



TAKING ACTION TO IMPROVE LIVES

SUMMARY BY THE PRESIDENT OF THE ECONOMIC AND SOCIAL COUNCIL 2018 Special Meeting

“Towards sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through participation of all”

23 May 2018
ECOSOC Chamber

Introduction

The 2018 ECOSOC Special Meeting took place on 23 May 2018 at United Nations Headquarters in New York, under the theme of “Towards sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through participation for all”¹. The one-day event built on the outcomes from a [series of preparatory meetings](#) on the broader issue of sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies in the context of the 2030 Agenda, which is the priority theme of the Czech Presidency of ECOSOC. These meetings included a preparatory meeting held in Prague, Czech Republic, on 26-27 March 2018 and four breakfast meetings with NGOs, local government representatives, the private sector and academia, convened between November 2017 and March 2018.

The Special Meeting provided a forum for the exchange of best practices and lessons learned from national experiences in fostering sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies that can inform policy making by Member States and highlight avenues for UN system support and stakeholder engagement. It particularly aimed at (1) highlighting the benefits of participatory and inclusive development approaches and understanding the linkages between participation, society and institutions to ensure that no one is left behind; (2) promoting partnerships for policy action and fostering cooperation among all relevant stakeholders to foster participation through innovative approaches, particularly of vulnerable groups; (3) sharing knowledge, experiences and innovative approaches on increasing participation, inclusiveness and transparency in public policy and governance at national, regional and global levels; (4) advancing recommendations for the ECOSOC system’s role in providing policy guidance for building inclusive, peaceful and resilient societies to achieve the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development.

Main messages from the 2018 Special Meeting

1. **Participation of all must be seen as an asset for sustainable development and the 2030 Agenda.**
Engaging a broad range of stakeholders provides localized knowledge of challenges, adapts responses

¹ Detailed information about the 2018 Special Meeting is available on the dedicated website:
<https://www.un.org/ecosoc/en/node/3371101>

to needs and realities, and catalyses creative solutions. For the 2030 Agenda and its Sustainable Development Goals to be successful, they need to be embraced at the local level.

2. **Partnerships and participation at the local level can build momentum** ('snowballing') on key issues, leading to institutional changes such as legislative reform and new planning processes at higher levels. Local authorities can foster the participation of all, for example through participatory budgeting processes, crowd-sourcing, consensus-building, communication, and community-building. The promotion of civic education is key to build people's and communities' capacity to engage.
3. **Governments, parliaments and local authorities should lead in creating more space for inclusive participatory processes and building trust in institutions.** Engaging all stakeholders in the preparation of national implementation plans for the Sustainable Development Goals, and enabling stakeholder participation in the reviews conducted at the High-level Political Forum are essential to expand the understanding around and ownership of the SDGs.
4. **Internet access and connectivity hold significant opportunity to strengthen the participation of all.** However, there must be proper resources made available to ensure the engagement of all, including the most vulnerable and those without access to the internet. The private sector can play a key role in improving internet access and connectivity.
5. **More effective ways must be found to communicate the challenges the world is facing and the potential of the 2030 Agenda to address these challenges.** Addressing the sense of exclusion that prevails in many places is critical to reverse the trend of declining trust in public institutions and multilateralism.
6. **The engagement of all also means the *responsibility* of all.** Responsive governments and transparent, effective, and accountable institutions at all levels are critical to build and maintain sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies.

Opening Session

The President of the Economic and Social Council, H.E. Ms. Marie Chatardová (Czech Republic), opened the Special Meeting by recalling the preparations that have happened throughout the year, including a series of breakfast meetings with different constituencies of stakeholders to discuss their participation in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development. In March 2018, a preparatory meeting in Prague had brought different voices together to discuss the participation of all as a cross-cutting endeavor for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. Some of the main take-aways from these meetings included the need to focus on education, economic development, and good governance to advance inclusion and participation at all levels. While progress is being made, the pace is not fast enough, and interdisciplinary whole-of-government and whole-of-society approaches are required to build and maintain sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. The President closed by noting some of the opportunities to improve participation, such as participatory decision-making, context-sensitive institutional mechanisms, and the use of information and communications technologies.

The Deputy Secretary-General of the United Nations, H.E. Ms. Amina J. Mohammed, noted the importance of the theme of the Special Meeting which speaks to the heart of the 2030 Agenda as an agenda of the

people, by the people, for the people and with the people. She underscored the collective responsibility to engage all actors in the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). Effective public participation leads to better laws and policies, and more accountability from governments, as well as new solutions to contemporary challenges. Several core areas of work are critical for the achievement of broader participation: First, an enabling environment for participation, including responsible leadership, legal frameworks that adhere to human rights standards, as well as greater investments in transparent and accountable institutions. Furthermore, women and youth as powerful agents of change should be more centrally involved in the implementation of the SDGs. Third, climate action should be viewed as central to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda and as a catalyst for greater participation and economic growth for all. Investing in green economy, resilience and technology can create jobs and improve disaster risk reduction. The Deputy Secretary-General closed by calling for the participation of all actors in the preparation of national implementation plans for the 2030 Agenda and the review of their progress at the High-level Political Forum on Sustainable Development, noting ECOSOC's role as a central platform for inclusive debate and coordination of efforts.

The Deputy Minister of Environment of the Czech Republic, Mr. Vladislav Smrž, emphasized that budget is not the key to participation in the 2030 Agenda, but the willingness of governments to involve various stakeholders, as well as the willingness of the latter to participate. He drew comparisons between the principles of the foundation of the Czech Republic and the 2030 Agenda's call for the participation of all, noting that the Agenda is a unique opportunity to broaden the inclusiveness of political participation. The Czech Republic is working to facilitate the participation of all, including through the preparation of their national strategy for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda, for example through crowd-sourcing of priorities, workshops, large-scale consultations and the engagement of parliament. The development of a web-based platform to collect voluntary commitments from all actors, drawing on the best practice of Finland, is also planned. The public's engagement in developing a strategy for the management of national parks in the Czech Republic is a further example of public engagement, and has resulted in strong legislation for the management of national parks as well as a strong sense of ownership.

The General Director of the Presidential Agency for International Cooperation of Colombia, Mr. Sergio Londoño Zurek, emphasized that, in Colombia, peace has been key to establishing an enabling environment for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. It is therefore necessary to address the structural barriers to achieving sustainable development. The 2030 Agenda provides a great opportunity to consolidate and connect the challenges and required actions to achieve sustainable development. The National Government of Colombia provides a platform to support communication between all sectors and government around the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and developing a national SDG Compass, a long-term planning strategy, which guides the work of local governments. It is critical to bring the 2030 Agenda to the local level, and to share best practices for implementation through dialogue. The private sector also plays a key role in implementation. For example, the Colombian Government is working with the private sector to improve the collection of data to monitor progress on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The General Director closed by reiterating Colombia's commitment to continue engaging all actors as much as possible, including the international community, to achieve the SDGs by 2030.

Session 2: Global trends and emerging issues: Building sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies in a changing world

The world is rapidly changing from an economic, social, and environmental standpoint, with progress and risks coming hand in hand. While economic development is positive on the one hand, it can also be accompanied by rising levels of debt and global inequalities. Governments play a central role in creating the space to bring together all actors to jointly address current and future challenges, such as disaster risk, rapid urbanization and rising inequalities amongst others. As the environment for the implementation of the 2030 Agenda is increasingly complex, the responses to global trends and changes must also be global.

Natural disasters have no boundaries and affect all, in many cases destroying years of development gains. Conditions such as poverty and inequality, poorly planned rapid urbanization, environmental degradation, and an increasing number of natural disasters enhance vulnerability and exposure to disaster risk. The Sendai Framework for Disaster Risk Reduction (2015-2030) therefore contains a call for the participation of all, highlighting that stakeholders, such as women, the elderly, youth and children, persons with disabilities, and indigenous peoples, can all contribute greatly to the management of disaster risk through their specialized knowledge and experience, and that these contributions should be included in all levels of government. UNISDR engages different stakeholders, through a private sector network, and their work with cities and local governments through the Making Cities Resilient programme. Moreover, experiences from the ground clearly illustrate the increasing need to develop better disaster risk reduction strategies which include the engagement of all stakeholders.

Rapid change is occurring globally across many areas. It is often beyond the capacity of policy makers and institutions to keep pace in developing adequate responses. Working at the local level is therefore critical to address some of these challenges, including through adequate financing encompassing ODA, domestic resource mobilization, and leveraging private sector funds. The use of new technologies can lead to lower transaction costs, improved access to services, and smarter and more resilient cities. Moreover, adequate investment in human capital is essential and requires enhancing education, learning, and health, including through universal health care.

Furthermore, the role of academia in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda was highlighted. Academia can provide governments and policy makers with access to extensive high-quality data, usable for research and analysis to improve policies and decision-making. For example, the Luxembourg Income Study Database (LIS), a cross-national data archive based in Luxembourg, provides micro-data (households and persons) largely focusing on income data, which is harmonized and standardized in a format that can be applied to policies for the implementation of the SDGs, particularly SDGs 1 and 10.

During the interactive discussion, several Member States shared examples on how their governments are operationalizing the participation of all, highlighting that constituencies such as women, young people, local governments and the elderly, are often consulted for their knowledge and expertise in dealing with disasters, their role in bringing the 2030 Agenda to the local level and their role in providing data to monitor the SDGs. It was noted that while the 2030 Agenda provides an unprecedentedly inclusive

framework for sustainable development, many people are increasingly feeling excluded at the country-level. The declining trust in government and institutions requires to work on devising policy guidance for more equitable and inclusive economic growth. Moreover, there were calls for the need to engage those which fall outside of the political arena, providing them with more resources and access to finance to allow them to engage in the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The discussion further reiterated the contribution by academia to make data and research more usable for those working in the field, the need to close communication gaps through technology to engage those in remote locations, the importance of providing adequate resources at the local level, and, overall, a call for governments to provide more space for the participation of all.

Session 3: Innovative policy approaches and technologies to foster participation of all

Paradoxically, many cities with robust climate action or sustainable development strategies and technical expertise are lacking in community engagement and communications strategies. A move to “campaign-mode” (increased communication of strategies with citizens), crowd-sourcing, consensus-building (community-wide engagement and involvement), and communicating back to the community what is happening, can lead to a more concrete commitment in communities, and conflict prevention.

In this regard, panelists shared innovative policy approaches and context-sensitive technology applications with the potential to foster the participation of all. The *Groupe Tawhida Ben Cheikh* in Tunisia works on improving knowledge and access to sexual and reproductive health. Partnering with civil society organizations that have local expertise on how to address women’s needs has been critical to change attitudes in terms of reproductive health. This helped to build momentum to empower women in the local community to push for their sexual and reproductive rights. The momentum of community mobilization, or “snowball effect”, led to these issues being taken up in parliament, and the passing of more progressive legislation.

The experience of the *Participatory Budgeting Project* demonstrates the importance of inclusion and equity for successful implementation of participatory budgeting initiatives. It is also critical that the money invested matches the priorities of communities, that there is grassroots leadership, inclusive design, and targeted outreach to communities. Cases showcased included the example of Boston, United States, where the mayor allocated \$1 million to a group of young people in the City, allowing them to decide how the money was spent. As the program evolved, the projects funded by the resources became increasingly targeted and specific, as the goals of the youth involved began guiding the participatory process.

Technology-enabled solutions include current trends in e-governance, and the potential of the latter to strengthen communication for the participation of all. E-governance can be used both to enhance the delivery of public services and to facilitate people’s participation in governance. However, governments are currently placing less emphasis on citizen participation online. Thus, it was suggested that governments do more to integrate existing social media platforms, where much of the current online engagement is occurring. A large digital divide remains between OECD and non-OECD countries, and more must be done for e-governance to be inclusive of vulnerable populations, including the elderly. Increased

connectivity, capacity, and cooperation are therefore key to enable technology to foster participation and promote sustainable development.

In the area of sustainable consumption and production, the example of *ERCTech* illustrates the potential to move to a circular economy in the construction business, applying zero-waste technologies, using products that were once considered waste, and greatly reducing carbon dioxide emissions from concrete production and processing of raw materials. The significant financial benefit globally from moving to this new way of working in the construction business was underscored.

Comments and questions from the floor included a call to look at the discussion on sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through the lens of Africa, including for women and grassroots organizations to receive more support to engage. Concerns were also raised on the use of some of the emerging technologies with regards to populism and extremism. The session closed by reiterating the need for more connectivity, capacity, cooperation, and communication to help engage the 'silent majority', including finding incentives for the private sector to improve global connectivity and internet access.

Session 4: Strengthening cooperation for sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies

The success in implementing the 2030 Agenda and in delivering on its promise to leave no one behind, hinges on strong multi-stakeholder partnerships and cooperation among all relevant actors. Institutionalizing strong mechanisms and processes for participation of all is therefore critical for building sustainable and inclusive societies.

The human rights dimension in sustainable development was highlighted, including the need to combat inequalities, exclusion and discrimination, and to ensure the right to equal participation in political and public affairs. 'Leaving people behind' makes societies vulnerable to social and political instability, and can lead to violent conflict. Concerns were raised about the trend to 'squeeze civil society' and a more systematic effort to reverse this trend was urged. To ensure that the SDGs are realized for everyone and to achieve the transformative potential of the 2030 Agenda, it is critical to enable the participation of all stakeholders in the design, implementation, as well as the follow up and review of the Agenda. This includes, for example, encouraging meaningful participation of stakeholders, especially the vulnerable, in the preparation of Voluntary National Reviews and hearing from different stakeholder groups during the High-level Political Forum. Institutional barriers for participation should be overcome at all levels, including allowing civil society to meaningfully contribute to international debates.

In a world which has grown hyper-competitive, and in which societies hold very little trust in governments, partially due to growing inequalities, effective cooperation and partnerships are considered key. Parliaments are supposed to be the epitome of participation and partnerships bringing different segments of society together. It was underscored that parliaments are responsible for working on behalf of all people, irrespective of their social status. While governments have a leading role to play, parliaments are responsible for ensuring that governments uphold their commitments. However, it was noted that in recent years many governments have been retreating from their commitments. There is therefore a need

for proactive social action to ensure that all stakeholders, particularly civil society, are engaged at the national and local levels. Parliamentarians should be provided with the funds and skills to carry out their mandate of representation and to promote inclusive sustainable development. The private sector would also need to be engaged in a more robust manner.

Businesses that benefit women were identified as an area where strengthened cooperation is required. Long-term investments and a systems-thinking approach would be key to devise business solutions that benefit women, including in the health care and education sectors, as well as in terms of consumer products. Furthermore, while the social impact investing sector is maturing, scale is missing. The critical potential of taking women out of 'survival mode' was underscored, enabling them to support anyone around them.

Drawing on experiences from designing participatory processes, panelists underscored that people and communities have an inherent desire to engage. If people do not engage, the process should be blamed. To overcome challenges in programme design, capacity building is needed to enhance public officials' skills to read data and assess public participation needs. The lack of civic education also constitutes a critical challenge to be overcome for building and fostering sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies. Participatory processes are inherently multidisciplinary and should not be treated as political campaigns or public relations projects – once the trust of communities is lost, it takes years to gain it back. It was highlighted that there is no magic "app" that can guarantee public participation nor one-size-fits-all solutions. Public authorities should enable participatory processes while refraining from trying to control them.

Governments should be mindful of the effects that legal frameworks may have in promoting or hampering the enabling environment for citizens' participation. Multi-stakeholder dialogue should be promoted and democratic ownership should be fostered to embrace the 2030 Agenda at the local level. Concerns were raised that government bureaucracies can hamper the establishment of inclusive partnerships. Countries' Voluntary National Reviews on progress towards achieving the Sustainable Development Goals should reflect citizens' voices. The drafting of progress reports could serve as a process to achieve greater transparency and accountability at the national level.

The interactive discussion centred on the value of grassroots movements and their contributions to the achievement of the 2030 Agenda. More emphasis should be given to those living in extreme poverty and their views should be considered in policy design. It was highlighted that participatory process cannot be faked, they must be genuinely designed to achieve scale and include all voices. Strategic packages for participatory government should be considered, as well as the accompanying infrastructure needs such as access to open data and other transparency platforms. Attention should also be paid to new social movements, which are globally connected and have substantive inputs to make.

Closing Session

In his closing remarks, the Under-Secretary-General for Economic and Social Affairs, Mr. Liu Zhenmin, highlighted three aspects deemed critical for the achievement of the 2030 Agenda in the context of participation of all relevant stakeholders: First, participation of all should be regarded as an asset, it brings localized knowledge of issues and challenges, adapts responses to needs and realities, catalyzes creative solutions, and can ensure the success of the implementation of the 2030 Agenda and its interlinked Sustainable Development Goals. Secondly, communications and outreach should be a priority, including more effective ways to communicate current challenges. Third, the engagement of all also means the responsibility of all. Achieving strong and responsive governance at all levels is a key objective.

The President of ECOSOC, H.E. Ms. Marie Chatardová, concluded the Special Meeting by highlighting some of the main points discussed, including the role that local authorities can play in fostering citizens' participation and the need to scale-up models of public participation, supported by information and communications technologies. Furthermore, building momentum on key issues through community mobilization and multi-stakeholder partnerships, involving governments, parliaments, civil society, academia, the private sector and other relevant stakeholders, are critical. A vibrant and actively engaged civil society is important in promoting and monitoring progress achieved on the implementation of the 2030 Agenda. The President expressed her belief that the Special Meeting has contributed to the identification of concrete solutions to work towards sustainable, resilient and inclusive societies through participation of all.
