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From global complexity to local reality

Aligning implementation frameworks with Sustainable Development Goals and landscape approaches

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Key messages

- Many of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) retain a sectorial focus; however, emphasis is placed on the need for integration across goals and targets.
- Given that there are inherent synergies and trade-offs embedded throughout, applying sectorial approaches to achieving the SDGs will likely be ineffective.
- Integrated landscape approaches offer significant potential as an implementing framework for addressing interlinked and conflicting challenges.
- This brief identifies where the current set of goals would benefit from a landscape approach and to what degree, and presents key recommendations.

Introduction

A landscape approach can be defined as a framework to integrate policy and practice for multiple competing land uses through the implementation of adaptive and integrated management systems (Reed et al. 2015). It is a multi-faceted, long-term and collaborative process that aims to bring together multiple stakeholders from multiple sectors to provide solutions at multiple scales. In doing so, the process is designed to facilitate negotiation between stakeholders in order to account for trade-offs and maximize synergies, with the overall objective of 'winning more' and 'losing less' (Sayer et al. 2013).

Many of the SDG targets are conflicting, and appropriate management of trade-offs will be required if multiple goals and targets are to be met. For example, in order to achieve Goal 2 (ending hunger), careful consideration will need to be given to implementing strategies for increasing food production that do not negatively impact on Goal 15 (protecting terrestrial ecosystems) and Goal 6 (sustainable water management). In addition, a large majority of the individual targets overlap with overarching goals such as those tackling climate change (Goal 13) and the promotion of inclusive transparent institutions (Goal 16).

Policy development will occur at different rates and with different SDG priorities. The landscape approach provides an adaptable framework that can operate on varying levels and at varying scales. Thus, landscape approach frameworks are well suited to cope with overlapping, ongoing and newly developed policies. A well-implemented landscape approach has built-in mechanisms to allow for the gradual adoption of different policies as they are put in place, and is flexible enough to meet national commitments while remaining locally relevant (Figure 1).

Although a landscape approach may not be optimal for achieving all goals, we consider it to be an appropriate vehicle for delivering targets where cross-cutting measures are needed to address interlinked goals. Despite the intrinsic overlaps between goals and targets throughout the United Nations SDG report (UNGA 2015), not all of these interlinkages will have the same degree of connectedness or interdependence within a given landscape – meaning one size will not fit all. As such, it is imperative to develop implementation pathways that contribute to national global policy commitments and are cognizant of local realities. Integration at any level will therefore require a high degree of contextualization.

Figure 1. Ten principles for a landscape approach

Source: Sayer et al. 2013

To this end, we have produced a table that identifies where we feel the philosophies of the landscape approach are most suitable for use in achieving the SDGs: vital to achieving Goals 6 and 15; important for Goals 1, 2, 13 and 14; and relevant to a further 11 SDGs. In only one case did we assess the landscape approach as being not applicable (Goal 16).[1]

Recommendations

Embracing integration

The UN SDG report emphasizes that the fulfillment of the goals will require holistic and integrated approaches. Landscapes are inherently challenging – engaging multiple actors, operating at multiple levels and across multiple scales. We consider that overcoming traditional sectorial barriers at research, practice and policy levels is fundamental to accomplishing targets across multiple goals.

Practitioners and policy makers need to be prepared to negotiate, compromise and accept that the greater good may impact their own objectives in the short term, but should result in more sustainable and productive landscapes for more people in the longer term.

Optimal implementation

Landscape interventions need to be scalable. Providing transparent recommendations for actions at the local level that stakeholders can identify with is essential if we are not to risk further marginalization of vulnerable groups.

Processes for implementation should be framed around a negotiated and transparent theory of change (Sayer et al. 2013), which needs to be inclusive and open to all stakeholders, both internal and external to the landscape.

Stakeholders need to identify both the financial mechanisms and technical capacities to support landscape approach implementation and ongoing evaluation, particularly after project funding has expired.

Current donor models for conservation and development are inherently maladapted to the philosophies of the landscape approach – and therefore largely the SDGs. Policy makers, researchers and practitioners must justify and stimulate change in donor funding distribution and allocation.

Most importantly, policy makers and donors need to move away from traditional short-term deliverables and project funding cycles: a landscape approach is a process rather than a project.

Developing appropriate metrics

Indicators for measuring the goals are still in development. Governments that are pursuing integrated approaches to address the SDGs would be well advised to take heed of the available evidence-based research on landscape monitoring and assessment. Likewise, policy makers should be encouraged to work with landscape researchers and stakeholders in efforts to concurrently develop complementary sets of indicators that can be used for both landscape approaches and monitoring of progress toward SDG objectives.

Conclusions

The SDGs represent a significant challenge and opportunity for the global community. Overlaps between the framework of the landscape approach and the objectives of the SDGs are clear; as is the potential value of the landscape approach – when applied effectively – as an implementing framework for addressing multiple targets both within and between SDGs.

The current landscape and sustainability science discourse requires that there be further discussion among landscape researchers and practitioners on best practices for implementation and the monitoring of progress. The challenge now is engaging policy makers to acknowledge the landscape approach as a viable implementing framework for achieving the SDGs.

References

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[UNGA] United Nations General Assembly. 2015. *Transforming our world: The 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development (A/RES/70/1)*. New York: United Nations.

1 For details, see Table 1 in Reed J, van Vianen J, Sunderland T. 2015. *From global complexity to local reality: Aligning implementation pathways for the Sustainable Development Goals and landscape approaches*. Infobrief No. 129. Bogor, Indonesia: Center for International Forestry Research.

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