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## Regional, national and local level governance for sustainable development<sup>1</sup>

This Brief addresses the main issues involved in strengthening governance for sustainable development below the international level. At the regional level, it considers how to strengthen coherence among the UN bodies engaged in providing normative and operational support to Member States, but it also looks at the question of broader coherence and coordination with other relevant institutions. At the national and local levels, the focus is principally on how country-specific institutions can be strengthened and coordinate more closely in implementing aspects of the sustainable development agenda. Finally, the question of coordination and linkage across governance levels – what we call ‘vertical integration’ – is addressed.

Subsidiarity is a useful starting point in considering governance at different levels. It states that matters ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest or least centralized competent authority. This applies in sustainable development governance as in other areas, with the possible qualification that by its nature sustainable development governance involves effective horizontal and vertical coordination among institutions.

### Part I: Regional landscape

#### 1. Introduction

Over the last three decades, regional integration processes have gained momentum, together with sub-regional platforms, in coordinating effective policy actions and dialogues to address key development issues. There is an increasing acknowledgement of the regional dimension of development as a critical link between the global and national levels.

#### Intergovernmental regional fora

The Regional Commissions of the United Nations regularly convene meetings of high-level policy makers in various domains to deliberate on and develop policy responses to regional sustainable development challenges as well as provide guidance to national-level actions within different regions.

Agenda 21 and subsequent CSD decisions recognised the relevance of the regional dimension. The World Summit on Sustainable Development (WSSD) reiterated and further strengthened this mandate and tasked the Regional Commissions to facilitate and promote a balanced integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development into their work, and into the work of regional, sub-regional and other bodies.

The Regional Commissions promote an integrative approach to sustainable development in the following ways:

- (i) Providing an inclusive platform for deliberation and decision making on such an integrative approach, e.g., through the Commission sessions and meetings of the subsidiary bodies of the Commissions related to sustainable development.
- (ii) Providing the link between the global and the national levels: e.g., Regional Commissions have led the regional preparatory processes for Rio+20 collaborating closely with the regional development banks, UNEP, UNDP and regional and subregional organizations, as well as with the entire UN system through the Regional Coordination Mechanism. Other examples include: ECA collaboration with the AUC and UNEP in the establishment of the African Ministerial Conference on the Environment (AMCEN), ECA’s Climate for Development in Africa (ClimDev-Africa) Programme, and hosting of the African Climate Policy Centre (ACPC), the policy arm of the Programme. Similarly, ESCWA closely cooperates with UNEP/ROWA and the League of Arab States (LAS) through a joint technical secretariat for WSSD follow-up. In the ECLAC region, the Regional Implementation Forum has convened the regional implementation meetings in support of sustainable development and CSD processes. ESCAP’s regional mandate includes convening the Ministerial Conference on Environment and Development in Asia and the Pacific (MCED) as well as other Ministerial Conferences in sectoral areas. ECE provides the secretariat for the “Environment for Europe” process.
- (iii) Setting norms and standards at the regional level: e.g., ECE conventions (including those related to water, transboundary pollution and access to information) and their associated protocols constitute a legal backbone for improving the environment in the region. The ECE, through its Environmental Performance Review Programme (EPR), has been providing in-depth advice to countries with economies in transition to improve their environmental performance.
- (iv) Coordination among UN organizations and entities at the regional level: through the chairing of the Regional Coordination Mechanisms (RCMs).

Some important initiatives that subsequently gained global momentum originated in the intergovernmental work of specific regional commissions. For example, before discussions began at the international level on a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, the Asia-Pacific region had a substantial body of work and intensive intergovernmental dialogue on green growth which was later endorsed by ECE’s “Environment for Europe” through the

adoption in 2010 of the “Astana Initiative” as a framework for green economy principles in Europe and Asia and the Pacific.

### **Regional Coordination Mechanisms (RCMs)**

Mandated by ECOSOC<sup>2</sup>, the Regional Commissions<sup>3</sup> hold regular inter-agency meetings in each region to improve policy coherence and programme coordination among the organizations of the UN system and non-UN partners in that region. These meetings are conducted through the Regional Coordination Mechanism (RCM), which is chaired by the Deputy Secretary General and coordinated by the Regional Commissions. RCM meetings focus on policy and programming issues of a regional nature and are guided by regional priorities. The RCMs in different regions have on average a membership of 30 UN and affiliated entities, including the Regional Development Banks.

The RCMs have become the vehicle for delivery of joint analytical products in support of regional development frameworks.

### **Regional UNDG Teams**

The UN Country Team (UNCT)<sup>4</sup> is guided and supported by the Regional UN Development Group (UNDG) Teams<sup>5</sup> (formerly known as “Regional Directors Teams”). The Regional UNDG Teams’ core functions are focused on the provision of coherent and timely technical support to UNCTs, quality assurance of UN Development Assistance Frameworks (UNDAFs)<sup>6</sup>, performance management through the Resident Coordinator (RC)/UNCT Performance Appraisal system, and “trouble shooting” in challenging country situations.

### **Regional Development Banks**

Regional development banks<sup>7</sup> have emerged as important actors for economic integration and development at the national as well as the sub-regional level (e.g., ADB in the Greater Mekong Subregion). They provide effective instruments to fund development initiatives. Sustainability and the environment are post-Rio 1992 additions to the focal areas of these banks (for example, EBRD<sup>8</sup>).

### **Regional/sub-regional intergovernmental organizations**

Regional/subregional organizations, such as the European Union, African Union, MERCOSUR, ASEAN, CARICOM and the Pacific Islands Forum, to name a few, provide platforms for effective policy dialogue and actions to address key development issues at the regional and sub-regional levels. These organizations are important players in determining the development agenda. Some have more comprehensive cooperation programmes than others for which trade cooperation and integration remains the top priority.

### **Regional/sub-regional partnerships, targeted cooperation mechanisms**

Regional partnerships are also playing an increasingly important role. For example, the East Asia Climate Partnership (EACP) is a

cooperative mechanism that aims to tackle climate change and promote green growth in the Asian region. In the Caribbean, the Regional Coordinating Mechanism (RCM) is a coordination mechanism, promoting partnership among ECLAC, UNEP, the Caribbean Community (CARICOM) Secretariat, the Association of Caribbean States (ACS), and the Organisation of Eastern Caribbean States (OECS) Secretariat. In the Pacific, the Council of Regional Organizations of the Pacific (CROP) Sustainable Development Working Group coordinates the activities of its members, which include both UN and non-UN sub-regional organizations.

### **How these organizations currently work together**

In 2008, it was agreed within the UN system<sup>9</sup> that: Regional Commissions lead on regional policy issues, together with the linkages to global policy issues, with UNDG members supporting as required; Regional UNDG Teams manage country operational work (country programming and policy work), with the Regional Commissions participating as needed.

## **2. Enhancing coordination and integration of regional governance**

It is important that regional governance institutions coordinate among themselves and integrate effectively the social, economic and environmental dimensions of sustainable development. Regional institutions need to address region-specific issues; manage regional spillovers, externalities, interdependencies; support national policy development and implementation within the region; provide region specific inputs to inform global policy making.

### **How well is it working at present?**

The functions and complementarities of the RCMs vis-a vis the regional UNDG teams are clearly outlined, with areas of synergy identified<sup>10</sup>. For example, the outcome of the policy coherence work of the RCMs, including regional and sub-regional frameworks, can be conveyed to regional UNDG teams to inform their country-level actions; whereas the country-level experience can inform the regional discussions on policies. A good start has been made by scheduling the meetings of the two mechanisms back-to-back in all regions to ensure complementarities and to allow outcomes of one to feed into the other. However, slow progress has been recorded in the regions regarding improving complementarities and synergies between the two coordination mechanisms.

## **3. The way forward**

### **Ideas on how regional governance could be better integrated across the three pillars**

Issues relating to sustainable development governance at the regional level and the role of emerging new stakeholders and actors, such as the private sector, civil society, trade unions and

farmers, could be further studied. Current inter-linkages and gaps between key organizations (i.e. UN, Regional Development Banks, sub-regional organizations) could be further analyzed to help address the lack of coherence or multiplicity of integration processes and initiatives. Such insights would be useful in designing improved and more effective implementation programmes in the near future.

### **Ideas on how UN agencies can work better together at the regional level**

UN organizations working at the regional level should develop<sup>11</sup> an agreed medium-term capacity-building framework. Stocktaking and reviews should feed into a coherent and coordinated regional framework, informed by normative policies formulated at the international level. To this end, the roles of the Regional Commissions and the UNDG Regional Teams are absolutely critical. Greater coherence and cohesiveness<sup>12</sup> between RCMs and Regional UNDG Teams should be forged. The RCMs and the Regional UNDG teams could be linked more strongly to ensure input from the normative regional work into the work of the Regional UNDG teams in support of UNCTs and vice versa. Engagement and commitment at the highest level to closer collaboration would go a long way in ensuring policy coherence and improving coordination among the work programmes of UN organizations at the regional level. The Regional Commissions and UNDG, as the UN entities mandated with coordination responsibilities at regional level, should prepare a common regional roadmap on how the actions of all regional actors could be better integrated across the three pillars. The strategy should be discussed and agreed upon by all actors at the RCMs and Regional UNDGs, operating as One UN at the regional level. Under the leadership of the Chief Executives Board (CEB), the linkages of the High-Level Committee on Programmes (HLCP) with the RCMs (as a means of enhancing policy coordination between global and regional levels) and with UNDG (as a means of enhancing implementation at the national level) continue to be of relevance.

## **Part II: Governance at national and local levels**

### **1. Introduction**

Governance at national and local levels can be described as the processes by which public policy decisions are made and implemented. It is the result of interactions, relationships and networks among the different sectors (government, public sector, private sector and civil society) and involves decisions, negotiation, and different power relations between stakeholders to determine who gets what, when and how – that is, who is responsible and accountable for what actions.

Some elements of sustainable development governance include:

- integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions across sectors and policy domains (horizontal integration);
- coherence in policy design across domains with sometimes competing priorities (coherence);
- inter-connectedness between governance levels (vertical integration and coherence);
- effectiveness and efficiency of administration and public service delivery;
- quality and inclusiveness of public policy and decision-making procedures;
- engagement of all constituencies of civil society through different forms of participation;
- transparency and accountability.

It is evident that governance for sustainable development involves a wide range of entities, networks and bodies within and outside government that play a role in policy-making and implementation of sustainable development priorities. While this can provide flexibility and innovative solutions to challenges of coordination and coherence, it can in turn influence effectiveness of oversight, accountability and ultimately implementation.

In the Johannesburg Plan of Implementation (para. 162a), States committed to “[c]ontinue to promote coherent and coordinated approaches to institutional frameworks for sustainable development at all national levels, including through, as appropriate, the establishment or strengthening of existing authorities and mechanisms for policy making, coordination and implementation and enforcement of laws.” Furthermore, they committed to take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation by 2005 (para. 162b). It is widely recognized that such strategies can take different forms such as poverty reduction strategies, national development plans or similar, as long as they fulfil the requirement of integrating economic, social and environmental concerns in a balanced and integrated manner. As of 2009, 106 countries had reported their National Sustainable Development Strategies (NSDS) to the Commission on Sustainable Development.

Local authorities, one of the nine major group sectors recognized by Agenda 21<sup>13</sup> are considered the level of governance closest to the people, playing a vital role in mobilizing and responding to the public to promote sustainable development. Local government institutions come in many shapes and sizes, functioning as part of widely varying constitutional and administrative frameworks, yet sharing some common features and responsibilities. As stated in Agenda 21: “Local authorities construct, operate and maintain economic, social and environmental infrastructure, oversee planning processes, establish local environmental policies and regulations, and assist in implementing national and subnational environmental policies.” Thus even when frameworks, norms and

standards are set at a higher level of authority, local governments possess competencies for numerous sectors such as urban planning, urban management, transportation, water, waste management, air quality management, public health, promotion of social services and education.

There is no single model of governance of sustainable development. As a rule, however, local governments are subject to national or regional legislation, dependent to varying degrees on higher levels of government for funding, and have limited legislative powers.

## 2. An issue of integration and coherence

There are many examples of good practices, as well as guidelines, resource materials, planning models, and tools that both national and local governments can use to implement sustainable development action plans or strategies. In this regard, it is well recognized that institutional arrangements for sustainable development are key to achieving integrated decision-making and implementation of sustainable development priorities.

Experience has shown that a number of factors which are applicable to most countries contribute to success:

1. A high-level government commitment to sustainable development articulated through a common vision or strategic objective which also informs governance at the local level. Such commitment can follow on commitments made at the international level which are then translated into goals and priorities taking into account the specific national context and anchored in national legislation.
2. Strong horizontal coordination and coherence mechanisms led by a high-level government office with substantive authority. Such mechanisms can take a variety of forms, such as presidential commissions, inter-ministerial working groups or task forces where participating entities share a common responsibility for ensuring integration and coherence while maintaining operational mandates.
3. Balanced horizontal integration of policy concerns which adequately considers synergies and trade-offs associated with proposed policy measures across economic, social and environmental domains.
4. An integrated development planning process and document underpinned by integrated assessment methods and appropriate measures of progress (such as indicators of sustainable development), which ties directly to Medium-Term Expenditure Frameworks, to ensure that integrated strategies and policies are funded.
5. Strong vertical integration which ensures alignment between national, regional, and local levels of government. Proper alignment can reinforce and support achieving goals across territories and facilitate implementation at all levels, if adequate resources are attached, taking into account that

local government is often at the frontline of the implementation challenge.

6. Institutionalized processes for ensuring meaningful participation of all civil society actors, including the private sector and local government. This has been shown not only to facilitate public awareness regarding sustainable development issues, but to condition the quality, accountability and impact of sustainable development plans. The experience of national councils and stakeholder advisory bodies has shown their potential as a forum for openness and transparency, articulating priorities and concerns, and monitoring progress made in achieving sustainable development goals.
7. In this regard, access to data and information is not only critical to goal setting and as a communication and outreach tool for engaging stakeholders, but experience has shown that increased access to high quality up-to-date information can serve as an integration tool in and of itself. In many cases, access to information on government budget and expenditures provides a critical tool for accountability and transparency.
8. The national sustainable development strategy process implies a continuous iterative process encompassing articulation of priorities, monitoring, evaluation and review to ensure progress in implementation and accountability while allowing for adjustments in priority setting and implementation actions responding to new and emerging challenges.
9. Lastly, some countries have found it useful to undertake voluntary sharing of experiences or reviews vis-à-vis other countries engaged in similar strategy processes. This creates an opportunity to reflect on good governance experience and identify gaps and potential remedies in a collegial setting.

## 3. Particular challenges at the local level

Decentralization and devolution of functions and responsibilities to local governments has sometimes occurred without the accompanying resources and legislative powers. Local authorities, with sub-regional and national spheres of government “above” them, are especially prone to unfunded mandates. Another dimension is that reforms granting local governments new powers and responsibilities should go hand-in-hand with new public accountability mechanisms. There is also room to explore new forms of social accountability mechanisms, such as citizen oversight bodies and participatory budgeting, which enable direct engagement of citizens with government and complement more traditional public accountability mechanisms.

## 4. UN system support at country level

While implementation of sustainable development priorities is the sole responsibility of governments, a number of international actors are engaged at the national and local levels to provide support in one or several areas of concern.

Resident UN agencies, non-resident UN agencies (NRAs) and international financial institutions (IFIs) all form part of United Nations Country Teams (UNCTs) to varying degrees. UN-HABITAT has been supporting local governments around the world in enhancing local leadership for sustainable development. Experience reported by country teams suggests that, in order to achieve the necessary level of capacity to support national institutional arrangements for sustainable development, a further systematized inclusion of the expertise of NRAs and IFIs at the country level would be an advantage. Typical areas of such support include the development of national strategies, regulations, frameworks and policies, but also capacity building of all stakeholders at all levels. Well functioning UNCTs have the potential to provide support by providing policy guidance; developing indicators and other measurements; building capacity of government to deliver on commitments; improving information sharing and knowledge networking; finally, linking issues/frameworks for greater cross-sectoral cooperation.

## 5. The way forward

Though many implementation measures have been taken by governments and non-government stakeholders alike, barriers to implementation such as fragmented decision-making, conflicting policy targets and insufficient or ineffective coordination persist.

The lessons learnt from the past 20 years should provide a basis for the further improvement of governance at the national and local levels. This includes seeking a renewed attention to national and sub-national sustainable development strategies as a key vehicle for integration and coherence in sustainable development policy design and implementation, if appropriately linked with resource mobilization.

There is a need to pursue cooperation and integration along two axes – vertical and horizontal. All governance levels from local through global need to be vertically interconnected, knitting together sometimes fragmented and overlapping governance arrangements. This is sometimes referred to as the notion of multi-level governance. The strategies and SD policies at the local level should be integrated into sub-national and national plans and processes for SD.

In the context of many “emerging issues” such as climate change and rapid urbanization in many parts of the world, local authorities’ frontline responsibility for provision of basic services and spatial planning places intense strains on their institutional and human capacities. The sustainable development implementation gap can therefore only be closed if the capacities of local authorities are significantly strengthened.

Future efforts should enhance capacity building for local authorities and ensure that resources follow implementing authority. For local authorities to be successful in their work for sustainable development, it is crucial that favourable conditions

are put in place by national governments, since there is a limit to what local authorities can achieve on their own. It is imperative that decentralization policies are accompanied by all the needed political, legal and financial support that local authorities need for implementing their localized strategies for sustainability.

At the heart of the debate on institutional strengthening and capacity development are the use of data and information to build consensus and support decision making in an integrated manner, the ability to provide leadership on cross-sectoral issues, and the reinforcement of analytical and strategic planning capacities for multi-sectoral issues. The enabling environment within which this can happen is a key dimension of capacity building at the local level.

Looking forward, UNDG and entities at headquarters could be encouraged to strengthen support for the further application of good practices at country level in furtherance of governance for sustainable development, including in the areas of developing suitable coordination mechanisms that address sustainable development in its totality; integration and coherence in policy design; support for meaningful stakeholder participation in decision-making; outreach and communication. In addition, opportunities could be sought to facilitate learning and sharing of experiences among peers, including through use of technological innovations.

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The purpose of the Rio 2012 Issues Briefs is to provide a channel for policymakers and other interested stakeholders to discuss and review issues relevant to the objective and themes of the conference, including a green economy in the context of sustainable development and poverty eradication, as well as the institutional framework for sustainable development.

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<sup>1</sup> We would like to acknowledge inputs received from the Regional Commissions, UNESCO, GEF, UN-HABITAT, UNEP and UNDP.

<sup>2</sup> Resolution 1998/46

<sup>3</sup> CEB/2009/HLCF-XVII/CRP.2

<sup>4</sup> The main purpose of the UN Country Team is for individual agencies to plan and work together to ensure inter-agency coordination in delivering tangible results in support of the development agenda of the Government. Source: <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=1257>.

<sup>5</sup> <http://www.undg.org/index.cfm?P=684>

<sup>6</sup> The UN Development Assistance Framework (UNDAF) is a programme document between a government and the UNCT, describing collective actions and strategies of the UN to support national development. The UNDAF includes outcomes, activities and UN agency responsibilities that are agreed by government.

<sup>7</sup> The African Development Bank, Asian Development Bank, European Bank for Reconstruction and Development, and Inter-American Development Bank Group.

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<sup>8</sup> <http://www.ebrd.com/downloads/research/sustain/sr10e.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> “The Regional Dimension of Development and the United Nations System”, draft unedited version (4 Oct 2011).

<sup>10</sup> “The Regional Dimension of Development and the United Nations System”, draft unedited version (4 Oct 2011).

<sup>11</sup> Recommendation 4 of “The Regional Dimension of Development and the United Nations System”.

<sup>12</sup> Recommendation 6 of “The Regional Dimension of Development and the United Nations System”.

<sup>13</sup> Agenda 21, Section III, Chapter 28:

[http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd\\_aofw\\_mg/mg\\_locaauth.shtml](http://www.un.org/esa/dsd/dsd_aofw_mg/mg_locaauth.shtml)