

Expert Group Meeting on Promoting Integrated Approaches to Sustainable Development

19-20 July 2018

Conference Room 12, United Nations Headquarters, New York

MAIN DISCUSSION POINTS

1. Organized jointly by the UN Office for Sustainable Development and the UN Environment Programme (UN Environment), the **Experts Group Meeting on Promoting Integrated Approaches to Sustainable Development** took place on 19 and 20 July 2018 in New York, right after the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development (HLPF). The meeting was moderated by Professor Adil Najam of Boston University, with the participation of 62 representatives of Member States, the UN system and civil society.
2. The meeting consisted of five interactive sessions focusing on different aspects of “integrated approaches” to sustainable development, ranging from what constitutes integrated approaches to how they can be effectively deployed to achieve the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Policy coherence and multilateral environmental agreements were examined in-depth as important pathways to promoting integrated approaches to the SDGs, which are indivisible and closely interlinked.

The following major points emerged from the rich discussions held during the meeting.
3. The importance of integrated approaches to sustainable development in general and the SDGs in particular has been recognized for many years. Integrated approaches essentially meant taking strategies that bring progress to all three dimensions of sustainable development – economic, environmental and social – and maximizing the synergies among SDGs while minimizing their trade-offs (i.e. trying to achieve one SDG should not hamper progress in other SDGs).
4. Despite this shared understanding, promoting integration had remained challenging primarily because of governance gaps that provided weak institutional framework and capacities for action. Incentives to identify optimal areas for integration, let alone strategically address challenges to integration across sectors and within government, also remained low. In poor countries, pressing economic and social demands continued to sideline the environment. While global efforts to achieve integration existed at multiple levels, including through the UN Environment Management Group, governance gaps punctuated by parochialism and silos persisted to render integrated approaches a well-intended but impractical endeavor towards sustainable development.
5. In this context, it was important to find country-specific entry points to realize meaningful integration. In some countries, policies to tackle climate change (SDG 13) such as low carbon, green growth could help to attain many other SDGs and targets. In other countries, post-conflict peacebuilding and emphasis on people’s happiness provided opportunities for taking integrated approaches with the involvement of the whole society. Although each country faced unique political circumstances, it was often more effective if a national task with a scope as sweeping as the SDGs was assigned to a dedicated office reporting directly to the Head of Government. Because different Ministries had different mandates, assigning a single Ministry to lead the SDGs created coordination problems.

6. In most countries, greater efforts were needed to foster communication and advocacy for the SDGs in the first place. In fact, the 2030 Agenda and the SDGs represented one of the highlights for international diplomacy; yet these accomplishments had not been sufficiently localized or internalized by the general public as their own agenda.
7. Along with public support, political will and leadership played a critical role in implementing the SDGs in an integrated manner. One way to secure the requisite political will was to weave compelling narratives that turned SDGs into votes during national and local elections. The importance of political context could not be ignored, as key decisions relating to institutional arrangements and budget allocation for competing priorities were made by elected officials and their constituents. It was pointed out that the UN system had a substantive role to play in demonstrating the importance of strong political leadership in the implementation of the SDGs.
8. Once deeper awareness about the SDGs was generated, it was possible to meaningfully explore ways to mobilize the public to implement the SDGs in an integrated, synergistic and coherent manner. When trade-offs among the SDGs were inevitable, science and data needed to be brought in to enable evidence-based decision-making that reaped maximum benefits for the current and future generations. In this regard, capacity building for disaggregated data collection, monitoring, analysis and reporting was cited as a key area requiring international support. Multistakeholder partnership, particularly with the private sector that harbored the latest innovations and technologies, was cited as another building block for ensuring integrated approaches to sustainable development.
9. Strategic integration – one that factors in all angles of integration, both horizontal and vertical, as well as its limitations and interlinkages with policy coherence – required that the environment no longer be considered as a negative cost that must be paid to advance economic and social development, but as a positive value that accelerates development. The experience of the multilateral environmental agreements pertaining to chemicals and waste, for example, showed how protecting the environment from their harmful effects helped to reduce costs related to human health. Effective knowledge management and dissemination remained a challenge in many countries, which rendered intersectoral collaboration and synergies difficult.
10. The voluntary national reviews that Member States presented at the HLPF on the status of their national SDGs implementation offered an excellent opportunity to critically assess where the gaps were and how integrated approaches could help address these gaps. Many voluntary national reviews, however, had served to reinforce the status quo in many countries by capturing only the success stories worthy of presentation at an intergovernmental forum such as HLPF. What could prove a mutual learning and community engagement process often gave way to a last-minute rush to produce a government report that reflected positively on the current elected office. It was therefore timely to rethink how the voluntary national reviews could better fulfill its mandate to facilitate the follow-up and review of the SDGs.
11. In sum, the meeting demonstrated that participants shared a strong awareness about the importance of taking integrated approaches to the SDGs. But first, more efforts were needed to raise general public awareness about the SDGs, which should be embedded in the political economy of each country, including at local levels. With the public on board, it was possible to generate the political will and leadership necessary to implement the SDGs in an integrated and balanced manner, which in turn depended on effective institutional designs and capacities as well as continuous and critical self-appraisal with the participation of all relevant stakeholders. Moving forward, it would prove helpful if the UN system organized targeted capacity building programmes for Member States that were working to refine their integrated approaches to the SDGs, with the environment at the center.