

EMG Nexus Dialogues on implementing the environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda

A Concept Note

Introduction

Supporting the implementation of the 2030 Agenda on Sustainable Development and the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) will be the focus of the United Nations System over the next 13 years. In recent decades, the UN system has developed a wealth of specialized technical, normative and operational capacity and services to support Member States on specific aspects of sustainable development. However, with its integrated approach and indivisible nature, the 2030 Agenda challenges agencies of the UN system to ensure that their specialized policy decision making and response systems are well suited to uptake and effectively support the integrated SDGs, including the environmental dimension of the goals and targets. In the absence of innovative thinking and practice, the efficiency of the UN system in implementing the Goals could be significantly lowered. It is crucial to identify ways to increase coherence, enhance synergies in governance and policy planning, put in place effective institutional architecture and decision-making processes, and scale up financing and partnerships.

In this context, the Senior Officials of the EMG at their 22nd meeting in 2016 called for regular and more frequent meetings of EMG with focus on UN system cooperation and collaboration around some of the nexus issues embedded in the 2030 Agenda. In response to this call, the EMG Secretariat, in collaboration with the Stockholm Institute of Environment (SEI), plans to prepare and organize a series of EMG Dialogues on environmental nexus issues linked to the SDGs.

Purpose

The Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) are the core of the 2030 Agenda. Taken individually, they can attract and energize specific agencies, ministries, and expert communities. Taken together, they offer opportunities for synergist work and cumulative effects, but also raise the thorny problem of competing goals and conflicting means which can block action at the nexus among different goals. While similar complexities were faced in the context of the Millennium Development Goals, the 2030 Agenda enhances these complexities to an unprecedented level. This presents a challenge for UN agencies and their Member States; for example, how to act confidently when faced with sizable interactions across quite dissimilar domains? One possible approach is to focus on the connections among those domains – the “nexus” between one sector and another.

The EMG Dialogue series will contribute to a common understanding of the integrated goals and targets of the SDGs, as well as the requirements and opportunities which these bring to UN agencies in supporting the implementation of the environmental dimension of the 2030 Agenda in a coherent and collaborative manner. The Dialogues will provide an occasion for UN agencies and other stakeholders to identify areas of mutual interest and to better understand the transmission channels through which an action in one sector may impact the outcomes of another.

Through the Dialogues, partners will view the SDGs from a nexus perspective, acquaint themselves with available nexus methodologies and seek to identify practical strategies for integrating the nexus approach into their mission and work. The Dialogues may also serve as an opportunity for Member

States to consider how a nexus approach could support collaboration among different governmental departments.

The outcome of the 2017 Dialogues will include a first set of identified environmental nexuses, a mapping of how environment related goals and targets contribute to other goals and targets and vice versa, and a heightened awareness of a nexus approach as a way to approach the implementation of the integrated 2030 Agenda. As there is no single preferred methodology in addressing a nexus, the EMG may build on the results of the Dialogues to identify appropriate methodologies through its Issue Management Groups. Ultimately, the Dialogues may trigger UN agencies to establish multi-stakeholder partnerships to strengthen policy coherence and integrated policy development, and adopt mutual strategies in support of implementing the SDGs.

The nexus approach

The concept of “nexus” thinking has been with us for over half a century under different names, such as holistic, integrative, and trans-disciplinary thinking. The need for integration in solving complex problems has long been recognized, leading to a variety of approaches and areas of study. More recently, the term “nexus” grew in popularity following the Bonn Nexus Conference of 2014,¹ which focused specifically on the nexus between water, energy, and food security. However, nexus thinking goes beyond these three sectors and beyond resource security.

For these dialogues, a “nexus” approach is the one that focuses on *overlaps across sectors while respecting sectoral expertise* in order to *make better plans by understanding interactions*.

The essential task when tackling complex issues is to break them down into feasible components and address the components one by one. The temptation – and often a useful strategy – is to break problems down along sectoral lines, but when crucial decisions must be made at the nexus across sectors, this approach creates risks. Sector experts know their business, while very few people are experts on the overlaps across fields. Thus, we advocate a nexus approach to utilize the benefits of sectoral expertise focused on breaking down the complexity of the overlaps of these sectors. The purpose is practical: to make better plans through an understanding of interactions.

There are numerous techniques available for a nexus approach, and UN agencies have been applying some of them. Those techniques may or may not have been designed with “nexus” in mind, but they are practical methods to clarify thinking when problems involve overlaps across different domains.

Tentative Plan of Dialogues

It is proposed to arrange a series of four dialogues during 2017, aimed mainly at UN agencies with participants from Member States and civil society. Each dialogue is envisaged to be held in person in the margins of international events/conferences when feasible to facilitate participation and to fit with the deliberations of the Conference. Online participation, virtual contributions and live streaming will also be arranged. Each Dialogue will consist of two segments: a technical preparatory segment followed by a high-level political segment. The anticipated number of participants per Dialogue is 40-50 persons. The Dialogues are planned to take place tentatively in the margins of:

¹ <http://nexusconference.web.unc.edu/whats-the-nexus/>

- 1- The Conference of the Parties of the Basel, Rotterdam and Stockholm Conventions, Geneva, April/May 2017)
- 2- World Health Assembly, Geneva, May 2017 or UN Oceans Conference, New York, June 2017
- 3- HLPF, New York, July 2017
- 4- United Nations Environment Assembly, Nairobi, December, 2017

Immediate outputs

At the end, the dialogue is intended to identify key obstacles and priority issues, providing the needed information and knowledge to agree on concrete recommendations for prioritized actions on crucial and nexus targets. The dialogue will allow the identification of gaps and its analysis in terms of targets, available resources and current status, i.e. helping to fill the existing gap between ambitions and reality.

Dialogue 1: Introduction to the nexus approach, mapping of nexuses and launch of the Dialogue Series

The first Dialogue will launch the Dialogue series and introduce the nexus approach and nexuses. A high-level segment involving a panel discussion among UN senior officials, invited Member States, the private sector and civil society will officially launch the process, highlighting the needs for and benefits of the nexus approach from an environmental perspective.

During the technical part, attendees will be introduced to the process, benefits, and challenges related to the nexus approach, focusing on practical application. Participants will explore the nature of interactions across multiple SDG targets and identifying crucial “nexus targets” between sectors. Participants will be invited to identify where they have used nexus-like approaches and/or where they see potential. The discussion will move on to reflect what other sectors need to consider in order to support the work of others and what blocks there are in establishing and maintaining nexus partnerships. Building upon the discussion, three nexuses involving more than one SDG target per nexus, will be selected where the biggest strides can be made for Dialogues 2 - 4. Taking into account lessons learned, a preferred nexus methodology to be used at Dialogues 2 -4 to approach the selected nexus, will be chosen.

Special emphasis will be placed on recognizing that each nexus involves trade-offs and are context specific. A nexus may play out in different ways depending on the level at which it is implemented - for example, making policy at the national level vs. delivering a local project. The benefit of looking outside your area before going deeply into your own strategy process will be emphasized. Lastly, the presentation will justify the nexus approach in alignment to Goal 17 – Partnerships for the Goals – and present a successful UN case study.

Preparation

- Prepare maps of interactions between inherently environmental SDGs to other SDGs to serve as a basis for discussion during the first Dialogue. A matrix of influences and a circle and line map illustrating interactions among different SDGs and among the SDGs and environmental issues or targets;

- A mapping of selected nexus initiatives, applied methodologies and perceived gaps. The mapping can include non-UN actors, universities and the private sector;
- Logistical arrangements including identification of participants and invitation;
- Gather suggestions and ideas from EMG members on potential nexuses that could be the focus of Dialogues 2-4.

Outcome

- Strengthened knowledge of nexus approach
- Identified lessons learned and challenges to taking the nexus approach
- Selected nexus methodology and topics for Dialogues 2 -4
- Launch of the Nexus Dialogues

Dialogue 2 - 4: Application of nexus approach to specific nexuses

Dialogues 2-3 will focus on a challenge area identified in the first dialogue. The specific form for the topical dialogues will depend on the topic and the participants, targeting in particular agencies and partners with most relevance to the selected nexus. The Dialogues will address i.a. how to approach and solve conflicting interactions between Goals/Targets. The aim is to identify strategies to enhance synergies and minimize conflicts where they arise.

Participants of the technical segments are expected to gain a nuanced and complex understanding of how their strategies, activities and goals affect and are affected by those of other agencies and sectors in society. Based on the outcome of the technical segment, the high level segment will consider options to establish partnerships for further cooperation on the nexus issues.

Outputs and Outcomes:

1. Guidance and other tools for participants to carry out the nexus approach within their own work;
2. Contributions to the work on defining “integrated policy support” in the form of recommendations for integrating environmental sustainability into MAPS, UNDAF and joint programming guidance;
3. Possible partnerships can be established between UN agencies and other stakeholders on respective nexus issues;
4. A set of joint strategies or actions to which the agencies might contribute, or from which they might benefit;
5. A set of conflicting interactions that affect agencies planning, with strategies for minimizing conflicts and enhancing synergies;
6. Recommendations on how to ensure that the environmental dimension is considered in the implementation of all SDGs;
7. Methods for approaching and resolving potential conflicts;
8. A summary report of meetings and feedback questionnaire.

Dialogue four will also look at the importance of taking an integrated approach to implementation of the environmental dimensions of the 2030 Agenda and the usefulness of the nexus approach in identifying

interlinkages and broadening partnerships. The discussion will be framed around a specific nexus relevant to the UNEA3 context.

The technical segment will focus on pragmatic decisions for how to move forward based on the insights gained throughout the Dialogue process. A brief presentation will report the outcomes of the previous dialogues followed by an evaluative discussion of the usefulness of the approach from the point of view of UN agencies, and their recommendation for follow-up action, including the possibility to hold further dialogues, the establishment of new Issue Management Groups under the EMG and the option to develop a platform for people to check-in or record action so that best practices and lessons learnt are available to others.² This evaluation and recommendations will be the main outcome of this Dialogue.

² For example, <https://sustainabledevelopment.un.org/partnerships/> or <https://business.un.org/en/passport>.