

Side Event Report

Implementing the SDGs: Meeting the Capacity Development Challenge for Integrated Sustainable Development

Date: Thursday, April 23

Time: 6:15 pm - 7:30 pm

Location: Room 8, UNHQ Conference Building

This side event, sponsored by the United Nations Office for Sustainable Development (UNOSD), brought three very experienced practitioners together to sample the current “state of the art” in implementing sustainable development in a more integrated way, with the forthcoming SDGs in mind. The speakers represented the international, national, and sub-national level.

The Side Event was opened by its host, **Dr. Jong-Soo Yoon**, Director of the UNOSD. Dr. Yoon briefly described the mission of the UNOSD, its core programming, and its commitment to support the knowledge and capacity development of member states with regard to integrated sustainable development. He reminded those present of the Secretary-General’s synthesis report of December 2014, which “placed a strong emphasis on the need for integration in policy making.” He committed UNOSD to “continue to provide capacity building and advisory services to Member States on how to integrate the different sectors and actors at the national and local levels to operate in line with the SDG era. The outcome of these services will be disseminated to the other Member States with similar regional/ or national circumstances..”

The first speaker, **Ms. Ndey-Isatou Njie** (Director, Water and Energy Branch, UN DESA Division for Sustainable Development), provided an overview of the challenge that implementation of the SDGs present for countries, and how UN DESA is mobilizing its knowledge and resources to help them in meeting that challenge.

Ms. Njie reported on how UN DESA’s divisions are responding to the capacity development challenge by working in an integrated manner, bringing together their economic, social, and environmental expertise. The aim is to help “bridge the gap” between the global and the national level through a series of initiatives that include capacity-building workshops, national training sessions in partnership with UN Country Teams, and working with the UN Development Group.

One specific and important program is UN DESA’s “Pilot Country” initiative, which is working with several countries to support them in the implementation of more integrated approaches to national planning that are in harmony with the draft SDGs and with the expected outcome of the Post-2015 process. The program is demand-driven from the country side, and currently includes Belize, Costa Rica, Uganda, Ethiopia, Togo, Honduras, and Vietnam. The requests from countries for assistance originate in different ways, ranging from a request for support on administrative reform (in the case of Togo) to requests for assistance in thinking through the impacts of policy initiatives such as green taxation (in the case of Costa Rica). From these entry points, a more integrated process of engagement with multiple ministries and planning processes then develops.

Ms. Njie described the structure of the work with two countries in more detail. In Belize, UN DESA was responding for a request from the country for support in the development of a national sustainable development strategy (more on this below). The government owns the support and capacity development process, defining its needs and approving all work performed. The UNDP office in Belize provides facilitation and logistical support, as well as coordination of other national partners (such as non-state actors and stakeholders). UN DESA’s Division for Sustainable Development provides the conceptual frameworks, the institutional strengthening, and linkages to other resources in UN DESA. This collaborative approach has been essential to the success of the project to date.

In Uganda, the government has already begun the process of integrating the draft SDGs into policy, and has requested the assistance of UN DESA in the development of statistics and monitoring, modeling of the economy (with a focus on energy use), and strengthening the mainstreaming of sustainable development into policy making.

In Togo, the state is involved with the rebuilding of its national development system, and UN DESA's divisions — beginning with the Development Policy and Analysis Division (DPAD) — are collaborating to support this process of administrative modernization and national strategy development. Other countries exhibit similar variability in their specific needs, but UN DESA is able to draw on the diversity of its competencies to address these needs in a coordinated manner, working with other UN agencies and the UN Country Teams.

So far, a number of common issues have emerged from this process, including the following observations:

- A number of countries already have strategies in place for integrated sustainable development; but they need additional technical and capacity development support.
- The challenge for most of the countries is the “how to”: what tools are there, and where has this been done elsewhere, so that we can learn from others' example?
- Many countries need assistance to build ownership of sustainable development and to mobilize all stakeholders.
- Implementation at the sub-national and sectoral levels remains something to be developed.
- Many countries need strengthening of their statistical capacity.
- For all countries, the Means of Implementation (technical, financial etc.) remains a pressing challenge.

Looking ahead, UN DESA sees a need to develop communities of practice and other networks to support accelerated learning and knowledge sharing in this area. It will be partnering with UNOSD (a project office of UN DESA) in the delivery of training and networking events, learning from these pilot country initiatives, helping countries prepare for the process of doing national reviews of their implementation of the SDGs, expanding the number of pilot countries, and generally growing the network of countries, experts, and practitioners who are dedicated to realizing the vision of the Post-2015 Development Agenda.

In the second presentation, **Mr. Alan AtKisson**, an independent advisor to UN DESA, presented the case study of Belize in more detail. The structure of the collaboration between UN DESA and the Government of Belize — which was one of the first countries to express its desire to be a Pilot Country — was described above. This presentation looked at the content and process of the work that has been pursued by the Government, UN DESA, and UNDP.

Mr. AtKisson first described the general challenge of integration of sustainable development, which includes:

- **Systemic clustering** to tackle SD challenges in ways that go beyond “issue-based” (single-theme) treatment.
- **Inter-ministerial collaboration** and cross-sector coordination of policy and implementation actions
- **Prioritization and optimization processes** that can increase synergies among policies, and reduce perceived “trade-offs” where progress in one area results in losses in another

The Belize Pilot Country process brought these challenges to the fore, as well as other challenges such as dealing with resource scarcity (human and financial) and managing the input of stakeholders.

The initiative had begun in 2013 with the request to UN DESA to support the development of a new National Sustainable Development Strategy, a process coordinated by the Ministry of Forestry, Fisheries and Sustainable Development in Belize (MFFSD). A scoping mission to Belize had identified a number specific national challenges related to the general ones noted above.

During 2014, UN DESA had conducted three missions to Belize, in close collaboration with the UNDP office there, conducting numerous bilateral consultations with separate ministries, meeting with non-state actors in a multi-stakeholder meeting setting, and finally facilitating (again, together with UNDP and the MFFSD) a national stakeholder workshop to define the key elements of the National Sustainable Development Strategy.

At the same time, Belize's Ministry of Finance and Economic Development was in the closing stages of putting together its new medium-term development strategy, called the "Growth and Poverty Reduction Strategy." This marked the first time that economic growth and poverty reduction had been merged into an integrated program of action. But during the consultations around sustainable development, a sense began to emerge among all the stakeholders (governmental as well as non-state) that these two processes should be merged.

The Government of Belize subsequently took a decision to merge them, and UN DESA again provided the conceptual and process support, working with the two named ministries and UNDP (as well as through numerous other ministerial consultations). The result, in February 2015, was the newly completed Growth and Sustainable Development Strategy, which is harmonized with the emerging Post-2015 Development Agenda as well as the nation's established development vision. The "GSDS" includes the following features that are specifically designed to support the shift to a more integrated approach to sustainable development:

1. A new conceptual framework that puts the dimensions of sustainable development as the goal structure for policy making (based on a UN Task Team framework from the run-up to Rio+20)
2. Institutional shifts that move overall coordinating responsibilities for sustainable development from the environment-oriented MFFSD, and into the Ministry of Finance and Economic Development, which has overall budgeting and planning responsibilities (while retaining the MFFSD's engagement with regard to its special competencies on SD).
3. Tools and mechanisms designed to foster greater inter-ministerial collaboration, including policy-review mechanisms and the development of monitoring and evaluation processes. One of these tools includes a Prioritization Framework, which Belize's policy makers can use to assess their options and choose the ones that create the greatest positive impact on the whole system of goals and conditions that they are trying to achieve, while reducing the negative trade-offs between different sectoral and ministerial interests.

At the time of this Side Event, the draft GSDS had been submitted to the Belizean Government and was going through the process of formal Cabinet review. However, elements of the draft had already found their way into the medium-term development strategies of other Caribbean states. It is hoped that the processes and innovations introduced in Belize can continue to spread, where they are useful, through the capacity building processes offered by UNOSD and UN DESA.

The final speaker was **Prof. John Holmberg**, Vice-President of Chalmers University in Gothenburg, Sweden. Chalmers University has been instrumental in facilitating an integrated approach to sustainable development in the Västergötaland region of Sweden (where Gothenburg is the main city, so this summary will use "Gothenburg" as the more recognizable English word, though the model really concerns the whole region). Prof. Holmberg had been invited by UNOSD to describe Chalmers' approach, which has been identified as a model example at the sub-national level.

Prof. Holmberg noted that their approach involves starting from a set key principles: (1) understanding from the outset that *transformation* is the goal (note just incremental change); (2) using "backcasting" techniques to build up a clear picture of the desired future, based on sustainability principles; (3) creating platforms for inter-disciplinary exchange and "co-creation" of the critical insights and initiatives; and (4) starting from the people in the process, and not from the technology.

He described the evolution of industrial civilization, in material and energy terms, as an “S-Curve” that goes through three stages: (1) “low intensity, low efficiency, low growth”; (2) “high intensity, low efficiency, high growth”; and finally (3) “high intensity, high efficiency, low growth”. It is towards this third stage that the region around Gothenburg is now developing.

Chalmers University (which many consider to be Sweden’s leading technical university, and indeed a global leader) is unusual in that sustainable development has been at the heart of the institution for many years. In fact, *every student* has been required to take coursework in sustainable development since the late 1980s. Today, the university uses a matrix organizational structure that essentially requires its faculty to engage with the solving of large societal problems and challenges, in inter-disciplinary ways, tackling problems like energy, transport, and communications.

Chalmers then uses its role and convening power to act as a facilitator and “change agent” within the region around Gothenburg, which is also the center of Swedish manufacturing, being home to major global companies such as Volvo and SKF. The university often convenes partnerships, in collaboration with regional and national government agencies, to advance progress — for example, in the field of “sustainable chemistry” (where five major companies are involved).

Importantly, Chalmers conceives of its role in society as not education and research, but also as a link between knowledge creation and practice in the public and private sectors. This general approach is reflected in many specific programs as well as in the relationship between Chalmers and local institutions. One example highlighted by Prof. Holmberg is the “Challenge Lab” or “C-Lab,” which turns students into “change agents” by tackling large challenges and engaging, in practical ways, with local companies, government agencies, and stakeholder groups, to design and implement practical solutions that combine insights and tools from technology, communications (i.e. smartphone apps), and the science of human behavior and wellbeing.

Indeed, “wellbeing” is increasingly important because “putting a stronger focus on wellbeing might be a driving force for sustainable development,” noted Prof. Holmberg. In the university’s research work on sustainable cities — which is funded by a government foundation and has practical change elements connected to Gothenburg as well — wellbeing is a central component. He showed practical examples of retrofits to aging and low-quality housing stock that, in consultation with residents, turn them into centers of “wellbeing” where neighbors grow food in common gardens, socialize more often, and generally express greater levels of happiness, while also saving energy and other resources.

Prof. Holmberg ended by reminding participants that we should not be afraid to experiment, that we must tolerate uncertainty and risk in trying to facilitate transformation, and that “the second mouse [to approach the mousetrap] gets the cheese.”

In the discussion that followed, participants (approximately 50 people attended this evening session) expressed great interest in the models and approaches that had been presented. Most questions posed concerned requests for additional detail but also reflections on the emerging role of universities as a critical institution for providing knowledge, continuity, and a “neutral platform” to support the facilitation of transformation processes in the context of integrated sustainable development.

— Reported by Alan AtKisson, Consultant to UN DESA / UNOSD and Side Event Moderator