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The MDGs and sustainable development: the need for a strategic approach

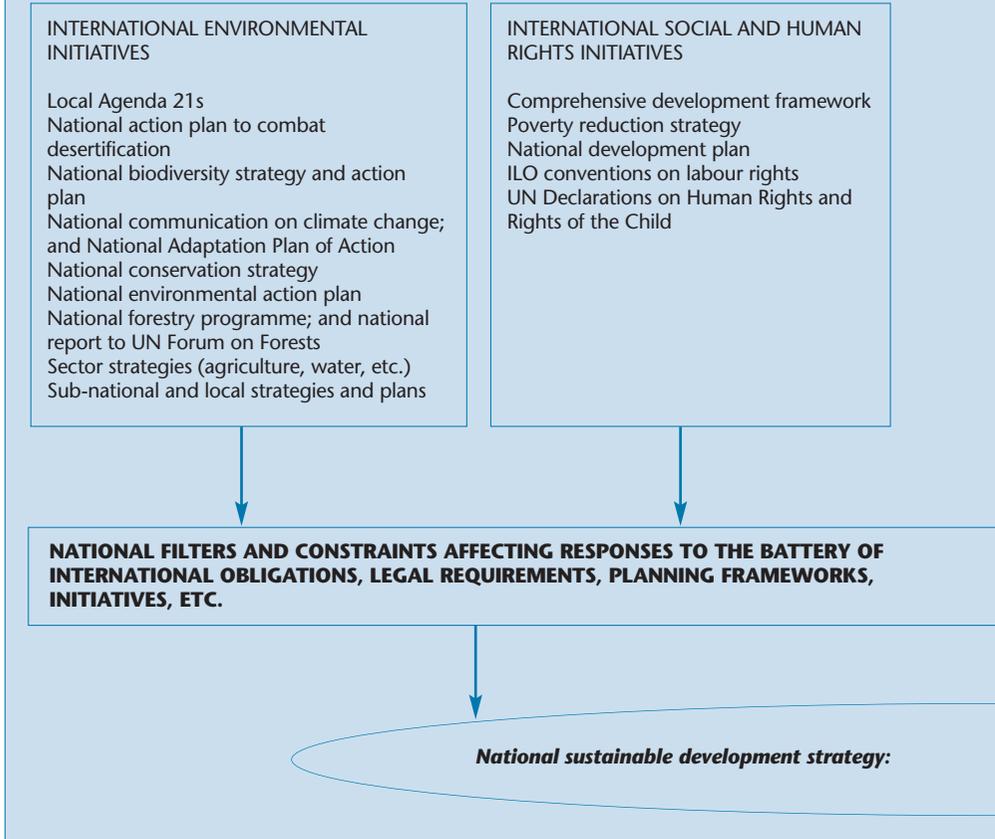
Barry Dalal-Clayton

***“Ultimately, sustainable development is not something that governments do for people; it is something people achieve for themselves through individual and collective change.”
(Cielito Habito)***

I. FACING THE CHALLENGE

This chapter reviews the experience to date developing and implementing sustainable development strategies, and considers what can be learnt from this experience for implementing the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs). The eight goals (and their associated targets) provide a new framework for guiding the thinking and activities of the development cooperation community, although they integrate many previous commitments. But there is a danger that they will be seen by low- and middle-income countries as yet another external international precept that they are “required” to respond to – much like National Environmental Action Plans (NEAPs) and Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs). Countries are already

Figure 5.1: Bombardment with strategic planning requirements: illustrative examples of international conventions and initiatives and national frameworks that typically challenge a country



bombarded with international obligations (Figure 5.1), which place considerable strain on already overloaded institutions with limited capacity, and which may well lead to duplication of effort and reduction in policy coherence. The international community can only help if governments and civil society in low- and middle-income countries see the MDGs as important to them, and as a set of goals they see value in addressing.

This presents a major challenge. How can the MDGs be addressed, both individually and collectively, in policy-making, planning and decision-taking? How can the

INTERNATIONAL ECONOMIC AND TRADE INITIATIVES

ISO standards
International agreements on transport, telecommunications, etc.
WTO rules
Intellectual property rights
Financing for Development (Monterrey) commitments

INTERNATIONAL COMPREHENSIVE SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT INITIATIVES

Millennium Development Goals
Agenda 21 Rio declaration
UN Commission on Sustainable Development programme of work
Vision 2020

e.g. National legal procedures, coherence, stakeholder participation, communications, absorption capacity, etc.

A mechanism to integrate and coordinate responses?

implications of taking steps to meet the different MDG goals and targets be squared with each other – so that the steps that need to be taken in poverty reduction, natural resource management, water and sanitation and food security that were discussed in previous chapters are synergistic and not counter-productive, and are integrated with other national and local needs and priorities? Achieving progress towards the MDGs is at the core of operationalizing sustainable development, but the MDGs are only useful tools if they make sense to a range of key actors at local and national levels.



In the 10 years between the 1992 Earth Summit at Rio (UNCED) and the 2002 Johannesburg Summit (WSSD), international agencies, national and local governments, private sector organizations, NGOs and others have struggled to find ways of putting sustainable development into practice. But progress has remained elusive, despite all the rhetoric and the accords reached at conferences and summits.

Sustainable development means treating the issues of poverty, environmental management and economic development together, in the face of many difficult challenges. But how can environmental protection, poverty alleviation and money-making objectives be integrated in practice – or trade-offs acceptable to all parties be developed – if integration is impossible? How can long-term needs **really** be balanced with short-term imperatives, especially when change is so unpredictable? How can local demands be treated alongside broader national and global requirements? And how do you get a decision-making process “with the maximum possible participation” – as called for by Agenda 21, and again in the WSSD Plan of Implementation – that does not impose substantial costs in time or money? In effect, social, environmental and economic issues of almost unprecedented complexity need to be tackled at several levels in ways that are not merely conceptually neat but that also encourage significant behavioural and institutional change.

Achieving real progress on the MDGs, and finding an effective balance between them and the other dimensions of development and natural resource management not covered by the goals, will require structural changes to the ways societies manage their economic, social and environmental affairs. Different countries may settle for different solutions, but all will have to make hard choices. Strategies for sustainable development are about making and implementing such choices, in realistic, effective and lasting ways.



“Sustainable development strategies offer a way of managing and structuring a national response to the challenges of the MDGs in general, and to MDG8 in particular”

Sustainable development strategies were first called for in Agenda 21, and made a hard target in the WSSD Plan of Implementation:

“States should:

(a) Continue 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 necessary for policy-making, coordination and implementation and enforcement of laws;

(b) Take immediate steps to make progress in the formulation and elaboration of national strategies for sustainable development and begin their implementation by 2005. To this end, as appropriate, strategies should be supported through international cooperation, taking into account the special needs of developing countries, in particular the least-developed countries. Such strategies, which, where applicable, could be formulated as poverty reduction strategies that integrate economic, social and environmental aspects of sustainable development, should be pursued in accordance with each country’s national priorities.”⁽¹⁾

Such strategies offer a way of managing and structuring a national response to the challenges of the MDGs in general, and to MDG8 (“Ensure environmental sustainability”) in particular, and a mechanism to operationalize target 9 (“To integrate the principles of sustainable development into country policies and programmes and reverse the loss of environmental resources”).

II. NEW THINKING ON STRATEGIES FOR SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

In the run up to WSSD, a review of experiences with sustainable development strategies, which included

1. Paragraph 162, Plan of Implementation, World Summit on Sustainable Development final version, 24th March 2003, www.un.org/esa/sustdev/documents/WSSD_POI_PD.



“Donors will need to consider carefully how to avoid repeating the experience of earlier strategy approaches which were, effectively, conditionality vehicles for aid”

organized stakeholder dialogues in a range of countries,⁽²⁾ showed that most low- and middle-income countries are engaged in the simultaneous performance of multiple strategy exercises (Box 5.1), which give rise to policy inflation. But they face remarkably similar problems – and many of these will challenge countries and international agencies as ways are sought to implement the MDGs:⁽³⁾

- ◆ **Externally driven:** A large number of strategies have not been **country-led** but have been induced or even imposed by external agencies. (“A long form to fill in if we are to get aid” was how one minister described one major strategy process.) Many governments may also view the MDGs as something “cooked up” by the outside world. Although some governments have demonstrated a commitment to addressing the MDGs, it is mostly international agencies that have pushed the MDGs strongly, and have (rapidly) made them a central focus of their policies, almost to the exclusion of other fundamental aspects of the sustainable development agenda. Donors will need to consider carefully how to avoid repeating the experience of earlier strategy approaches which were, effectively, conditionality vehicles for aid.
- ◆ **Lack of integration:** Different international agencies push their own strategy “brands” in their dealings with governments, leading to **competition**, “policy inflation” and overburdening of local capacities. Consequently, many strategies are not **integrated** into a country’s

2. IIED/UNDP/DFID (2002), “National strategies for sustainable development: new thinking and time for action”, Opinion Paper for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, IIED, London, in cooperation with United Nations Development Programme and UK Department for International Development, IIED, London, <http://www.iied.org/pdf/wssd-09-nssd.pdf>; also OECD DAC (2001), *The DAC Guidelines: Strategies for Sustainable Development: Guidance for Development Cooperation*, Development Cooperation Committee, Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development, Paris, available on www.SourceOECD.org; OECD/UNDP (2002), *Sustainable Development Strategies: A Resource Book*, prepared by Barry Dalal-Clayton and Stephen Bass, IIED, for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and United Nations Development Programme, Earthscan Publications, London; UN DESA (2002), “Guidance in preparing a national sustainable development strategy: managing sustainable development in the new millennium”, Background Paper No 13 (DESA/DSD/PC2/BP13), submitted by the Division for Sustainable Development, Department of Economic and Social Affairs, United Nations to the Commission on Sustainable Development acting as the Preparatory Committee for the World Summit on Sustainable Development Second Preparatory Session, 28 January–8 February 2002, New York, available on <http://www.johannesburgsummit.org>.

3. Bass, S and D B Dalal-Clayton (2002), “Bridging the knowledge gap in SD strategies: research partnerships for sustainable development”, Opinion Paper for the World Summit on Sustainable Development, July 2002, IIED, London, in association with the Regional and International Networking Group (RING), http://www.iied.org/wssd/pdf/27_RPSD_Strategies_for_SD.pdf.

Box 5.1: Examples of the array of strategy approaches

For addressing poverty reduction – Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSPs) are the predominant approach, promoted by the World Bank (often as part of the requirement for securing debt relief). Many bilateral development agencies have accorded PRSPs a central place in their support to Southern countries. The World Bank's particular requirements have meant that existing "home-grown" poverty strategies may have been displaced and/or superseded by the PRSPs.^(a)

For environmental conservation – The environmental conventions spawned by the 1992 UN Earth Summit each demand some form of national response. The predominant frameworks include National Biodiversity Strategies and Action Plans under the CBD; National Communications on climate change under the FCCC; National Action Plans on desertification under the CCD; and National Forest Programmes to implement the IPF Proposals for Action. In some countries, frameworks that were developed in the 1980s and early 1990s – National Environmental Action Plans and National Conservation Strategies – are still in operation. These do not relate to international obligations, but national environmental action plans are often strongly associated with the World Bank.

For an integrated approach to sustainable development – Three recognized frameworks are predominant, and one "organic" option has

emerged in practice.

- ◆ At local level, Local Agenda 21s have been developed in over 6,400 local districts or municipalities as the means to put Agenda 21 into action. Some of these have led to significant innovation and changed behaviour.
- ◆ The national-level equivalent is the National Sustainable Development Strategy (NSDS), but far fewer of these have been developed. There has never been a strong international political push for these, in spite of their centrality to Agenda 21 recommendations and the international target agreed in 1997 at a UN Special Session (Rio+5), renewed at WSSD. Indeed there were no official UN guidelines until 2002.
- ◆ The World Bank's Comprehensive Development Framework (CDF) was introduced as the means to ensure integrated development. But this approach has now been largely subsumed under the international focus on PRSPs (CDF principles are applied in HIPC countries).

Other integrated approaches to sustainable development have developed more organically, most notably the evolution of environmental strategies (for example, Pakistan), which have progressively had to deal with social and economic issues during implementation, or through the evolution of national development plans, which have had to face up to pressing social and environmental concerns (as in Thailand).

^(a) ODI (2001), *PRSP Institutionalization Study: Final Report*, submitted to the Strategic Partnership with Africa, 15 October 2001.

SOURCE: OECD/UNDP (2002), *Sustainable Development Strategies: A Resource Book*, prepared by Barry Dalal-Clayton and Stephen Bass, IIED, for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and United Nations Development Programme, Earthscan Publications, London.

mainstream decision-making systems (notably, government economic planning and private sector investment decisions). Potential incentives for local institutions and mechanisms to contribute to, or make use of, the strategy are missed. The results are often not more than "planners' dreams", with little political, civil society or business commitment and demand for further action.



“There are often few links between policy and on-the-ground realities, so that policy debate is unable to learn from the field, and people in the field cannot participate in debate”

- ◆ **Inadequate learning from real life:** There are often few links between *policy* and *on-the-ground realities*, so that policy debate is unable to learn from the field, and people in the field cannot participate in debate. As a result, opportunities to link progress in both areas are missed. Donors will need to ensure that efforts to implement the MDGs do not fall into the same trap but are built around learning processes that enable full stakeholder participation to identify needs and priorities, generate consensus on ways forward, and track what works.
- ◆ **Not enough prioritization:** Many strategies are little more than wish-lists, lacking clear *priorities* or achievable *targets*. The determination of many strategies to be comprehensive is a source of both strength (awareness of linked issues) and weakness (lack of focus). This is partly due to inadequate research to inform priorities and solutions (as discussed in more detail later) or to the progressive removal of research from the priority-setting process. As a result, usually, no one is interested in, or feels responsible for, the complete wish list, and those at the “centre” feel paralyzed by too many proposals.
- ◆ **Lack of ownership:** There is often a very narrow base of *participation*, usually due to a lack of time and resources, no recognized means of identifying the stakeholders that count most, and weak rules and institutions on participation processes and outcomes. Any participation is often late in the process. As a result, consensus is forced, fragile or partial, and few people feel a sense of “ownership”.
- ◆ **Poor data and analysis:** The *information base on natural resources and other environmental issues* is usually inadequate and often out of date or inaccurate (Box 5.2). Old analyses are repeated and dubious assumptions are not challenged. *Analytical methodologies* are often not up to the holistic tasks, or are inadequately tried, tested and trusted. Existing *sources of (local) knowledge* are often overlooked in favour of the analyses of (external) strategy consultants.

Box 5.2: The lack of environmental information in Southern Africa

While there is a wealth of documentation on the environment in the countries of Southern Africa, a significant proportion of the data which they report has not been “ground-truthed” by field observations, but is based on information from other sources, and there is often uncertainty about the reliability of data in the original sources. This means that questionable information continues to be given currency without checking, and various “environmental myths”, which they are used to support, such as the extent and seriousness of land degradation in the region, are perpetuated.

In practice, for many environmental factors for which reliable data are required to assess trends meaningfully, key data are lacking or available data are questionable. In some cases, the problem is more one of “invisible information” – i.e. information exists, but it is dispersed, inaccessible (even kept secret) or unrecognized. A key challenge in addressing many sectoral and cross-sectoral information issues is to think creatively about accessing hidden and unconventional information sources, as well as making obvious existing information more useful.

SOURCE: Dalal-Clayton, D B (1997), “Southern Africa beyond the millennium: environmental trends and scenarios to 2015”, *Environmental Planning Issues* No 13, IIED, London.

As a result, the credibility of what is recommended is often low because the information base is not measured in terms of its relevance, utility and accountability to local stakeholders. In the earliest environmental strategies, such as the National Conservation Strategies and the National Environmental Action Plans, analysis was quite innovative, as there were fewer imposed norms and frameworks. But in the worst cases, pieces of “analysis” from one country strategy were “cut and pasted” into another country strategy; these served more to push the point of view of the external “drivers” of the strategy than to assess local needs and solutions.

These common failings have discredited the concept of “national strategies”, and the term has begun to be synonymous with external concepts rather than locally owned policy processes and commitments. Yet, the transition to sustainable development **will** require some kind of coordinated, structured – strategic – response that deals with priorities, that can manage complexity and uncertainties, and that encourages innovation. Tackling the knowledge limitations will be a key part of this.

New thinking on national⁽⁴⁾ strategies for sustainable development has emerged from this work. This emphasizes

4. “National” is used to mean within the nation, and to be country owned and at multiple levels – from national to local.

Table 5.1: Changing approaches to strategies

FROM:	TO:
Develops and implements a single “master plan” for sustainable development (that gets increasingly out of date)	Builds a system of coordinated mechanisms and processes dealing with sustainable development priorities step by step
Fixed ideas and solutions	An adaptive, learning system offering coherence between activities
One-off initiative	A continuous process
Management based on precedent or evidence only	Management also drawing on experimentation and managing uncertainty
State alone is responsible	Society as a whole is responsible
Narrow participation	Multi-stakeholder approach
Focus on outputs (projects, laws, etc.)	Focus on outcomes (impacts) and the quality of participation and management processes
Sector-based research and planning	Partnerships and integrated research and planning
Focus on costly “projects” (and a consequent dependence on external assistance)	Focus on cost savings and domestically driven and financed investment and development

SOURCES: Adapted from OECD/UNDP (2002), *Sustainable Development Strategies: A Resource Book*, prepared by Barry Dalal-Clayton and Stephen Bass, IIED, for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and United Nations Development Programme, Earthscan Publications, London; also Dalal-Clayton, D B and S Bass (2002), “Recent progress and new thinking on strategies for sustainable development”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Impact Assessment, 15–21 June 2002, The Hague, IIED, London.

multi-stakeholder processes, continuous learning and improvement, and effective mechanisms for coordinating strategic planning as captured in the following definition of a strategy:

“A coordinated set of participatory and continuously improving processes of analysis, debate, capacity-strengthening, planning and investment, which seeks to integrate the short- and long-term economic, social and environmental objectives of society – through mutually supportive approaches wherever possible – and manages trade-offs, where this is not possible.”⁽⁵⁾

National strategies for sustainable development can offer **systems** to integrate many initiatives – and keep sustainable



“Old notions of strategies as perfectionist ‘master plans’, which are invariably imposed from outside, are being dispensed with, and new thinking recognizes the need to build on approaches that actually work”

development on everyone’s agenda. Old notions of strategies as **perfectionist “master plans”**, which are invariably imposed from outside, are being dispensed with, and new thinking recognizes the need to build on approaches that actually work. Table 5.1 highlights these changing approaches; it is worth noting how much this table has in common with Table 2.1, which highlighted the gap between what international donors find easy to fund for poverty reduction and what actually works best on the ground. Success in implementing the MDGs depends on international agencies understanding the need for these shifts in approach.

In building effective systems and processes, governments in each country will need to identify and strengthen those mechanisms that they have found most effective in understanding and debating sustainable development issues, in planning experiments, in changing policy towards sustainable development and associated roles, and in monitoring sustainable development in ways that lead to improved action. In some countries, conservation strategies, environmental action plans, green plans and similar approaches have offered some of these mechanisms. But there have been other sources of innovation too – especially in the regular planning system, in corporate investment, in public–private partnerships, and in community development and decentralization initiatives. These other initiatives respond to different everyday pressures – local as well as (increasingly) global – and are often not coordinated with one another. But they embrace some of the desirable characteristics of a strategy for sustainable development, if they can somehow be brought together.

III. COMMON PRINCIPLES AND CHARACTERISTICS OF SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT STRATEGIES

A set of principles has been established for National Sustainable Development Strategies,⁽⁶⁾ and agreement reached on a number of characteristics common to all such

6. OECD DAC (2001), *op. cit.*



“The particular label applied to a national sustainable development strategy is not important as long as the common characteristics of the strategy are adhered to”

strategies in all nations.⁽⁷⁾ These principles and characteristics can be summarized as:

- ◆ integration of economic, social and environmental objectives;
- ◆ coordination and balance between sector and thematic strategies and decentralized levels, and across generations;
- ◆ broad participation, effective partnerships, transparency and accountability;
- ◆ country ownership, shared vision with a clear timeframe on which stakeholders agree, commitment and continuous improvement;
- ◆ developing capacity and an enabling environment, building on existing knowledge and processes;
- ◆ focus on priorities, outcomes and coherent means of implementation;
- ◆ linkage with budget and investment processes; and
- ◆ continuous monitoring and evaluation.

Although effective national sustainable development strategies have common characteristics, they can take different forms depending on national and local conditions. For example, established frameworks such as a National Vision, a National Agenda 21, a Poverty Reduction Strategy or a Comprehensive Development Framework can all provide a good starting point. The particular label applied to a national sustainable development strategy is not important as long as the common characteristics of the strategy are adhered to.⁽⁸⁾

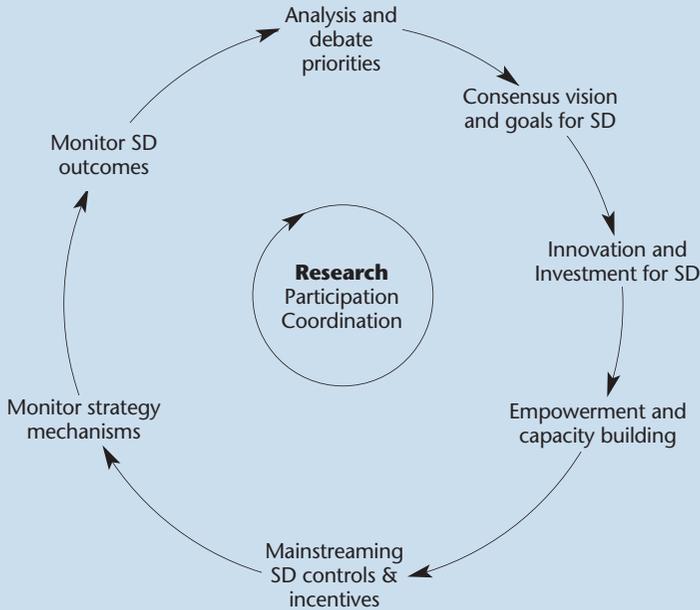
IV. STRATEGIES SHOULD BE LEARNING SYSTEMS

The emphasis within sustainable development strategies is now on demand-driven processes rather than on top-down agendas. “Strategy” is increasingly being used to imply a

7. UN DESA (2001) and (2002), *op. cit.*

8. UN DESA (2002), *op. cit.*

Figure 5.2: A “continuous improvement” approach to sustainable development strategies



SOURCE: OECD/UNDP (2002), *Sustainable Development Strategies: A Resource Book*, prepared by Barry Dalal-Clayton and Stephen Bass, IIED, for the Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development and United Nations Development Programme, Earthscan Publications, London.

continuous (or at least iterative) learning system to develop and achieve a shared vision, rather than a one-off exercise (Figure 5.2). The associated challenges are now more clearly about governance and institutional change; about generating awareness; about building relationships between government, civil society and the private sector; about reaching consensus on values; about building commitment; about creating an environment with the right incentives; and about working on shared tasks – and doing so at a pace with which stakeholders can cope. The means to do this involves integrated systems of participation, analysis, debate, experiment, prioritization, transparency, monitoring, accountability and review. All countries will have some elements of these systems within existing strategic planning mechanisms. The challenge is to find them, bring them together and strengthen them.



“Putting a National Sustainable Development Strategy into operation would, in practice, probably consist of using promising existing processes as entry points”

Putting a National Sustainable Development Strategy (by whatever label) into operation would, in practice, probably consist of using promising existing processes as entry points, and strengthening them in terms of the key principles and characteristics listed above.

V. ESTABLISHING A COORDINATED SYSTEM

A national strategy should be seen as a set of coordinated mechanisms and processes which operate at national to local levels in an integrated way to implement the above principles and help society work towards sustainable development, and not as “master plans” developed just at national levels (which usually ignore local needs and priorities and which rapidly get out of date). This will help improve convergence between existing strategies, and will avoid duplication, confusion and straining developing country capacity and resources. It should help build effective links and synergies in policy-making and decision-taking between local and national levels – something that is lacking in almost all countries but which is vital to realizing the MDGs and progressing towards sustainable development. Indeed, a sustainable development strategy may best be viewed as a ***system comprising various components***:

- ◆ regular multi-stakeholder fora to debate issues connected with realizing the MDGs and achieving sustainable development, and means for negotiation at different levels – from national to local – with links between them so that they can inform and learn from each other and work together;
- ◆ a shared vision for realizing the MDGs in particular, and sustainable development more broadly, developed through such fora, incorporating broad strategic objectives;
- ◆ a set of mechanisms to pursue these objectives in ways that can adapt to change (notably an information system with key sustainable development indicators; communication capabilities; analytical processes; international engagement; and coordinated means for



policy coherence, budgeting, monitoring and accountability). Such mechanisms will need to operate across the local to national spectrum and be designed, developed/adapted and tailored according to specific needs and capacities at different levels;

- ◆ strategic principles and locality- or sector-specific criteria, indicators and standards adopted by sectors and stakeholders, through legislation, voluntary action and market-based instruments;
- ◆ pilot activities – from an early stage – to generate learning and commitment. Most of these should be locally rooted and address real community needs so that citizens can see that sustainable development approaches are working and feel that their engagement in developing a strategy is worth their effort;
- ◆ a secretariat or other facility, with clear authority and powers, to coordinate these mechanisms; and, finally,
- ◆ a mandate for all these activities from a high-level, central authority such as the Prime Minister’s office and, to the extent possible, from community, citizens’ business organizations. Such a mandate, with official government backing as well as support from civil society and the private sector, is vital if a sustainable development strategy is to be implemented effectively.

VI. THE NEED TO BUILD AND USE KNOWLEDGE

Sustainable development, in general, and the MDGs in particular, require continually updated understanding of many issues. As noted earlier, the priorities and solutions set out in many strategies for sustainable development have failed to take account of available knowledge – and particularly local knowledge – and have not been based on adequate research, particularly local analyses of needs, priorities and knowledge. In practice, much knowledge already exists, but needs to be identified, applied and kept under review. Equally, there are major data gaps and particularly so for local data for most localities.

Box 5.3: Scope of knowledge needed for sustainable development to support progress towards the MDGs

Understanding poverty in its various dimensions:

As Chapter 2 described, there are many aspects to poverty with complex interlinkages between many of them. Attention needs to be paid to poor people's access to financial, physical, natural, social and human assets; their conditions of vulnerability, resilience and opportunity; their associated rights and powers; and well-being relative to others. Both aggregate and stratified information is needed. Of particular importance is understanding the nature of chronic poverty, i.e. identifying those people or groups who seem "immune" to development efforts from one generation to the next.

Understanding environmental conditions:

The extent of particular ecosystems and their productive capability (yields or waste assimilation capacity), diversity and current use; and both the potential hazards they face and the actual degradation being caused. It is especially important to identify the status of ecosystems of importance to human well-being and to the main economic sectors (e.g. farm systems, or air and water quality), and to identify those under most threat.

Understanding multiple links between poverty and environmental conditions:

There are few simple, linear and one-way

relationships. At one time, it was widely assumed that poor people were a major contributor to environmental degradation, even though their "poverty" was often related to their lack of access to environmental resources. Now it is generally realized that people are poor because they do not have effective access to environmental resources and other benefits and to means to sustain them; also, that most environmental degradation is linked to the consumption patterns of non-poor groups (especially high-income groups) and the production structures that serve them. But simple development myths are still bandied about in the absence of dynamic and locally specific information. Isolating the major causes of environmental degradation or environmental health risks is nearly always a matter of long-term research, independent from any vested interests, coupled with transparent debate processes and a high-level mandate to get to the (sometimes ugly) truth.

Understanding change and possible future scenarios:

Uncertainties abound but one thing is certain: sustainable development will not be described by the end-point illustrations offered in the average sustainable development strategy. Change is constant in economic, social and environmental systems, and dis-equilibrium is often on the increase,

Underlying assumptions or "myths" need to be tackled. Gaps in knowledge need to be identified. Processes of innovation need to be generated when new problems emerge. Particular programmes to capture knowledge need to be put in place in order to organize the exploration of this vast terrain. Box 5.3 outlines what such knowledge-building needs to cover. And those who hold knowledge, particularly at local levels, need to be brought into strategy and decision-making processes so that their knowledge can be incorporated.

It is clear that there are both needs and the potential for improving the links between knowledge generation, policy development and sustainable development practice.

especially in small and vulnerable communities and countries. Sustainable development requires the ability to assess vulnerabilities and sources of resilience in relation to uncertain changes. Scenario planning provides rigour to test resilience (it is not a forecasting exercise). Yet, sustainable development research too often bases its conclusions on existing conditions or (at best) an extrapolation of current trends.

Understanding stakeholder powers, capacities, needs and motivations: An assessment of the particular powers (or lack of them) of stakeholders is crucial both to an understanding of each sustainable development issue (who are the dominant, the marginalized and the excluded), and to the structuring of strategy processes (who needs to be involved to remedy problems and realize opportunities).

Understanding policy and decision-making processes: including the institutional, legislative and administrative drivers and dynamics of development at all levels. In sustainable development strategies, for example, stakeholders establish an intention to undergo a participatory process to renegotiate goals and their own roles in achieving them. Research is needed to identify which are the most promising existing mechanisms for this.

Subsequently, the strategy process itself, and all of its components, need to be well understood for the strategy to keep on track.

Understanding practice – the impacts of “solutions”: There is a vast range of field-based innovation at the interface between economic, environmental and social systems. Much more effort is needed to assess such innovations, their impact and the conditions that make them a success. This helps to avoid the cult of the “local success story”, the “miracle cure” or the “demon to be exorcised”. It is too easy to say “this local project is good, so we’ll have a hundred more of them” without understanding the particular context and enabling policy and institutional conditions. Policy should be improved by knowing what works on the ground, why, where and when.

Understanding and testing theories of the development process: Development agencies tend to favour fashions and miracle solutions, which are replete with assumptions. “Sustainable development” itself can be viewed as an hypothesis – requiring research to establish the right integration and trade-offs, to assess impacts, to review whether the process has worked, to make adjustments as necessary, and to revisit assumptions, fashions and theories.

SOURCE: Dalal-Clayton, D B and S Bass (2002), “Recent progress and new thinking on strategies for sustainable development”, Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Association for Impact Assessment, 15–21 June, The Hague, IIED, London.

Strategy processes that effectively link all the centres of debate and decision-making – government, business and civil society – on a continuing basis will lead to demand for relevant sustainable development knowledge generation.

Information-building and research programmes that bring together many sources of knowledge in effective inter-disciplinary methodologies – on a continuing basis – will lead to better strategies.

A practical approach for doing this is the “continuous improvement” framework (Figure 5.2) that integrates knowledge-building and policy actors in a step by step, learning and adaptation process of change, driven by multi-stakeholder groups.



“There are limits to what even the best corporations and NGOs can do on their own, especially in the absence of a forum to debate integration and trade-offs with one another, and with government”

VII. SEIZING THE OPPORTUNITY

Sustainable development strategies emerged as a fundamental issue at WSSD, when countries and organizations gave considerable thought to how they might organize themselves to address the MDGs and implement the agreements embedded in the WSSD Plan of Implementation. The guidance offered by the OECD and UN⁽⁹⁾ provides a timely and effective way forward at national and local levels. It offers a “fitness for sustainable development” diagnostic and a “gap analysis” to identify processes and mechanisms that are missing. Because national strategies are now understood as being based on what works from civil society, private sector and government sources, they should be able to spur countries into real institutional change, by clarifying the issue as one of “identify and scale-up” rather than one of “start again”. Because the new thinking on national strategies treats national environmental action plans, poverty reduction strategies, comprehensive development frameworks, etc. as optional means to an end rather than as ends in themselves, it encourages an inclusive approach that should be able to defuse tensions between these “branded” initiatives. By emphasizing integration with budget/investment processes, and by seeking clarity of goals and evidence of priorities, effective strategy processes are also more likely to attract investment than in the past.

National strategies can provide many “entry points” for concerned civil society and business groups. Many such groups are seeking effective means of engagement with one another and with government. There are limits to what even the best corporations and NGOs can do on their own, especially in the absence of a forum to debate integration and trade-offs with one another, and with government. It is clear that the emerging, pragmatic approach to national strategies has dispensed with the notion of a government-led plan, and has replaced it with a government-facilitated process. This process integrates many functions (debate,

9. OECD DAC (2001), OECD/UNDP (2002) and UN DESA (2002), *op. cit.*



information-gathering, analysis, decision-making, experimentation, role changes, policy changes, monitoring and review), and incorporates principles of inclusiveness and innovation; thus, it is an efficient and equitable way of bringing together concerned groups. In short, it offers a practical way of keeping sustainable development on everybody's agenda.

This chapter argues that national sustainable development strategies that are genuinely domestically owned and driven offer a key vehicle for achieving the MDGs, not only by providing a framework for achieving MDG7 but also by allowing for an integration of sustainable development concerns into the other MDGs. But, in reality, there remains a tendency among international agencies to press "external frameworks" onto governments (Figure 5.1). It is extremely important that all strategic planning and decision-making frameworks (domestically or externally driven) support local processes that deliver the MDGs for local communities, e.g. local processes that are inclusive, incorporate and build on local knowledge, that address poverty reduction, and recognize that there are many real conflicts at the local level for which the best local fits need to be brokered.

