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Report of the Experts Meeting on Sustainable Development in the 21st Century: A Contribution to the High Level Panel on Global Sustainability

**16-17 March 2011
IUCN Headquarters, Gland, Switzerland**

1. Background

On 16-17 March 2011, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) hosted a Meeting of Experts to discuss strategic inputs into the work of the UN Secretary-General's High Level Panel on Global Sustainability (GSP) and the preparations for the UN Conference on Sustainable Development (Rio 2012).

The mandate of the Panel is “to eradicate poverty and reduce inequality, make growth inclusive, and production and consumption more sustainable while combating climate change and respecting the range of other planetary boundaries.”¹ The High Level Panel will issue its final report by the end of 2011. The report’s conclusions will be important inputs to various inter-governmental processes, including preparations for the Rio 2012 Conference and the meetings of the Conferences of the Parties to the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC), the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD) and the UN Convention to Combat Desertification (UNCCD) as well as the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs) process. IUCN itself will use the outcome of the Panel’s work and the Rio 2012 conference as important inputs to its own 2012 World Conservation Congress (September 2012).

The generous support of the Federal Office for the Environment of Switzerland made it possible for IUCN to organize the Meeting of Experts with the participation of renowned experts and actors in the area of sustainable development. A list of participants is provided in Annex 1 to this Report, and comprises representatives of relevant organizations and sectors of civil society including the private sector and indigenous communities, UN agencies, the Secretariat of the GSP, IUCN’s Members, Commissions and Secretariat. The experts were invited in their personal capacity.

This brief report and recommendations will be submitted to the GSP through its Secretariat and to the Swiss Government, as appropriate, for their consideration and use. A more comprehensive publication containing the examples of cases studies on sustainable development in action presented at the meeting will also be produced for wide distribution among IUCN Members, Commissions and other groups of interested stakeholders in order to raise and/or increase awareness about the main elements of sustainable development under discussion. This document will be part of the IUCN strategy for ‘Rio 2012’ and the IUCN World Conservation Congress in 2012.

¹ <http://www.un.org/wcm/content/site/climatechange/pages/gsp>

2. Discussions at the meeting:

To assist the participants, IUCN had prepared a scoping paper that considered:

- The current status of implementation of sustainable development, taking into account the international process that began in 1972;
- The lessons learned and good practices at all levels;
- The opportunities to promote these lessons and scale up the good practices; and
- The changes that need to occur and the measures that need to be put into place to achieve sustainability.

The paper also underlined some important points, for instance, that the challenge over the next 40 years is to ensure better implementation of the concept and to make development more equitable and more efficient. This needs to happen in a context where GDP is expected to increase from \$40 trillion to \$135 trillion; population will grow from 6.8 billion to 9 billion; urbanisation will rise from 50% to 70%; global energy demand will double by 2050; accelerating impact on nature, such as climate change (with CO₂ concentrations increasing from 388 ppm to as much as 530 ppm by 2050).

a) Sustainable development, more relevant than ever:

Participants noted that sustainable development is still a valid concept and one that is in fact needed more than ever before. They noted that it was no longer useful to think of sustainable development solely in terms of economic, social and environmental “pillars” but that it had become a more complex idea that draws on many strands and was better conceptualised in terms of a helix or composite of multiple threads. They found it also useful to think of the concept of sustainable development as a journey as much as a goal that entails an on-going process and that continually redefines the type of development we want. They agreed that economic development will remain the dominant driver for the foreseeable future but also acknowledged that more voices were calling for the inclusion of a more ethical perspective of development.

b) Obstacles for achieving sustainable development:

Participants agreed that the major obstacle to achieving sustainable development was lack of implementation of sustainable development values, attitudes and behaviour (in other words, what is taking place in many countries is the implementation of unsustainable styles). Without being comprehensive or prioritising specific obstacles to implementation participants highlighted the following as being important:

- Implementation gaps – not enough invested capital, credit; lack of appropriate information and education; no mechanisms of accountability; inequity; inefficiency; weak linkages among sectors; poor governance; lack of trust among the different sectors and actors; lack of leadership;
- Gender and cultural inequality;
- Wrong metrics – GDP as insufficient measure of sustainable development;
- Perverse subsidies;
- Dominant economic paradigm not sufficient, reward for unsustainable behaviour and development;
- Wrong values that promote a materialistic lifestyle that doesn't take proper account of other key non-monetary values – pressure to maintain the monetary value system;

- Sustainable development is still largely confined to environment sector and linkages aren't being made (see first point); and
- Governments shirking their responsibilities, especially in terms of regulating the market which is a good servant and bad master (related to the lack of accountability mechanisms).

Participants noted that challenges are complex and there are no “silver bullets”. However, it was generally felt that crisis creates opportunity. Effective sustainable development requires more tailored answers to specific circumstances. For example, the first Green Revolution was driven by several new varieties of rice. The next green revolution requires many smaller improvements in farming that are tailored to local fields.

c) What needs to be done seems evident but we do not know how to do it:

Governments don't need more rules, they need more tools on how to implement the sustainable development concept. There is also a lack of political commitment to use some of the tools that already exist. Developing the right tools that will drive the changes needed requires identifying the right examples that can catalyse change in other areas and bring about transformative change and reinvigorate the paradigm of sustainable development.

Based on the scoping paper and presentations made by some of the participants and IUCN staff, participants considered specific examples that provided the basis for some of these tools. Some of the examples presented included:

- The work on water conservation, harvesting and sanitation – Habitat technologies, products and services by Development Alternatives;
- Examples of forest and sustainable development in Uganda Mount Elgon and Shinyanga, Tanzania by IUCN;
- Le Grenelle de l'Environnement of France (unprecedented set of dialogues between the government and civil society to design a road-map for sustainable development)

Other participants mentioned additional programmes, initiatives, strategies that gave positive results, among which the following were singled out: the Bolsa Floresta scheme in Amazonia, Bolsa Família in Brazil, Satoyama and Satoumi initiatives in Japan

Other thematic presentations related to:

- Decoupling the Use of Natural Resources and Environmental Impacts from Economic Activity: Scoping the Challenges (the work of the International Resource Panel);
- Inputs and insights from the “green economy” for sustainable development (including the study on The Economics of Ecosystems and Biodiversity, TEEB Study);
- Sustaining Water;
- REDD+: Opportunity to deliver sustainable development.

3. Conclusions of the Experts

Participants agreed that the GSP provided an important opportunity to bring new perspectives and real needs to the global debate on sustainable development to contribute to policy processes, in particular, Rio 2012. The GSP could also champion with stronger leadership the values of sustainability with a view to promote the new attitudes and behaviour required for reorienting development policies and programmes towards greater sustainability. The central question the Experts focused on is what are the critical actions that the GSP can recommend to the Secretary General to promote sustainable development by 2050? And within this main question what can Rio 2012 do to contribute to this development pathway?

Participants agreed that the following key points should be put forward for consideration by the Panel in fulfilling its mandate:

General key points:

- Resources exist to develop sustainably and transform society – changes are already taking place through important drivers, such as new technologies, entrepreneurship, the changing role of governments. These drivers provide the leverage for change;
- It is critical to understand the imperative of tackling sustainable development holistically, making the necessary linkages and integration;
- There are examples of applied sustainable development that are being up-scaled. There is need to continue identifying good examples and promoting patterns which result in resulting in these to be up-scaled.

Key points related to specific issues:

- Ensuring gender and cultural equality is an efficient, clear and the most effective way of delivering sustainable development.
- Poverty and environmental degradation are manifestations of the same problem and are important entry points for leveraging change across society. Eradication of poverty is central to environmental conservation and sustainable development;
- Creating sustainable livelihoods is key to addressing both these two factors. Social enterprises, which make business out of providing social products, water services, etc., are being developed and can be further strengthened in many developing countries with great potential for further up-scaling. Simple technologies addressing basic needs are commercially profitable and scalable.
- There is a clear imperative and benefit to removing perverse subsidies. There can be no significant movement towards sustainable development if the existing pattern of economic incentives continues to reward unsustainable behaviour by citizens and corporations. These incentives - and particularly public subsidies to agriculture, energy, water and transport - must be screened for their impact on sustainability and those found to be undermining sustainability must be reduced, rechanneled or removed.
- There is a need for a new set of MDGs which inspire, enable and mobilise people and their leaders (poor people and youth, in particular) and which have the indivisible sustainable development helix at their core. As a successor to the MDGs, which mobilised the UN system and aid agencies, but were marginalised and treated the poor as passive, the new MDGs should steer real organisations, social enterprises and intermediaries that work at small scale (not just "big aid"); should promote small producer agencies and access to markets and should address livelihoods that are life enhancing and available to all. ICT (information communication technologies) and education are important tools that help to mobilise youth. Social and ecological performance should be part of this endeavour. The new MDGs need to be based on rights based and ecosystem based approaches to sustainable development.
- Managing and reducing various traditional and emerging risks in society or for human security is becoming an increasingly relevant and urgent task for sustainable development. The role of ecosystems in managing and reducing risks (natural, food, health, disasters, etc) needs to be more visible and recognised by policies and legislation at national as well as international levels.
- Processes and organizations addressing health, food security and energy are opportunities to tackle sustainable development in an integrated manner and can leverage positive changes;

Key points related to tools for implementation:

- More public investment or capital is needed to develop and up-scale identified efficient models of sustainable development;
- The purpose of ODA (official development assistance), FDI (foreign direct investment), etc. should leave receiving countries on a higher threshold for investment, new technologies, cutting edge capacity, to achieve and sustain their own development-
- An affirmative programme on behalf of the least developed countries (LDCs), including a financing platform of public/private finances could leverage great change, to put LDCs on the path for sustainable development, to help them leapfrog the traditional development curve, replicate and concentrate good practice now available in a systemic and designed (as distinct from ad hoc evolutionary) way, to bring back skilled Diaspora, address equity issues in global development prospects and avoid past impediments of the traditional development process;
- There is already a green race underway involving many developing countries making increasingly significant investments in technology, becoming market leaders and changing the research and development (R&D) world. China, India, Brazil, Mexico, South Africa, Argentina, Hungary, Romania, Turkey and Poland have billion dollar commitments to R&D and rank among the top 40 countries in the world. These transformations mean that many more governments are working constructively with business as well as competing to get ahead. Business leaders will benefit from this change by thinking about local and global challenges as an impetus for investments that open up the search for solutions and the realization of opportunities. The transformation will bring with it huge shifts in terms of regulation, markets, consumer preferences, the pricing of inputs, and the measurement of profit and loss; all of which will impact business. Rather than follow change, business must lead this transformation by doing what business does best: cost-effectively creating solutions that people need and want. The difference is that the new solutions will be based on a global and local market place with “true values and costs”. There is a need for an environment that promotes bold conceptual examples that encourage new business solutions and give traditional businesses permission to think differently. For example, energy poverty solutions could include decentralised electricity "clusters" at a village level that could be connected to nearby grids as appropriate.
- Accountability mechanisms must be properly developed. Promises are worth nothing unless they are realized. For far too long, governments and other actors have gathered political credit for making commitments to sustainable development but have paid no price when those commitments were ignored. This must change. All future commitments to sustainable development must be accompanied by a robust accountability framework that identifies who will take the action, against what timetable and with what funding, together with third-party monitoring arrangements. And the framework must identify both the incentives to comply and the disincentives that might flow from failing to comply;
- Education is the central long term solution to ensuring that sustainable development is achieved;
- Promoting effective participation of communities or civil society organizations in policy, planning and decision-making is key to ensuring sustainable development, with a special focus on youth as it is essential for their education; and
- Communication and outreach strategies need to be more sophisticated to be able to reach the general public and all interest groups.