

UN-DESA Division for Sustainable Development Goals

Sustainable Development Goal 15: Progress and Prospects

*An Expert Group Meeting in preparation for HLPF 2018:
Transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies*

14-15 May 2018

Conference Room 9, United Nations Headquarters, New York

Opening remarks by ASG Elliot Harris

[Introduction]

I am honored to welcome you to this Expert Group Meeting, which has been organized by the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs, with the support and collaboration of key partners, in preparation for the 2018 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development.

The theme of the High-Level Political Forum this year is “transformation towards sustainable and resilient societies”, with a special focus on reviewing progress toward SDGs on water and sanitation, energy, cities, sustainable consumption and production, and terrestrial ecosystems, in addition to the means of implementation. The goals under review will be examined in terms of progress made and challenges encountered in their implementation, as well as in terms of their relationships with the rest of 2030 Agenda.

SDG 15 specifically calls on the international community to “protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss”.

Although SDG 15 can sometimes be misperceived as an environmental goal lacking in economic and social dimensions, it is in fact a critical measure of overall progress against the 2030 Agenda, as well as a key enabler of many other goals and targets.

[Analyzing the challenges]

SDG 15 is sometimes abbreviated as ‘life on land’: and it truly connects human lives and well being to that of the other organisms that we share the planet with.

Some of these connections become especially clear when we think about sustainable livelihoods, migration, land tenure, empowerment of rural women and smallholder producers, urban-rural linkages, climate change, the rights and knowledge of indigenous peoples, peace and security.

These connections work both ways: diverse and healthy ecosystems can be cost-effective solutions to climate change adaptation; and forests help with carbon sequestration. On the other hand, climate change threatens the health of eco-systems across the world.

However, an inadequate understanding of the true value of nature in policy making, a lack of integrated thinking and spatial planning, and difficulty accessing public finance all present obstacles to implementing ecosystem-based approaches.

Obstacles also arise due to several underlying factors that are themselves resistant to change: institutions, governance and individual and social values and preferences. These need to be addressed as well, if we are to secure lasting transformation.

And finally, we must never lose sight of people who are at the centre of it all – for example, practitioners on the ground are keenly aware that local communities must be involved as custodians of the local environment, and engaged in participatory planning, conservation, and management. Implementation of SDG 15 must also address issues of inequality for indigenous peoples, who are often among those who are considered left behind.

[The importance of interlinkages]

But there is hope—we have seen that change can often be leveraged through efforts to make progress in implementing multiple goals that are closely interlinked. For example:

-- Through the development of more gender-responsive and women-led resource and land management initiatives, along with strong legally and socially legitimate land tenure for women (as called for in SDG 5);

-- Through efforts to shift toward more sustainable food systems (under SDG 2)—preserving diversity in traditional diets, maintaining and developing agricultural biological diversity *in situ*, and moving away from reliance on animal proteins and a small number of staple crops; and

-- Through the development and application of scientific knowledge and innovation, deploying GIS and other modern technologies more effectively.

In this third year of SDG implementation, the need to work across sectors and explicitly accommodate interlinkages is quite clear. We are striving for concrete ways to put this thinking into practice, not in one or two cases, but consistently across the SDGs, and in ways that will be responsive to local contexts.

We must develop long-term strategies based on holistic thinking about how to leverage interlinkages across the goals and targets. In this regard, I would like to highlight some important observations that are relevant to the work ahead:

- 1) **Evidence-based knowledge** that draws upon empirical observation and scientific assessment is crucial for understanding the complex interlinkages among the goals and targets, and connecting them to transformative actions. Indeed this knowledge-building process itself can fuel the policy convergence process at all levels.

- 2) We need to use this knowledge to **set priorities**, taking a critical and creative approach to deciding what investment is needed, and where. Because the 2030 Agenda is integrated and indivisible, some may say that prioritization is taboo. But that is simply not realistic in a world of limited resources and multiple vulnerabilities. Prioritization is necessary, and should address specific national and local circumstances.
- 3) This is the third point I want to emphasize—that prioritization and policy choices are always **context-specific**. Many government officials talk about the need to “domesticate or localize” the SDGs and the 2030 Agenda, to bring it in line with national and sub-national strategies and plans. We need similar action to domesticate or localize interlinkages.

Local communities, municipal governments, and national leaders—they all bring important knowledge and perspectives to the table, and our implementation strategies must accommodate these specificities.

- 4) At the same time, we must recognize that the effects of these interlinkages play out over territorial scales that need not respect man-made divisions. An important part of the implementation strategy will need the engagement of stakeholders in regional and global fora.
- 5) Recognizing the interactions and relationships among the SDGs is only half the battle. **Adjusting governance structures** to reflect the inter-relationships will be an important concrete step toward capitalizing on positive synergies and reducing or eliminating negative outcomes.

Governance reforms may be the greatest challenge of all—overcoming institutional inertia and realigning incentives can be a huge struggle. But armed with evidence and a strong will, advocates for integrated policy making will be able to make their case.

- 6) Which brings me to my sixth point—the **need for high quality, reliable, timely and disaggregated data**. The 17 SDGs, with their 169 targets, are unprecedented in their

scope and the global indicator framework provides a rigorous basis for measuring progress.

At the same time, complementary data to guide decisions is now also available from many sources – remote sensing, mobile phone usage, administrative records, citizen monitoring and many others – and must be used. Open source and open access data are the way forward.

- 7) Additionally, **the SDGs touch everyone, and must engage everyone.** Their achievement will be a multi-stakeholder endeavor, with important cultural and societal elements that cannot be ignored. Governments, individuals and communities all have the power to take decisions that can make or break the SDGs.

The private sector—companies of all sizes—will also need to commit to the transformative vision of the SDGs, and to choices for long-term sustainability that will be good for business and the planet, evolving beyond an ethos of short-term profit.

- 8) Finally, let me emphasize the need for **continuous communication, dialogue and learning.**

As experts in our own areas, we are often sure of what we know, but we have to reach out to policy makers and a host of other actors to understand their perspectives and challenges, and put our knowledge to work for them. This requires humility and patience, but is an essential part of the work we must do to succeed.

[Objective of the EGM]

Bearing all this in mind over the course of the next two days, this expert group meeting will aim to assess the progress made to date in achieving SDG 15, and illuminate the prospects for its success through policies, partnerships and coordinated actions at all levels, which can also play a critical role in advancing the overall implementation of the 2030 Agenda.

We welcome your inputs of knowledge, success stories, good practices and challenges, and ask you to identify particular areas of concern.

An examination of progress toward each individual SDG 15 target should be data-driven and focused, taking into account obstacles, challenges, enablers, and interlinkages.

Finally, the principles of inclusion, interdependence and leaving no one behind enshrined in 2030 Agenda underpin this work, to achieve a world in which “humanity lives in harmony with nature and in which wildlife and other species are protected.”

[Contribution to HLPF 2018]

The knowledge and insights generated by this diverse group of experts during each session’s discussions will be captured as a set of key messages to be presented as the outcome of this meeting, along with a summary report.

Both the key messages and summary will provide input to the thematic reviews at the HLPF, and help to shape its outcomes.

Examples from specific countries, especially those that are conducting or have conducted Voluntary National Reviews, can help to highlight innovative practices at the national level.

The depth and breadth of the work generated in this expert group meeting will also influence future collaboration and programmes of work as we move forward.

In closing, on behalf of DESA, I would like to sincerely thank our partners who have helped to provide support to the organization of this meeting, which will undoubtedly benefit from their collaboration, including: the UN Food and Agricultural Organization, the UN Convention to Combat Desertification, the Secretariat of the UN Forum on Forests, the Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity, the UN Development Programme, the UN Environment

Programme, the International Union for Conservation of Nature (IUCN) and the Wildlife Conservation Society (WCS).

With this, I wish you all a very interesting and productive meeting, and look forward to receiving the outcome.

Finally, we invite you to participate in and contribute to the many activities being planned around the HLPF in July, and the Science, Technology and Innovation Forum in June and hope to welcome you back to New York in connection with these events.

[Introduction of Francesca Perucci]

At this time, I would like to introduce our moderator for the first session of this meeting.

Ms. Francesca Perucci is the Assistant Director of the UN-DESA Statistics Division, which is tasked with producing the annual Secretary-General's SDG Progress Report, and which has recently launched an **Open SDG Data Hub** to promote the exploration, analysis, and use of SDG data sources for evidence-based decision-making and reviews.

Ms. Perucci, you have the floor.