



HIGH-LEVEL POLITICAL FORUM ON SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

Under the auspices of ECOSOC

Session 15 – Thinking ahead: emerging Issues that will matter in the future

6 July 2015, 3.00 -6.00 pm

Introduction

The identification of new and emerging issues, drawing on scientific evidence, assessments and projections, is a function of the interaction between scientists, policymakers, the public, and other stakeholders. In an inter-dependent world, what today appears to be a local and isolated problem may to tomorrow assume global significance. Our inter-linked and inter-dependent systems also increase our vulnerability to shock and disruption, whether from emerging pathogens or financial instability.

An issue can also be understood as emerging where the academic and scientific communities consider it important, but the policy community has not given it “adequate” attention. Others argue that an issue becomes “emerging” as soon as the confidence in causality is established. It must be clear that these are broad generalizations; some issues have been squarely on the policy agenda – climate change for instance – for a long time, but with attention arguably failing to translate into action commensurate with the scale of the problem.

The inherently subjective process of identifying “emerging issues” can be guided by criteria, e.g., those used in the UNEP Foresight exercise. In this regard, indicative criteria include: (i) global significance of the issue; (ii) whether it affects one or more dimensions of sustainable development; (iii) the degree to which assessment is evidence-based, including reliance on scientific and traditional sources of knowledge; and (iv) novelty, the degree to which it is based on new findings or knowledge. Emerging issues also have different time-scales. Some, although arising rapidly as acute crises, may be driven by longer-term, underlying processes, e.g. Ebola, where a number of factors, including proximity of humans and wild animals and weakened health systems, coincided to create a severe crisis.

A range of approaches can be applied to identify a set of emerging issues; a common way is expert consensus, using criteria to collect an initial list of issues, which is then whittled down in the course of discussions among experts. The involvement of experts tends to enhance the credibility of the process. Nonetheless, the interests and perspectives of the organization involved play an important role in the type of issues identified. Some issues are common across a fairly broad set of assessments – recent exercises by the World Economic Forum, Worldwatch Institute, 2015 GSDR crowdsourcing, and Swiss Re all identify climate change or a sub-set of its impacts as among the looming risks facing humanity. In the economic realm, persistent high unemployment and recurrence of financial crises are among the top issues identified. Inequality, while not a new phenomenon, is again being identified as a pressing issue. As can be expected, advances in technology are the driver behind many emerging issues. This raises the perennial question of how to harness technological breakthroughs – whether in artificial intelligence and robotics or new gene editing techniques – for the broad benefit of society, while avoiding excessive risks.

There is a need for clear and accessible communication to policymakers of emerging issues of relevance to sustainable development, drawn from a range of sources. This would help facilitate discussions on agenda-setting by the HLPF.

Possible questions for discussion:

1. What are the major new trends decision makers should pay attention to and what is science telling us about them?
2. What role can the HLPF play in identifying and placing emerging issues on the policy agenda?
3. How can the HLPF help strengthen the response of the United Nations system to emerging issues relevant to sustainable development?