



Leveraging interlinkages among the SDGs to realize the 2030 Agenda and build back better from COVID-19

A side event building on the thematic Expert Group Meetings held in preparation of the HLPF and taking stock of the 2022 review of the SDGs

Monday, 11 July 2022, 1:00 – 2:30 pm (EDT / New York time)

Summary

The Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG) of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs organized on 11 July 2022 a side event of the High-level Political Forum on sustainable development 2022 titled Leveraging interlinkages among the SDGs to realize the 2030 Agenda and build back better from COVID-19. The side event built on the thematic Expert Group Meetings on SDGs under review, organized by DSDG as a preparatory process for the HLPF together with a number of United Nations entities.

Ms. Mara Cossu, National Sustainable Development Strategy Coordinator at the Ministry for Ecological Transition of Italy delivered the opening remarks of the side event. Italy presented at the 2022 HLPF its Voluntary National Review which highlighted the importance of interlinkages and policy coherence for SDG implementation. Ms. Cossu noted that interlinkages and the indivisible nature of the SDGs are one of the most important issues of the 2030 Agenda for sustainable development. The COVID-19 pandemic has widened inequalities, increased poverty and affected the most vulnerable in Italy, as well as disrupted education and training for all population groups.

Ms. Cossu stressed that there is a need to strengthen mechanisms for policy coherence, including ensuring that short-, medium- and long-term plans are all aligned towards the same aims. These mechanisms must be multi-stakeholder and multi-level at all levels of governance from national to the local level. In Italy, the National Sustainable Development Strategy and a National Action Plan (NAP) on policy coherence for sustainable development work in tandem, addressing also the enabling environment for policy coherence and SDG implementation. Ms. Cossu noted, that the work on policy coherence has also benefited from the scientific support of OECD through the Structural Reform Support Programme of the European Commission.

On behalf of the United Nations Department of Economic and Social Affairs (UN DESA), opening remarks were delivered by **Mr. Alexander Trepelkov, Director-in-Charge at the Division for Sustainable Development Goals (DSDG)**. Mr. Trepelkov noted that the event takes place after the thematic discussions of the HLPF on SDG 4 on quality education, SDG 5 on gender equality, SDG 14 on life below water, SDG 15 on life on land and SDG 17 on partnerships for the Goals have taken place. He stressed that the Forum has once again reaffirmed the universal, holistic and indivisible nature of the 2030 Agenda with its imperative to leave no one behind. In addition to taking stock of progress toward each of the in-focus SDGs, all thematic reviews highlighted the key interlinkages across various goals and



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targets and the ways how these interlinkages can be leveraged to accelerate SDG implementation and recovery from COVID-19.

Mr. Trepelkov stressed that even before the pandemic, the world was not on track to achieve the SDGs. The latest SDG progress report shows that years, or even decades, of development progress have been halted or reversed. Additional 75 to 95 million people have been pushed into extreme poverty in 2022 compared to pre-pandemic levels. 147 million children missed more than half of their in-class instruction over the past two years. In order to tackle these challenges, there is a need to leverage integrated approaches to a higher degree. Science and innovation should guide the way forward. The evidence-based approach and scientific thinking will help the world forge our shared understanding and collaboration at all levels. Knowledge is crucial for leveraging SDG interlinkages to harness synergies and minimize trade-offs, as is bringing together all stakeholders to build partnerships and to find local solutions that work best in each context.

Panel discussion: Identifying the interlinkages and ensuring an integrated approach

Mr. Stefanos Fotiou, Director of the UN Food and Agriculture Organization's Office for the SDGs and Director of the UN Food Systems Coordination Hub noted that the five SDGs under thematic review in 2022 represent inequality and environmental degradation but also some of the solutions we have through education, enhanced gender equality and effective partnerships.

Mr. Fotiou referred to the 2022 UN Ocean Conference that recently took place. At the Conference, numerous participants stressed that climate change and the health of our oceans and seas are faces of the same coin. Understanding of interlinkages and the need for integrated, holistic thinking, is clearly increasing. Policymakers are convinced that they need to alter their working methods but they need support for making the practical steps. Still today, policymakers mostly are given an annual budget and key performance indicators (KPIs) that only address their thematic expertise. Agriculture sector should have KPIs also on health and biodiversity, education sector on environment sustainable consumption and production. All of this should also be reflected in budgets. There is also a need to take these approaches down to the local level and Mr. Fotiou highlighted the importance of the Local2030 initiative in this regard.

Lastly, Mr. Fotiou called for focus approaches for interventions and increased monitoring. According to him, there is no need to invent the wheel, one way of prioritizing areas that will have major synergies is to focus on three areas that the Secretary-General has also highlighted: energy, food and digital transformation.

Ms. Cary Anne Cadman, Caribbean Blue Economy lead at the World Bank also noted the importance of the recent UN Ocean Conference and stressed the critical importance of a well-integrated approach with multiple SDGs for healthy and productive oceans. Ms. Cadman noted that coastal and marine ecosystem research is a critical gap that needs to be filled, together with increased awareness raising and ocean education in line with principles of SDG 4. She for example highlighted the connection between positive socio-economic impact of women's technical education and well-paid jobs in ocean and climate risk sector, in line with SDG 5.



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Ms. Cadman noted that the spill-over losses also highlight the multiple linkages. During the COVID-19 pandemic, decline in tourism has hurt livelihood, increased unsustainable fishing practices and reduced funding for sustainable fishing. Sound COVID responses and the integrity of fish stocks must be secured simultaneously. There is a need to invest in building back not only better but differently, in tourism, value added agriculture and sustainable fisheries. Carbon sequestration project may help provide seed funding for circular economy activities that can support healthy oceans and seas.

Mr. Mauricio Barahona, Professor at the Department of Mathematics of the Imperial College London presented the work of his research team on a recently published article titled [Complex interlinkages, key objectives, and nexuses among the Sustainable Development Goals and climate change: a network analysis](#). Mr. Barahona noted that many of the terms mentioned by previous speakers regarding interlinkages inspired their mathematical approach to data for the research. The team developed a method to find interlinkages among the 17 SDGs and climate change and used time series of indicators defined by the World Bank, consisting of 400 indicators that measure progress towards the 17 SDGs and an 18th variable of annual average temperature. Using temporal data from 181 countries spanning 20 years, researchers analysed dependencies among SDGs and climate for 35 country groupings based on region, development, and income level. The observed significant interlinkages identified varied greatly across country groupings. However, SDGs 11 and 17 and climate change ranked as highly important across many country groupings.

Mr. Barahona noted that their research represents a very data driven approach which integrates many factors but these need to be interpreted through expert analysis to lead to policy options. Causal inference is the current research focus but even then it is only an indication for in-depth work by substantive experts. Regional differences will also necessitate diverse approaches and expertise adapted to local knowledge will be crucial for future work.

Ms. Jihyun Lee, Director, Science, Society and Sustainable Futures Division. Secretariat of the Convention on Biological Diversity noted that discussions on biodiversity often revolve around SDGs 14 and 15 on terrestrial ecosystems, oceans and seas, even though already the Aichi targets have been linked to many of the SDG targets of SDG 2 on food security, SDG 3 on health, SDG 6 on water and SDG 10 on inequality, not to mention that climate change, pollution and unsustainable consumption and production are all drivers of biodiversity loss. For example, the world must be able to ensure food security without added loss of forests and other ecosystems.

Ms. Lee stressed that the global post-2020 framework for biodiversity must guide the world towards the path of recovery. According to the recent Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services (IPBES) assessment, significant negative impacts are still projected under the business as usual to biodiversity and ecosystems, due to climate change, land use changes, excessive natural resource extraction, pollution and invasive alien species. Complex interlinkages can be seen between loss of biodiversity and economic growth and good governance.

According to Ms. Lee, there is a need for creating enabling means of implementation, commensurate with the global ambition. These include resource mobilization, capacity building, technology transfer, and long-term approaches for mainstreaming biodiversity conservation in a number of fields. The new



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post-2020 framework must include in it a robust monitoring and evaluation framework for transparency and accountability.

Taking stock of the HLPF discussions on SDGs in focus - Lightning round experts reporting back from the HLPF sessions on SDGs in focus

Each expert gave their analysis on how well interlinkages were addressed during the HLPF session and what were some of the missed opportunities and blind spots that would still deserve additional focus in future debates.

SDG 4 Ensure inclusive and equitable quality education and promote lifelong learning opportunities for all

Mr. Angus Mackay, Director of the Division for Planet, United Nations Institute for Training and Research (UNITAR)

Mr. Mackay stressed that COVID-19 pandemic has underlined how much progress towards SDG 4 is off track. He called lifelong learning, for example, as a lost opportunity that should merit more attention from the global community. The positive impact of the pandemic may be that implementation of SDG 4 receives a much-needed shove, especially with the Secretary-General's Transforming Education Summit being held in September 2022.

Mr. Mackay noted that one key theme of the SDG 4 discussion at the HLPF was inequity. While countries around the world may have an equal interest in enhancing education, means to invest are very unequal between OECD countries and other countries around the world. He noted that the SDG 4 session included considerable references to education as a foundational element for many other SDGs. However, links with SDGs 14 and 15 did not receive the focus they deserve and these could be highlighted in the run-up to the Summit. Another SDG receiving too little focus was SDG 5 on gender equality, with references made focusing mainly on inclusiveness, not for example target 5.5 on women's effective participation in decision-making.

In addition, Mr. Mackay noted a concrete example of a North-South municipal-level partnership on educational knowhow exchange and highlighted the potential local level holds for SDG 4 implementation. Lastly, Mr. Mackay noted the very strong references to innovation, critical thinking and climate change and stressed the need to focus on these also in the preparations to the Transforming Education Summit.

SDG 5 Achieve gender equality and empower all women and girls

Ms. Salma Al Nims, Secretary-General of the Jordanian National commission for Women

Ms. Al Nims noted that the session on gender equality did highlight in general that none of the other SDGs can be achieved without progress on SDG 5, and the notion that gender norms have strong impact came out strong. Strongest references were made to SDG 3 on health, including access to health care and to issues of unpaid care work and its unequal burden, to SDG 4 on education and SDG 8 on decent work. However, several other SDGs went without specific references, including SDG 14 and SDG 15 and the issue of environmental justice. Ms. Al Nims stressed that there is a need to strengthen also



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discussions on linkages among gender equality and SDGs 6, 7, 9, 12, and 13 as well as on the role of women in crisis, conflict and political participation as well as the shrinking civic space.

Ms. Al Nims highlighted some of the recommendations made, including strengthening legislation and support to grass root entities and civil society actors. There is also a need to enhance data production, better multistakeholder approaches, donor coordination, and gender-based monitoring and tracking systems across the board. Discussions on funding and mainstreaming gender in humanitarian work were also largely absent, as were practical tools for ensuring that national development planning frameworks address interlinkages between gender and other SDGs.

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

Ms. Lucy Mullenkei, Indigenous Information Network

Ms. Mullenkei stressed that SDG 15 is crucial for indigenous peoples and local communities, including through issues such as livelihoods, forestry, land degradation, biodiversity and climate change. She noted that indigenous peoples have stressed the lack of integrated thinking between SDG 15 and, for example, climate change, already long before the COVID-19 pandemic. There is a need to look at the SDG 15 and at life in all forms on land in a holistic way, through the lenses of different people of our societies.

Ms. Mullenkei noted that there is a need for an inclusive, human rights -based approach for SDG 15 implementation. Without inclusive processes, indigenous peoples cannot contribute their traditional knowledge to efforts such as data collection, policy planning, and new innovations.

SDG 17 Strengthen the means of implementation and revitalize the Global Partnership for Sustainable Development

Ms. Moira V. Faul, NORRAG, Geneva Graduate Institute

Ms. Faul called SDG 17 the most “misunderstood Sustainable Development Goal”. Ms. Faul noted that during the HLPF session on the goal, financing was on the agenda and on everyone’s lips, especially the need to ensure an SDG-led stimulus. References were made to national debt, private resource mobilization, and the need to ensure that public seed funding leverages private investment. According to Ms. Faul, any discussion on taxation was focused on illicit financial flows and on tackling these. Ms. Faul also noted that the session gave considerable focus to science, technology and innovation and particularly to the digital divides and inequalities on access and production of STI. She noted that the calls that were made to enhance the use of indigenous knowledge mainly came from representatives of indigenous peoples.

Ms. Faul noted that a big missing piece of the discussion was a discussion on what is the evidence on how we can ensure evidence-based policy-making. In addition, discussions on trade were largely absent at the HLPF. References to the need of additional multistakeholder partnerships were made, although conversations were not had how to make them more equal and more effective. Also, while accountability was referred to, a question remains on accountability of and to whom. Focus was given largely to the states as duty bearers for policy-setting and funding. Lastly, Ms. Faul stressed that while



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many referred to the needs and costs of different interventions, no discussion was had on how much continuing with the business as usual will cost the world.