

UN Environment Management Group Nexus Dialogue

Sustainable Infrastructure for the SDGs

26 February, 2019

Salle IX Palais de Nations, Geneva

Background

The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development provides a transformative vision for people and planet-centred, human rights-based, and gender-sensitive sustainable development policy for more sustainable and resilient societies. Production and consumption activities and decent jobs depend on the use of natural resources and the services provided by natural ecosystems as well as human workforce. The greening of economies will enhance our ability to manage natural resources sustainably, increase energy efficiency and reduce waste, while addressing inequalities and enhancing resilience.

Resilient infrastructure is itself an SDG (Goal 9) interlinked with industrialization and innovation. Industry and innovation drive infrastructure development and consequently, economic growth. Resilient infrastructure is an essential foundation for achieving the socio-economic SDGs, including inclusive growth (Goal 8), addressing poverty (Goal 1), reducing hunger (Goal 2), good health and well-being (Goal 3), providing quality education (Goal 4), and supplying clean water and sanitation (Goal 6). For example, access to energy is central for better education, as is access to clean water and sanitation for better health. These services are also critical for gender equality as it increases mobility, output and productivity of women, in particular.

At the same time, highways, airports, dams, power plants, and other forms of infrastructure do affect, and are affected by the environment. Approximately 70% of greenhouse gases (Goal 13) are linked to the construction and operation of infrastructure¹, and linear infrastructure and dams, in particular, can have major impacts to terrestrial and aquatic ecosystems and biodiversity (Goals 14 and 15). In turn the increasingly visible effects of climate change, deforestation, and land degradation can pose major threats to infrastructure; buildings in coastal areas are vulnerable to sea level rise and nuclear power

¹ World Bank (2018). *Low-carbon Infrastructure: an essential solution to climate change?*
<http://blogs.worldbank.org/ppps/low-carbon-infrastructure-essential-solution-climate-change>

must shut down when the ambient temperature of the cooling water (from rivers, lakes and the sea) upon which they depend, rises beyond a certain level.

Given infrastructure's cross-cutting relevance to all of the SDGs, as well as the complex, networked properties of infrastructure systems themselves, an integrated approach to infrastructure planning and development is crucial. This approach considers the interlinkages between different infrastructure systems, sectors, project phases, locations, and aspects of sustainability (environmental, social, and economic). Institutions and governance mechanisms that support multi-disciplinary cooperation and coordination across various policy levels (sub-national, national, international).

Applying such an approach requires consultation with a broad array of stakeholders, and the institutions and governance mechanisms that support multi-disciplinary cooperation and coordination across various policy levels (sub-national, national, international) and ministries. The application of such a "system-of-systems" approach helps policymakers to better assess the impacts of planned infrastructure upon the environment, to optimize trade-offs, identify synergies for more efficient operation, and to guard against lock-in of unsustainable practices.

UN System-wide Dimensions and Significance

UNIDO is the UN System lead agency for SDG 9, on resilient infrastructure. However, several other UN agencies, programmes, bodies and processes are active in promoting sustainable infrastructure, whether in a general sense or within specific sectors (e.g. energy or transport) or thematic areas (e.g. finance, sustainable consumption and production). While the mandates of different UN entities have resulted in specialization and differentiation of approaches among them, there could be gains from promoting collaboration for more impactful programmes and to more fully exploit the linkages between infrastructure and the SDGs. This is especially the case with an integrated approach to sustainable infrastructure, due to its requirement for interdisciplinary analysis and collaboration.

Objectives

This Nexus Dialogue aims to contribute to a common understanding on the centrality of infrastructure to the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and foster support by both public and private stakeholders for the application of an integrated approach to the planning and development of infrastructure. Specifically, the Nexus Dialogue aims to provide a platform to:



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- **Raise awareness.** Current discourse on infrastructure importantly focus on financing and climate aspects. In delivering the Sustainable Development Goals as a whole, however, pollution and health, biodiversity, and resource efficiency should also be given attention. Promoting an integrated approach to infrastructure development will require a coordinated effort from the UN System.
- **Mobilize expertise.** There are many experts who work on integrative tools such as Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA), Environmental and Social Impact Assessment (ESIA) and sustainability certification schemes (e.g. SuRE, ENVISION), but mostly at the project level or at the sector level. In comparison, those who focus on cross-sectoral/city levels with related planning tools and using the Sustainable Development Goals as benchmarks are not that many. The Nexus Dialogue can help to mobilize relevant expertise and share best practices and experience in applying integrated approaches.
- **Support Countries.** There is a need to support countries in embracing the integrated approach, equip them with the essential tools, and enable them to apply the tools to specific infrastructure programmes. Efforts can be made to integrate this effort into the existing mechanisms of UN System partners.

Outcomes

As an outcome of the Nexus Dialogue, the EMG hopes to generate a policy statement outlining key messages re: sustainable infrastructure and the 2030 Agenda. This outcome statement can feed into ongoing processes, such as the UN Environment Assembly to be held in March 2019, and the High-Level Political Forum.

Structure and Content

The Nexus Dialogue will be a one-day public event consisting of a high-level segment and a technical component. It would start with a high-level opening by UN senior officials and Geneva-based Ambassadors, followed by technical sessions among UN agencies and representatives of governments and social partners, research and civil society organizations.