

Side Event on the Global Sustainable Development Report 2015

During the high-level political forum on sustainable development

1 July 2015, 1:15pm- 2:30pm,

In his opening remarks, the moderator of the side event, Mr. Nikhil Seth, Director of the Division for Sustainable Development, underlined the importance of integration. He also stressed that the GSDR needed to meet the needs of Member States in the post-2015 development agenda.

Mr. David O'Connor introduced the 2015 Global Sustainable Development Report, outlining the key points from its eight chapters (see link to presentation). Next, the Deputy Permanent Representative of Peru, Mr. Augusto Thornberry, made remarks, highlighting the importance of disaster risk reduction and the need for coherence between the SDGs and outcome of the World Conference on Disaster Risk Reduction, held in Sendai in March 2015. This was followed by brief presentations by scientific discussants.

Mr. William Colglazier, Visiting scientist, Centre for Science Diplomacy, American Association for the Advancement of Science:

- Welcomed the cross-cutting chapters, but also called for future reports to examine specific SDGs in more depth, such as done in chapter 5 of the present report.
- Expressed support for crowdsourcing and urged the report to engage the organized scientific community in this endeavor, e.g. ICSU, Inter-academy Panel (IAP), national academies of sciences. He also called on the report to benefit from expertise of UN entities, such as UNIDO, UNEP, etc., as well as other bodies and organizations such as the Commission on Science and Technology for Development, IIASA, World Bank, NGOs. They could use their own resources to review chapters and to undertake the process to prepare inputs and chapters. DESA could manage the table of contents and serve as secretariat to provide templates.
- There was a great deal countries could learn from one another and from the experience of preparing national sustainable development reports, referring favorably in this regard to China's report.
- He stressed the importance of maintaining the dialogue between scientists and policymakers. The GSDR needed to be a continuous process, not merely a one-off, periodic report.

Mr. Patrick Paul Walsh, Chair of International Development Studies at University College Dublin, Ireland, and Senior Advisor, SDSN:

- Underlined the need for a continuous engagement at the national level, referring to a "diamond engagement" between scientists, government officials, and the UN.
- He gave the example of the Statistical and Social Inquiry Society of Ireland (www.ssiso.ie), which provided a platform to bring together scientists/academics and bureaucrats. Options such as this exist to support the science-policy interface (SPI) at the national level.
- He also presented ideas for systems to harmonize the collection and storage of national inputs, using existing standards. He stated that for academics the incentive to prepare material existed to demonstrate research with societal value, which science briefs on the SDGs would fulfil.

Member States then expressed their views on the GSDR – what had worked and what could be improved. Among the points raised were the following:

- The consideration of the science-policy interface (SPI) was timely; however, in view of the non-specialist audience, there was a need to simplify graphics and visual matter.
- Several speakers agreed with the call for sustained engagement with policymakers; the GSDR should not end up as a thick report, only occasionally taken down from its shelf.
- The GSDR should not result in duplication, and its preparation should be integrated with other reports such as GEO and regional reports.

- Several speakers welcomed the fact that emerging issues were addressed and said this focus should continue, especially with respect to the HLPF under the GA.
- The focus on cross-sectoral issues and the application of nexus-type analysis was welcomed. The model of an “assessment of assessments” should guide the report. There was a need to reflect a long-term vision, while also taking into account national and regional perspectives. There should be dialogue with different UN agencies, especially in relation to thematic issues.
- Commenting on the content of chapter 2, one Member State highlighted that the analysis showed that poverty was a sort of meta-goal, linked to all others. Going forward, GSDR needs to maintain science and SPI from the perspective of the poor. Introduce the “solutions mindset”. The crowd-sourcing effort was welcome, and it would surely gain further traction in developing countries going forward.
- The SDGs set out the raw material for the GSDR; in future reports more attention could be given to social issues. Education was an issue that merited coverage.
- On the timing and sequencing of the report, one speaker underlined that it should be prepared for the GA every four years. It was also important to communicate politically relevant messages from the report.
- Reacting to a comment made about “parceling out” segments of the GSDR leading up to the GA session of the HLPF, one delegate welcomed this idea. In this scenario, pieces of the GSDR could be made available throughout the HLPF cycle, informing a bigger report every 4 years. Noting that the HLPF would also carry out thematic reviews, it was stated that the GSDR needed to be linked to, and inform this process.
- The SDGs should provide recommendations or a roadmap on SD based on science. The GSDR and HLPF should inform each other, with a focus on solutions.
- The GSDR should be an assessment of assessments with an integrated approach. Communication and outreach deserved more attention. What were the 5-10 key messages from this year’s report?

As contributors to the 2015 Report, UNIDO and UNEP also made brief comments:

- UNIDO: Welcome the selection and balance of thematic issues in the report. True that many of the “economic SDGs” lend themselves better to analysis through existing scenarios, because these scenarios are based on economic models themselves. And correspondingly there is a lot of research on these SDGs out there. However, this does not mean that the same SDGs have been high on the policy agenda. Glad that the report zooms in on the challenges of LDCs, LLDCs and SIDS and analyzes the level of comprehensiveness of the SDGs against priorities stated in the IPoA, the VPoA and Samoa Pathway.
- UNEP: There was two-way process, with the GSDR providing input to GEO and other initiatives and in turn these processes feeding into the GSDR. There was scope for the GSDR to be used in the UN Environment Assembly (UNEA), so as to promote the consideration of interlinkages and cross-cutting issues. Based on the analysis in the GSDR, there was scope for the HLPF to advocate for shortening science-policy-impact time lags.