

UN science report to guide countries on the SDGs

The new Global Sustainable Development Report will offer a science-based, practical blueprint on how countries can transform to become more sustainable.



Former United Nations Secretary-General Ban Ki-moon pose for a group photo together with 17 volunteers of Vienna-based organisations to help promote the Sustainable Development Goals. April 27, 2016. Image: IAEA Imagebank, CC BY-NC-ND 2.0

When representatives from 43 countries met at the UN headquarters in New York this summer, all eyes were on the [annual report](#) that probes how far countries have come in implementing a handful of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) adopted two years ago this month to end poverty and help improve people's lives worldwide.

But more quietly, a group of 15 scientists who also convened at the [High-Level Political Forum](#) (HLPF) were busy laying the groundwork for a different document – one designed to look ahead to guide policy, rather than look back to evaluate progress.

Set to first be released in 2019, and then every four years, the [Global Sustainable Development Report](#) (GSDR) will offer science-based guidance to help countries decide their own path to sustainable development.

Scientists involved say it is similar in ambition to the scientific assessments of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) that run parallel to the political negotiations for climate action.

The climate change process sets a good precedent, according to Zakri Abdul Hamid, science advisor to the Malaysian government and governing council member at the UN Technology Bank for the Least Developed Countries.

“The work of the IPCC had shown the way [on] how decisions arrived at by policymakers and negotiators could be improved by relying on scientific evidence,” he said. “GSDR is following the same path.”

It is not just a report, it is a tool for enabling countries to identify different approaches towards implementation.

Lucilla Spini, head of science programmes, International Council for Science (ICSU)

IPCC-like influence

Zakri, a vocal [advocate for the role of science](#) in the UN process, believes the report will bring “added value” to countries’ implementation efforts.

“For a long time, science [has not had a] high profile to assist the various negotiations taking place at the UN, in particular those that concerned socio-economic development,” he told *SciDev.Net*. “Increasingly, the voice of science is being heeded.”

Just like the IPCC reports, the GSDR will be based on evidence, aims to influence decision making, and runs parallel to the political process of implementing the SDGs.

According to the [Ministerial declaration](#) of last year’s HLPF, where it was formally adopted, it will complement the annual SDGs progress report by being “more scientific and analytical, focused on the science-policy interface”.

“It’s not going to be a political paper – we are very independent,” says Eeva Furman, director for Centre for Environmental Policy at the Finnish Environment Institute and one of the scientists elected to the group behind the report.

That independence is important – as is simply having a report that regularly presents evidence to policymakers, according to Saleemul Huq, senior fellow at the International Institute for Environment and Development in the UK and an expert on links between climate change and development. “I think that was the biggest strength of the IPCC,” he says.

Furman is careful to also point out some differences from the IPCC’s work. For one thing, the GSDR won’t rely on peer-reviewed literature alone, but will also look at so-called “grey literature” which includes other sources of research.

She explains this is because the knowledge sources and disciplines that need to be combined to inform the SDGs are diverse and go beyond the natural sciences.

The budget is another point of difference, Furman points out. “We don’t have the huge mechanism [of the IPCC]. We are talking about a group of 15 people who get their travel paid when they come to meetings.”

This year’s HLPF was just the second time the group got to talk face-to-face since work began in the beginning of the year.

“[But we are] aiming for the same level of impact that the IPCC has on decision-making – maybe even higher,” says Furman.

Looking to the future

The concept of transformation – how to get societies to become more sustainable – will be a key theme in the report. But rather than offering prescriptive answers, the aim is to help governments understand what they should focus on, how science links with policy and society, and how they can get input from scientific communities within their borders.

“Our report is different from the yearly UN report that looks at how different goals have progressed,” she Furman. “[It] is very much looking into the future.”

Huq agrees that the GSDR should be about solutions, including cost-effectiveness analysis. “[It needs] to be about what works, what doesn’t work, what can we do to enhance actions that are working in some places and make them more ambitious and more universal,” he says.

The group behind the GSDR is focused on offering recommendations and practical solutions backed by evidence. It’s also steering clear of producing a hefty document dominated by the science, in favour of a slim volume written in accessible language. “[It] is not going to be a 200-page report,” says Furman.

Huq agrees with the approach. “There’s one very big difference between the SDGs and the IPCC,” he says: the first few IPCC assessment reports were compiled at a time when climate change science was fiercely debated.

But for the SDGs, where an agreement to take action is already in place and there’s no science to examine, the GSDR can and should focus on recommendations for implementation.

Although a [first ‘prototype’ edition](#) of the GSDR was put together in 2014, plans for producing it as part of the UN process were formalised at last year’s HLPF.

Lucilla Spini, head of science programmes at the International Council for Science (ICSU), was [actively involved](#) in the prototypes including the 2016 ‘pilot’ version, reviewing chapters and facilitating contributions from scientists.

Calling the GSDR a ‘report’ does not do it justice, according to Spini. “It is not just a report, it is a tool for enabling countries to identify different approaches towards implementation,” she says. “It should offer a ‘one-stop shop’ on assessing science-policy interfaces and an overview of emerging issues.”

It’s also a community-building tool, says Spini, to encourage dialogue among scientists, and between the scientists and policymakers. “My personal role has been to build trust between the international scientific community and the UN DESA team [the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs team in charge of compiling the report],” she says. “And despite very tight deadlines, many scientists decided to help out.”

Process and the global South

Over the next few days the group is set to issue an open call for input through the [DESA website](#). Furman says open calls such as this, and the very openness of our conversation, are signs that the group wants to be inclusive and transparent.

“The group believes that dialogue with society and other parties will help the impact of their work,” she says. “Both process as well as content are important.”

Part of this focus on process is an emphasis on contributions from the developing world. A forthcoming workshop in Helsinki will have an equal split between developing and developed country participants, says Furman.

“And then we have some special focus on issues that are particularly [relevant to] developing countries,” she says, “like the whole science structure ... how it is built in the developing countries – what kind of networks you need, infrastructure, education, capacity-building.”

Participation of experts from developing countries was a problem with the early IPCC reports, according to Huq, but things have improved. One strategy that’s proven useful in recent years is to support young researchers from developing countries, training them so they can become future lead authors.

That element of capacity building pays off in the long-term, says Huq. “That’s where you can fill the gaps – there may be some countries in some geographical locations where at the moment there may not be enough experts, but you can then invest in creating the experts over time.”

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