclusivity, convening different interest groups and stakeholders has been, and will continue to be, key to achieving broad endorsement of and action for the SDGs. He closed by unifying the two principles, noting that ownership will be critical to SDG implementation.

**Dr. Carlos Lopes** (Under Secretary-General and Executive Secretary, UN Economic Commission for Africa) shifted the conversation by comparing the MDGs – which were initially driven by UN agencies without formal intergovernmental approval – to the SDGs, which feature one of the largest intergovernmental and consultative processes in history and ownership by the actors that played a role in their design. Looking beyond the Summit’s high-level discussions, Dr. Lopes reminded participants of the regional, national and country-specific complexities that can obstruct implementation efforts, and summarized three key characteristics that must be maintained, regardless of their difficulty: 1) preservation of policy spaces; 2) universality; and 3) an integration of the three pillars.

On integration, Dr. Lopes compared a traditional view of development to a cappuccino, with espresso as the economic base, the milk as the social layer, and the sprinkle chocolate on top as the environmental layer. Although we would like all three to achieve sustainable development, in practice, we strip away the layers in times of crisis. The challenge facing countries is that, by reverting back to the core idea of economic growth (just espresso), they lose the transformative approach that makes the 2030 Agenda unique: even if the economy is fixed, the same structural hazards exist that relegate environmental and social protections, which should instead be used as a means of promoting inclusive, sustainable growth.

**Ms. Paula Caballero** (Senior Director, Natural Resources and Environment Global Practice, World Bank) described the SDG process and what made it a success. She stressed that the 2030 Agenda is not just the SDGs themselves, but extends much deeper to issues of trade, the provision of global public goods, and how increased connectivity enables better targeting of our global actions to end poverty and remain within planetary boundaries.

Referring to the targets that Colombia felt it could not single-handedly achieve, Ms. Caballero made the point that this is where the world needs to transcend national agendas and cooperate to achieve shared prosperity, since we are no longer just talking about silo-ed development outcomes, but interconnected
development trajectories. Acknowledging Dr. Lopes’ cappuccino approach, she warned that the cup will spill if countries do not overcome inequality and exclusion to leave no one behind. Addressing the earlier point on migration, she said that we should aim to keep people in situ so they can have the culture and livelihoods they were born into; if people have a chance they will stay where they are, and this is what we should be collectively working to achieve.

Ms. Yolanda Kakabadse (President, WWF International) expressed excitement that the agenda is universal, but that looking ahead, governments risk forgetting the political pillar, which deals with platforms of participation and robust leadership. She recalled the importance of a space for civil society involvement, without which there is no way to succeed in realizing the 2030 Agenda.

Mr. Thomas Gass (Assistant Secretary-General, UN DESA) kicked off the question and answer session, asking how countries could mainstream the ‘new definition’ of sustainable development, adapt previous policy efforts to fit the 17 goals and incorporate new principles such as the need to leave no one behind. Other questions focused on awareness raising and “keeping the chocolate on the cappuccino.”

Manish Bapna wrapped up the discussion by acknowledging the Summit as a cause for celebration, but recognizing that the hard part – implementation – is just beginning. He closed with a quote from Pope Francis’s remarks to the General Assembly two days prior: “Solemn commitments are not enough even if they are a necessary step towards solutions.”

WRI and the SDGs

WRI has been actively engaged in the development of the SDGs through a series of seven workshops for senior negotiators with the partners of the Independent Research Forum. This side event marked the transition to the next stage of engagement, supporting country-level implementation of the SDGs with data and analysis, and tailored advice on integrating environmental sustainability in national development strategy and policy frameworks in a coherent way, whilst addressing potential transboundary spill-over effects.

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1 Written by Adam Fishman, with inputs from Peter Hazlewood and Kitty van der Heijden. WRI would also like to thank the governments of Colombia and Switzerland for their feedback.