

Eighth annual Multi-stakeholder Forum on Science, Technology and Innovation for the Sustainable Development Goals

Session 7: Messages for the SDG Summit and the Futures Summit – taking stock of STI for SDGs and closing remarks

(16:30-18:00 EDT, 4 May 2023; in-person, Trusteeship Council Chamber)

Background

As the world approaches the 2023 SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future in 2024, it is crucial to take stock of the progress made in science, technology, and innovation (STI) and identify high-impact policies and actions to accelerate SDG progress. The last such review in 2019 provided a series of recommendations, most of which remain valid.¹ In fact, the recent challenges, such as the pandemic, geopolitics, conflicts, weakened multilateralism, interdependent crises of food, fuel and finance, intensifying impacts of climate change, and rapid advances of artificial intelligence and related technologies, have greatly exacerbated the earlier challenges of facilitating the accelerated development, deployment and sharing of key technologies of relevance for global sustainability, in order to secure better lives of current and future generations. Arguably, many of these global challenges are also driven by or at least intermediated by science and technology trends and the choices we have made as societies on how to respond to them.

The UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) has made significant strides in promoting science-based, solution-oriented, multi-stakeholder, and collaborative approaches to address the global challenges outlined in the SDGs. It has become an unprecedented new UN entry point for science and technology communities. But there also remain significant areas for improvement of this new science-policy interface, especially in terms of effectiveness, reach, and scale.

As envisaged by Member States that created the TFM in 2015, it has led to an increasing number of complementary partnerships and activities spearheaded by UN Member States, the UN system, development partners, organized science and engineering communities, academics, private sector entities, NGOs, individual scientists and engineers. This is evident by the “mapping” of UN activities on STI for sustainable development which have been undertaken by the Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (and its informal predecessor) since 2012.

For example, the latest such IATT exercise, in collaboration with the Office of Secretary-General’s Envoy on Technology, documented 500 submissions from almost 40 entities across the UN system on digital-related activities alone, with impressive plans for the future. Digitalization issues are increasingly mainstreamed across the wider range of UN system work, especially those focused on capacity building and analytical work. It has become impossible to follow the lessons from this dynamically evolving amount of work, without using digital platforms and networks for monitoring.

¹ Lessons learnt from the start-up phase of the UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism (10/2015 – 12/2019), Informal note for discussion to guide the work of the Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs, New York, 15 December 2019.

The mapping shows that the level of cooperation across UN entities has significantly increased, that initiatives increasingly engage stakeholders from private sector, NGOs and scientific stakeholders, and that in no small part, the Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs and the Secretary General's 10-Member-Group of High-level Representatives have played an important role in this regard.

On 2 May, the Secretariat of the STI Forum convened an associated event, the first "STI in Africa Day". It is a day dedicated for African scientists, diaspora, youth and beyond, to assess and adapt STI-based solutions to the continent's transformative agenda. It connects the African and global communities to cooperate, network, showcase, share experiences, build coalitions, launch STI initiatives and promote concrete actions to advance Africa's STI4SDGs priorities.

This concluding session will bring together the messages of the STI Forum 2023 and its associated events such as the STI in Africa Day, towards high-profile UN events this year, including the High-level Political Forum in July, the SDG Summit in September this year, and the Summit of the Future next year. At the mid-term mark of the SDG timeframe, it is an opportune time to take stock of how far the world has come in terms of science, technology and innovation for the SDGs in general, and in the UN and the TFM in particular.

The pandemic and the world's response to it has been a stress test for science, technology and innovation capabilities, the science-policy interface at all levels, our national institutions, and the multilateral system as a whole. By some measures, our world has spectacularly failed the stress test. Yet, it highlighted the power of new technologies for testing, vaccinating, rapid prototyping, and sharing of latest scientific insights, which arguably has saved many millions of lives. And it has become clear how essential previous public and private investments in fundamental and applied research have been for these capabilities. For example, government-funded research since the 1960s laid the groundwork for mRNA vaccines.

So, we need to look back and appreciate the benefits of long-term commitment to fundamental research, but we also need to look ahead and anticipate challenges and possibilities. Many of the recent changes have been spurred – directly or indirectly - by rapidly advancing science and technologies. They have significantly changed the conditions for achieving the SDGs, compared to when they were adopted in 2015. Hence, it is insufficient to look at only past and current trends, but it has become increasingly important to anticipate future opportunities and challenges related to science and technology. Scenarios, tech futures, and STI roadmaps for the SDGs, and related capacity building have therefore become essential means for all countries – developing and developed - to make sense of the ongoing, disruptive changes.

Earlier in this Forum, the UN Secretary General's 10-Member-Group of High-level Representatives of Scientific Community, Private Sector and Civil Society presented their report, entitled "Science, Technology, and Innovation for the SDGs – Progress, Future vision, and Recommendations". It not only provides a broad assessment of how far we have come and what could feasibly be achieved by 2030, but importantly, it provides recommendations in the form of "political asks" and "high-impact initiatives" for consideration in the run-up to the SDG Summit in September 2023. The present session will discuss these and other related concrete ways forward for the TFM and beyond.

Objectives

The session aims to distill the key issues that have permeated throughout the discussions and to present actionable recommendations for upcoming events, in particular the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, the SDG Summit and the Summit of the Future. The session will also be an opportunity to take stock of what the Technology Facilitation Mechanism (TFM) has achieved at the mid-term point towards the SDGs.

Format

The session will be led by the co-chairs of the Forum and the co-chairs of the 10-Member-Group, and also feature perspectives of key TFM stakeholders and representatives.

The session will begin with a progress report from the Interagency Task Team on Science, Technology and Innovation for the SDGs (IATT), followed by presentations from TFM partners on selected initiatives. The co-chairs of the Forum and the 10-Member-Group will then lead a panel discussion, highlighting key messages and recommendations for the upcoming summits. The session will conclude with next steps and priorities for the intersessional work.

Guiding questions

The discussion will be guided by a series of questions:

- What are the most pressing challenges and opportunities in STI for the SDGs, considering the current global context and emerging technologies?
- What progress has been made in UN discussions, actions and initiatives on harnessing science, technology and innovation for sustainable development?
- What successful initiatives can serve as models for the TFM's science-based, solution-oriented, multi-stakeholder, and collaborative approach?
- How can the UN Technology Facilitation Mechanism be strengthened, and how should it work with the ever-expanding number of TFM partners? What is needed for the future? How can the TFM further enhance its engagement with youth, innovators, and technology pioneers to maximize its impact?
- What are your most important recommendations for policy action and high-impact initiatives to be considered at the SDG Summit in 2023 and the Summit of the Future in 2024?

Supporting documents/publications

- *Science, Technology, and Innovation for the SDGs – Progress, Future Vision, and Recommendations*, Report by the UN Secretary General's 10-Member-Group of High-level Representatives of Scientific Community, Private Sector and Civil Society in support of the Technology Facilitation Mechanism, New York, May 2023
- *Concept Note for Coalition on Science, Technology, and Innovation for Africa's Development*, DESA and ECA, New York, May 2023