



BUILDING THE FUTURE we WANT



2013 Economic and Social Council Integration Meeting (13 May 2013)

Achieving sustainable development: Integrating the social, economic and environmental dimensions

SUMMARY

Session 2: “Scaling Up for Sustainable Development”

The panel, moderated by His Excellency Ambassador Masood Khan, Vice-President of the Economic and Social Council, included Her Excellency Dr. Florence Chenoweth, Minister of Agriculture of Liberia; Ms. Hunter Lovins, President of Natural Capitalism Solutions; Mr. Gary Lawrence, Corporate Vice President and Chief Sustainability Officer of AECOM; and Mr. Philip Dobie, Senior Fellow at the World Agroforestry Centre. The panel presentations were followed by an intervention from the discussant -- Mr. Felix Dodds, Former Executive Director of Stakeholder Forum for a Sustainable Future.

Following the introduction of the Rio+20 “The Future We Want” document, the importance of engaging the international community to make serious efforts to scale up for sustainable development, intensify the relationship between the three dimensions of sustainability, and promote cross-sector collaboration was on the agenda of the Integration meeting. The integration of the economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development requires advanced cross-sectoral collaboration between Governments, civil society, the United Nations and other key stakeholders. The nexus of the three dimensions and cooperation across multiple sectors is necessary to approach emerging challenges to the agriculture and energy sectors such as urbanization, rapid growing economies, climate change and an increasing population. Formulating a cross-sector approach and reinforcing cooperation to effectively advance global sustainability was at the forefront of the agenda.

The necessity of scaling up for sustainable development in the agriculture and energy sectors and addressing what means are the most effective in incorporating the three dimensions was raised. Speakers highlighted the achievements of Liberia’s integration of economic, social and environmental dimensions of sustainable development, which has provided beneficial outcomes for the advancement of Liberia’s agriculture sector. Utilizing available natural resources sustainably and formulating a land tenure program, issuing farmers certificates of land ownership, has allowed Liberia to annually decrease levels of food insecurity. Liberia’s experiences in sustainable development and analyzing the lessons drawn from the Poverty Environment Initiative of the United Nations Development Program was highlighted as an indicator of how environmental management becomes indistinguishable from national development. Private sector investment had a key role in providing the necessary resources to the Liberian government, where the available financial resources were limited. Speakers noted that investment in both energy and agriculture sectors are necessary to bring successful innovations in sustainable development to scale. Achieving food security involved a multi-sector approach, not just promoting agricultural development. Therefore, a sustainable future is dependent on how “productive landscapes” are managed.

The importance of the involvement of key stakeholders in addressing the challenges in integrating the three dimensions of sustainable development was raised. Speakers highlighted the importance of the role of the private sector as a leader in sustainable development initiatives, particularly in advancing science, technology and innovation that seek to solve issues of sustainability. Private investment, both foreign direct investment and portfolio investment, should be used to leverage national and official development assistance resources. There is overwhelming business case for sustainable development --companies leading in sustainability are outperforming their competitors. Challenges remain in encouraging the involvement of businesses to engage in promoting sustainable development, in particular in post-conflict countries. The integration of three dimensions of sustainability continues to be largely ignored by corporation due to the bottom line in business--making a profit--was highlighted. Broken markets, market-distorting subsidies and incentives were seen as obstacles to companies' sustainability efforts.

Calculations should be based on an integrated bottom line, where costs of not managing water resources and climate are taken into account in determining companies' profitability. Speakers commented on the few corporations that have successfully integrated the three dimensions of sustainability. The achievements of SEKEM, a company operating in Egypt, were noted for its success in integrating the three dimensions of development-- sustainably growing good, cosmetics and sharing its profits with its employers. Unilever's Sustainable Living Plan demonstrated how commitment to sustainable and equitable growth can help increase sales while reducing costs. Increasing the private sector's involvement in sustainable development agenda requires providing the private sector a seat at the table.

Innovative means to promote knowledge transfer in the agriculture and energy sectors that can contribute to the integration agenda was raised. Some speakers noted that enabling entrepreneurs and advancing education could enhance the inherent drive towards sustainability. Providing a suitable environment for entrepreneurs to advance science, technology and innovation, is essential in promoting sustainable energy. Educating farmers on how to efficiently utilize limited natural resources available to further promote agricultural sustainability was also highlighted. Alternative practices in sustainable agriculture were provided. Diffusion of technology into the developing world can address many challenges, for example solar panels for sustainable energy, training for mid-wives, among others. Speakers also raised the importance of addressing rapid urbanization and environmental degradation as a barrier to further enhancing the integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development. It was also underscored that nature innovates within limits, and humans could go beyond limits in the name of innovation with detrimental results.

The steps which the Economic and Social Council should take in order to fulfill its mandate and actively engage with key stakeholders were also addressed. The Economic and Social Council provides a platform to reinforce the various partnerships of key stakeholders, allowing for better cohesion and collaboration between multiple parties on enhancing sustainable development initiatives. The world needed an honest broker between governments, non-governmental organizations and the private sector. Speakers highlighted various areas in which the role of the Economic and Social Council can be enhanced. Proposals included setting up an intergovernmental committee on sustainable development that brings together all stakeholders. The Council could convene a meeting to bring together financiers, ecologists and economists to analyze the state of the economy within the sustainable development context. Raising public awareness on sustainability initiatives, building a stronger relationship with peacebuilding operations in order to mainstream sustainable development, and reinforcing mutual partnerships to scale up development in the agriculture and energy sectors was raised.

The international community lacks comprehensive solutions to the pressing challenges of sustainable development that is equally economically viable, politically reasonable, and socially acceptable. Graham Turner's comparison¹ of 30 years of historical data and scenarios presented in the Limits to Growth² was provided as an example to illustrate that business-as-usual will result in an economic collapse by 2030. Some speakers highlighted the need to bridging the gap between the rural and urban communities, as a means to further enhance multi-sector collaboration. The need to develop efficient metrics and formulate a valuable feedback mechanism to gauge local indicators was highlighted as a necessity in measuring the levels of sustainability. Valuing the importance of knowledge gained from indigenous populations on innovations in agricultural development was also raised. The 2013 International Year of Quinoa, for example, recognizes the contribution of Andean indigenous peoples and highlights the role quinoa's biodiversity and nutritional values play in food security and nutrition as well as the eradication of poverty. Attention, however, should be paid to protecting the intellectual wisdom of indigenous peoples.

The need for a comprehensive global framework for reporting on sustainability was highlighted as an important mechanism in identifying the key drivers of sustainability and identifying the political, social, and economic barriers to integrating the three dimensions of development. Efforts by South Africa, Brazil, France and Denmark, as well as the sustainability accounting standards, were praised. Bhutan's Gross National Index was also praised as a multidimensional measure of living standards, health, education, time poverty, good governance, ecological resilience, psychological wellbeing, community vitality and cultural diversity and resilience. In Cuba, for example, urban agriculture has been a success despite economic challenges.

Conclusions and recommendations

- Advanced cross-sectoral collaboration between Governments, civil society, the United Nations and other key stakeholder is key for the successful integration of the three dimensions of sustainable development.
- Commitment from all actors of the international community is necessary to fundamentally improve the sustainable development. Involvement of various stakeholders is necessary to translate policies into action.
- Scientists should be encouraged to participate to aid in bridging the gap between economic, social, and development communities.
- Investment in sustainable agriculture and energy sectors is necessary to achieve a win-win outcome and will increase the integration of both fields.
- The Economic and Social Council must continue to serve as a platform for civil society, governments, and the private sector to strategically enhance cross-sector collaboration and promote the sustainability agenda.
- An intergovernmental committee on sustainable development should be set up to bring together all stakeholders.
- The Council should convene a meeting to bring together financiers and ecologist economists to discuss the future of the economy.
- The partnerships with the private sector need to be enhanced in order to strengthen science, technology and innovation which is necessary to enhance sustainable development capabilities.
- Effective metrics/reporting systems need to be established to measure the advancements in sustainable development.

¹ <http://www.csiro.au/files/files/plje.pdf>

² Meadows, D.H., Meadows, D.L., Randers, J. and Behrens III, W.W. (1972) The Limits to Growth: a Report for the Club of Rome's Project on the Predicament of Mankind. New York: Universe Books.