

Press Release

How can we Avoid the Risk of Unsustainable Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs)?

Berlin, 20 April 2015. The effectiveness and sustainability of the proposed 17 sustainable development goals (SDGs) with regard to the huge and still growing demand for resources such as land and biomass have been investigated by two studies, both of which were presented on Monday, 20 April at the Global Soil Week 2015. The Institute for Advanced Sustainability Studies (IASS), UNEP's International Resource Panel (IRP) and the International Institute for Applied Systems Analysis (IIASA) all concluded during the presentation of their studies that the land demand implicit in the individual SDGs will affect the future availability of land and potentially impede the fulfilment of the goals: the land demands made in the SDGs exceed our existing land resources. The IIASA study examines the economic links, co-benefits, and trade-offs between the different SDG aims, particularly between land, food and water resources. Conservation efforts focused on one resource or region can drive prices up, leading to food insecurity and even greater exploitation of other resources. "The Competition for resources concerns all 17 of the SDGs," warned Michael Obersteiner, Programme Director of Ecosystem Services and Management at IIASA. "Only a systems approach can help to reveal critical interdependencies and avoid zero-sum outcomes as nations craft policies to implement the goals," he argued when presenting the IIASA study commissioned by the IRP.

Twelve of the proposed SDGs relate to the sustainable use of natural resources and several depend on the use of additional land resources, for example, the goals on food security (Goal 2), energy supply (Goal 7), production and consumption (Goal 12) and the sustainable use of ecosystems (Goal 15). IASS Executive Director Klaus Töpfer concluded: „The 17 SDGs are therefore not consistent. The demands for biomass and land that they make are far more than we can possibly fulfil. We need to set priorities, for example, where food security is concerned.“

The IASS study emphasises the need to find democratic ways of balancing the demands implied by the SDGs during their implementation on national level. Consumers also have an important role to play. The choices we make are of great importance: not just our decisions on what to consume, but also our decision to buy food in such a way that it does not end up being wasted.

Ernst Ulrich von Weizsäcker, IRP member and formerly co-chair, until recently co-chair of UNEP IRP, said: "It is only natural that the ecological targets in the SDGs come up against brick walls, while the social and economic goals strive for more and more growth. It's a huge conflict and thus a problem of distribution: our planet's resources are finite, so the rich need to give away some of their wealth. Otherwise the current inequities will remain."

Mette Wilkie, director of UNEP's Division of Environmental Policy and Implementation, concluded: "The two studies highlight the fact that business as usual is no longer an option. We need to change the way in which we manage and use our natural resources and move towards sustainable production and consumption patterns.

In the UN International Year of Soils, the Global Soil Week from 19 to 23 April will serve as an international knowledge platform, bringing together more than 500 participants from more than 78 countries with different cultural and professional backgrounds, from high-level policymakers to scientists, farmers, civil society actors and artists. The motto of the event is "Soil. The Substance of Transformation." Information and the Global Soil Week Programme can be found at:

www.globalsoilweek.org

The IASS Working Paper "The Role of Biomass in the Sustainable Development Goals: A Reality Check and Governance Implications" can be found here: <http://www.iass-potsdam.de/en/content/role-biomass-sustainable-development-goals>

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