

2022 HLPF Thematic Review

Expert Group Meeting

Virtual, 17-18 May 2022

Meeting Summary for Session on SDG 15 and interlinkages

1. Introduction

The theme of the 2022 High-Level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF) is “Building back better from the coronavirus disease (COVID-19) while advancing the full implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development”. The 2022 HLPF will have an in-depth review of Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs): 4 on Quality Education, 5 on Gender Equality, 14 on Life Below Water, 15 on Life on Land, and 17 on Partnerships for the Goals. The forum will consider the different and particular impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic across all SDGs and the integrated, indivisible, and interlinked nature of the Goals.

In preparation for the review of SDG 15, and its role in advancing sustainable development across the 2030 Agenda, the Division for Sustainable Development Goals of the UN Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN-DESA/DSDG) jointly with the United Nations Environment Programme (UNEP), the secretariat for the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), the secretariat for the UN Forum on Forests (UNFF), and the Food and Agriculture Organization of the UN (FAO) organized an Expert Group Meeting (EGM) to take stock of where we are in terms of progress towards SDG 15 - Protect, restore and promote sustainable use of terrestrial ecosystems, sustainably manage forests, combat desertification, and halt and reverse land degradation and halt biodiversity loss.

The two-day virtual Expert Group Meeting brought together over 50 colleagues representing academia, government, international organizations, youth, the private sector and civil society. During the several plenary sessions as well as breakout group discussions, participants shared knowledge about what the data shows, success stories, good practices and challenges, identifying particular areas of concern and proposed ways forward in terms of policies, partnerships and coordinated actions at all levels.

2. Stocktaking and challenges

While nature and nature’s contributions to people are essential for human existence and good quality of life, none of the targets for the protection of life on Earth and for halting the degradation of land and oceans have been fully met. Many are trending in the wrong direction, and we are in the last decade for truly addressing environmental loss as we are approaching major tipping points and the risk of irreversible change. SDGs provide an indivisible agenda, and the ongoing degradation of ecosystems and the loss of biodiversity are jeopardizing the achievement of all the other SDGs. Simultaneously, several other SDGs and targets have an impact on the achievement of the SDGs under review, and more focus needs to be given to issues such as sustainable consumption and production, climate change, gender equality, quality education, good governance and other interlinked areas.

A number of commitments and pledges for more ambitious action already exist from the Member States and a wide variety of other actors, and the science underpinning these is there. However, even though there is some progress, progress is not at the pace and scale needed to match the drivers of change. It was also raised that we need to better understand progress being made through greater transparency and accountability on implementation. Hence, in addition to the major trends with SDG targets, several participants stressed two important messages: 1. When Governments have finally taken concrete actions, results have been visible. 2. The world can only achieve sustained results if we address the underlying drivers in a holistic way through systemic approaches.

Some of the key trends and progress points participants highlighted include:

- The risk of species extinction is increasing unprecedentedly in the history of humanity, with the situation being worst in Asia and several small island developing states (SIDS). More than a fifth of all reptile species are threatened with extinction. Only 37 per cent of countries are on track to achieve their national biodiversity targets, while 58 per cent have made some but insufficient progress. Without tackling the root causes of biodiversity loss, progress will be impossible.
- Agriculture continues to be the largest driver of forest loss and species extinction. Overharvesting of species, agricultural activities, logging and farming are causing irreversible damage to the world's biodiversity. Expansion of agricultural land accounts for some 90 per cent of global deforestation, with 50 per cent of this loss being attributed to the expansion of croplands and 38 per cent to the increases of livestock¹. At the same time, food losses are increasing, while prevalence of overweight around the world has also gone up.
- A large number of countries have set themselves national targets along the aims of the Aichi targets, although only a few of them are set to achieve these targets or are even making progress towards them.
- The world's forest area continues to shrink, although at a slower pace than in previous decades. From 2015 to 2020, the annual rate of deforestation was estimated at 10 million hectares, down from 12 million hectares over 2010 to 2015.² The proportion of forest area globally declined from 31.9 per cent in 2000 to 31.2 per cent in 2020. This represents a net loss of almost 100 million hectares of the world's forests, primarily due to agricultural expansion. Over 90 per cent of global deforestation is taking place in tropical forests. At the same time, forests are expanding in some regions. Over the last two decades some regions such as Asia, Europe, and North America have seen a net increase in forest area while other regions, namely South America and Africa continue to experience a decline in forest area. The qualities of primary forest lost may take hundreds of years if not longer to regenerate, and it may not be possible.
- Up to 40 per cent of the planet's land is degraded, directly affecting half of humanity and threatening roughly half of global GDP (US\$44 trillion). Overall, commitments to land restoration are estimated at 1 billion hectares, out of which over 450 million hectares are committed through land degradation neutrality targets.
- While wetlands provide a number of ecosystem services, over the past 300 years, wetland ecosystems have experienced an 85 per cent loss in extent despite the very high value goods and services they provide. Additionally, the extent of surface water bodies, including lakes, rivers, and reservoirs, is rapidly changing across the entire planet, with one in five river basins experiencing high - above natural - fluctuations in surface water during the last 5 years. Population growth, changes to land cover and land use, and climate change are key drivers of these changes to freshwater ecosystems.
- Regarding positive developments, the global coverage of protected areas has increased, although the encouraging trend has slowed down in the last few years. In addition, large regional differences exist in the establishment of protected areas.
- To date, 132 countries and the European Union have ratified the Nagoya Protocol on Access to Genetic Resources and the Fair and Equitable Sharing of Benefits Arising from their Utilization to the Convention on Biological Diversity.

3. COVID-19 crisis impacts and recovery

The COVID-19 pandemic reconfirmed what so many experts have been saying for years: there is a need to reimagine the relationship between people and nature. Zoonotic diseases are only one consequence of the resource intensive ways we consume and produce.

The COVID-19 pandemic has impacted progress towards SDG 15, but not all challenges can be blamed on the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted weaknesses in global development, in particular the inequalities that exist between different countries and different segments of society.

¹ FRA 2020 Remote Sensing Survey (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9970en>)

² FAO Global Forest Resources Assessment 2020 (<https://doi.org/10.4060/ca8753en>)

Around the world, the poorest and the most vulnerable have traditionally relied on ecosystems, including subsistence forestry and small-scale fishing, and the loss of jobs and income and increases in poverty have only increased the reliance on these safety nets.

Data on stimulus packages and recovery measures doesn't match the rhetoric. Actions towards stopping environmental loss and stopping biodiversity loss have been neglected in the COVID-19 recovery plans around the world. Based on OECD data on recovery measures from 43 countries, only 17 per cent related to green measures, and only 7 per cent were related to biodiversity. What's more, the remaining 67% of recovery spending cannot be considered environmentally neutral: 14% is specifically tagged as mixed or negative for the environment, and the final 52%, while not tagged as having direct environmental impacts, is unlikely to be benign for the environment. The world is losing, or knowingly not choosing the opportunity to truly build back better through integrated solutions.

The COVID-19 pandemic boosted the use of digital services in many areas but digitalization for environmental protection still remains an underutilized area, for example for monitoring, rapid management response and enforcement. Participants noted the Secretary-General's Roadmap for Digital Cooperation and stressed that the environmental protection community should also engage more in these discussions. At the grass-roots level, access to digital services, information and data (including from remote sensing), and capacity building will be crucial to empower especially vulnerable groups and to safeguard their rights.

4. Policies and actions to maximize synergies, mitigate trade-offs and drive transformation

In order to be fit for purpose on implementing SDG 15, there is a need to pay close attention to the interlinkages with other SDGs. Life on land is impacted by a number of different sectors, and unless these silos are broken down, a system-wide shift for nature positive solutions will remain out of reach.

Transforming global food systems

Transforming global food systems to sustainable food systems is critical to implementing SDG 15, and several participants stressed the need for active follow-up to the Food Systems Summit held in September 2021. In addition to driving land use change, negative impacts of unsustainable agriculture have been seen from increases in nitrogen fertilizer use, increase in land areas used for cereal yield, increases in water use and increases in ruminant livestock. Commercial monoculture farms have weakened the access of small-holder farmers to markets as well as had negative impacts on the environment.

In order to drive an SDG-based food systems transformation, on the production side, we need to promote systems thinking, tackle perverse subsidies, revitalize indigenous and local food systems, and develop inclusive stakeholder processes. On the consumer side, there is a need for digital tools that promote greater transparency and can influence consumer behaviour, from tools that reflect the true price of food (factoring in costs such as water use, carbon emissions, and impacts on livelihoods) to tools that allow customers to track and trace where their food comes from. In general, better circular economy approaches and sustainable consumption and production patterns are required.

The land sector is where all sectors come together, so integrated approaches are essential. Such approaches include the One Health approach, human rights-based approaches, integrated land use management plans that are co-designed and developed through partnerships with all key stakeholders, better support to small-holder farmers, move towards circular economy models, as well as integrated approaches to knowledge and data analysis. Often, land restoration is an area where interests of agriculture and forestry sectors merge and offer significant potential to increase sustainable production, and this aligned interest should be better utilized in land management plans and used for jobs creation. New types of land use management partnerships, including private-public partnerships (PPPs) are needed all the way from the producer to the consumer.

Fostering the One Health approach

The recent pandemic reminded the world of the deep connections between health and the environment. Adopting a One Health approach can help us not only to prevent outbreaks in zoonotic diseases, but also tackle other urgent issues such as ensuring food safety and combatting antimicrobial resistance through nature-positive action. The greater involvement of the forest and wildlife sectors in One Health efforts, and responsible land-use planning, are needed to address some of the underlying drivers of disease emergence. The concept has been expanded recently to include issues of not only health and the environment but more increasingly also linkages with equity and justice and it can be used as an effective model for addressing interlinkages.

The deep connections between ecosystem health and human health were, for example, on the agenda of the second segment of the fifth UN Environment Assembly (UNEA-5.2), held in February 2022 in Nairobi. The concluding Ministerial Declaration recognized the risk for future pandemics and other health risks if humanity doesn't overhaul its patterns of interaction with nature.

Tackling the root causes of biodiversity loss

Biodiversity forms the basis of our wellbeing and there is a growing political will to ensure that the loss of biodiversity will be halted. This must be paired with action. In the Kunming Declaration in 2021, Member States indicated the ambition we have for the post-2020 global biodiversity framework and recognized that achieving these ambitions would require transformative changes across society. The new framework and related priority actions must be complemented by strong climate change mitigation and review of consumption patterns throughout all sectors, including and particularly agriculture. As flagged in the Global Biodiversity Outlook 5³, the flagship publication of the Convention on Biological Diversity (CBD), transitions are needed across land use, forest management, climate action, health systems, fisheries and oceans management and urban development in an integrated fashion.

Some of the lessons learned from the time spent on working towards the Aichi targets on biodiversity include the need for even clearer goals and targets and effective review of these, the need to ensure a whole-of-society approach in implementation, and the need to provide sustained and targeted support to countries in their implementation efforts. The required means of implementation should accompany the post-2020 global biodiversity framework.

One proposal made during the meeting included the idea of requested the Member States to present holistic land use plans, jointly with multiple actors, that would present a map of planned land use nationally, including where protected or restored areas would be located. Colleagues also highlighted the ongoing UN Decade on Ecosystem Restoration (2021-2030) as a major initiative to support collaboration and implementation of restoration activities.⁴

Improved implementation of sustainable forest management practices

Global commitments on forests and mountains, including the Global Forest Goals of the UN Strategic Plan for Forests, the eventual outcome of the ongoing consultations on the post-2020 global biodiversity framework, and the Paris Agreement, provide frameworks and policy mandates for integrated actions on conservation, restoration and sustainable use of mountains, forests and other ecosystems, as well as biodiversity. However, more needs to be done. This was also the message from the 17th session of the United Nations Forum on Forests, held in May 2022, that brought together key partners to assess how synergistic implementation of the agendas on climate change, biodiversity, ecosystem restoration, food security can be advanced through joint forest-based actions and partnerships.

³ <https://www.cbd.int/gbo5>

⁴ <https://www.decadeonrestoration.org/>

Participants stressed, in particular, the need to prioritize protection of primary forests and ecological restoration of degraded forests as they offer one of the most effective ways to maximize ecosystem services, including biodiversity and carbon stocks, reducing the risks of zoonotic diseases, provision of freshwater and regulation of water flows. The vulnerability of forests and mountains to the worsening effects of climate change was also stressed.

Creation of forest-based value chains promotes local welfare and helps communities to take better care of their natural resources while at the same time generating revenue and advancing SDG 15 implementation in general. Some of the key components in creating such value chains are long-term land tenure, utilization of local knowledge and engagement with the local communities, research and sharing of market information, and providing a combination of products and services from wood and non-wood products to ecosystem services. Clustering of small-holders to enable higher productivity and skills, access to markets, marketing and financing can be a good way to empower local communities, although big companies often view such producers as having less reliability and production capacities.

Putting a value on our natural capital

Markets everywhere are still failing to incorporate the true value of nature. Consumers around the world will need to start paying the true costs of their consumption, including food, and be made aware of the actual impacts of their choices. Embedding conservation in trade agreements will also be crucial, and it was noted that progress towards this has already been made in the United Kingdom and the European Union.

The adoption of the SEEA (System of Environmental Economic Accounting) was an important step, but not enough countries have incorporated these guidelines into their policy frameworks. Financing gaps must be addressed, and positive incentives created to promote a system-wide shift to better value for nature. Policies to redirect subsidies for nature positive value chains are needed.

Tackling corruption and strengthening legal frameworks, including to tackle poaching and trafficking

Another major challenge calling for integrated policy solutions is poaching and trafficking of protected species of flora and fauna. It was noted that while many countries still do not well understand the true cost of these crimes, poaching and trafficking have severe links to not only biodiversity loss but to spread of zoonotic diseases, increased corruption and weakening of rule of law. Poaching and trafficking also serve as means of financing for other forms of illegal activities. At the same time, poaching and trafficking break down vulnerable supply chains in the fisheries and timber sectors, making it difficult for communities and countries to truly benefit from these natural resources for their socio-economic development. There is a need to empower countries to assess their value chains, jointly with revenue authorities, so that missing flows can be identified and tackled. Poaching and trafficking also hinder the opportunities to benefit from sustainable tourism, often to the detriment of local communities.

There is a need to enhance legal cooperation among countries, to harmonize legislation, promote sharing of information and intelligence, and to enhance countries' enforcement capacities. Communities must be empowered to stand up against the systems that deplete their lands. Corruption has particularly detrimental impacts and high levels of endemic corruption are prevalent in countries where trafficking is taking place. Corruption, bribery, forgery, tax evasion and money laundering all reduce the confidence people have on the state and hence weaken the whole cycle of SDG implementation.

It was noted that in general, criminal justice should not be an afterthought in our SDG actions. There is a need to better understand the role crime plays in our interventions and in funding SDG implementation. All line agencies and stakeholders working on topics such as education,

infrastructure, food security, poverty alleviation and other fields must understand that they have a role to play in mainstreaming criminal justice processes.

5. Means of implementation: Mechanisms and partnerships to accelerate progress

There is no magic recipe for transformation. Key enablers are needed, which include, among others, fair access to scientific and technical data and knowledge, stable financing, transparency, quality education, capacity building, nature-based policies, and long-term political will.

Enhanced data and monitoring

Data quality and timeliness in tracking progress towards SDG 15 remains a challenge, and there is a need to build national capacities for better data. There is a need to ensure accountability of actions. While data in some cases exists, requisite mechanisms are not in place to truly understand what action is being taken on the ground and whether this is contributing towards right type of progress.

More needs to be done to refine the indicator framework to monitor and measure progress made towards sustainable use and management of ecosystems and biodiversity, particularly in terms of the integration of ecosystem and biodiversity values into the long-term national development planning. Data should also be used more innovatively, with increased use of multidimensional indicators. The work of the Global Core Set of Forest-related Indicators⁵ by the Collaborative Partnership on Forests to help measure socioeconomic contributions of forests was also highlighted.

Remote sensing through the use of satellite imagery is increasingly being used, for example, to develop independent and consistent estimates on forest area, to monitor disturbances and changes in forests including deforestation, degradation and regrowth. Initiatives such as the Global Forest Resources Assessment remote sensing survey⁶ were showcased in this regard. The survey, for example, confirms the slowdown in global deforestation while also marking that tropics suffer from the greatest challenges, with almost 90 per cent of forest conversion driven by agricultural land use.

A number of other mechanisms and platforms are already available and offer solutions and contributions to better data-science-policy interface to monitor progress on policy implementation. Some examples mentioned by the participants include the Adaptation at Altitude Solutions Portal, Global Network for Observations and Information in Mountain Environments, and the scientific assessment on contributions of forests by the International Union of Forest Research Organizations. The European Union Observatory on deforestation and forest degradation was also highlighted as one of the upcoming new initiatives. The Observatory will play a role in the enforcement of EU Regulation on deforestation-free products that is currently being developed by the European Union.

Increased use of indigenous and traditional knowledge and participation

SDG 15 is central for the well-being of indigenous peoples and local communities, including through provision of ecosystem services such as safe water supplies and mitigation of climate change. At the same time, indigenous peoples and local communities play a vital role in conservation of nature, including through their collective actions and indigenous knowledge. Their participation and engagement in decision-making are key for our success. For example, research has shown that community forestry can be highly effective for tackling deforestation.

Participants stressed that in some cases well-intentioned sustainability interventions may have adverse impacts on indigenous peoples. For example, while protected areas are seen as an integral tool for SDG 15, they are often not equitably managed. Participants also noted the need to

⁵ Status of, and trends in, the Global Core Set of Forest-related Indicators, 2022 (<https://www.fao.org/documents/card/en/c/cb9963en>)

⁶ FRA 2020 Remote Sensing Survey (<https://doi.org/10.4060/cb9970en>)

differentiate livestock grazing from indigenous peoples' traditional livestock keeping when considering agricultural interventions and policy in land use planning.

It was noted that while the Convention on Biodiversity does recognize the vital role of indigenous peoples in biodiversity conservation through their traditional knowledge, there is a need to ensure financing and other means of implementation to enhance their direct participation in the negotiations and other decision-making bodies. The ICCA Registry website was highlighted as one example of an online information platform for Indigenous and Community Conserved Areas, where communities themselves provide data, case studies, maps, photos and stories.

Rights-based approach, innovation, and better governance

There is a need to encourage the use of evidence-based solutions that are transparent and multidimensional. While information and research already exist in many cases, there is a need for systems-thinking, enhanced co-production of solutions and democracy of use of knowledge and data. Actors should be encouraged to innovate, test, try and fail.

A rights-based approach to environmental protection is needed, integrating rights norms, standards, and principles into policy, planning, implementation, and outcomes assessments to help ensure that conservation practice respects rights of all people. This will also help in increasing intergenerational equity and raising generations that care. The Human Rights Council Resolution 48/13 was mentioned as a key milestone that can catalyze further progress to protect and promote the right to a clean, healthy and sustainable environment in national constitutions and laws.

While much has been done to stress the need to break down sectoral silos and work in a more connected way, not much has changed in the ways in which we govern our natural resources. These silos and governance structures need to be assessed in each context separately. When planning actions, there is a need to develop a shared understanding among all relevant actors of the systems dynamics in specific context prior to developing a shared vision and strategy. This will help also to build trust among the different actors needed for transformation.

Financing and tackling perverse incentives

Addressing financing gaps and increasing access to financing is crucial. The financing gap between what is available and what is needed is in the factor of trillions of US dollars. There is a need to redirect current financing to where it is most needed, including by enhancing access to financing for stakeholders who are delivering action on the ground.

At the same time, there is a growing interest from small scale impact investors to invest in sustainable solutions. There is a need for enhanced collaboration between the public and private sector to ensure that these financial flows find truly sustainable projects. For example, in the forestry sector opportunities for small scale investors are often in farming of eucalyptus and other tropical species plantations that may have sometimes negative environmental impacts.

There is also a need to tackle the often-perverse incentives that still today contribute to the degradation of nature. It was noted that many have tried to tackle the existing fossil fuel subsidies and failed, due to the immense vested interest. Similar situation is currently in place with many harmful agricultural and fisheries subsidies. Vested interests are protected while the environment is not.

In order to mobilize greater financing, the investment case needs to be strengthened, so that stable and predictable cash flows can be generated. The role of the UNFF Global Forest Financing Facilitation Network was underscored to build capacity of countries to have better access to forest and climate funds from multilateral sources such as the Global Environment Facility and the Green Climate Fund.