

President of the General Assembly
Morning Dialogue 4: Transformation to a more sustainable world
2 December 2022
SUMMARY

The President of the seventy-seventh session of the General Assembly, H.E. Csaba Kőrösi, convened the fourth Morning Dialogue with Permanent Representatives on Friday, 2 December, to discuss “Transformation to a more sustainable world”.

Transformation is often used for qualitative changes needed to enable the achievement of set objectives. While voluntary national reviews presented at the High-Level Political Forum picture positive results, the international community has unfortunately been witnessing several setbacks on our collective path to realize the 2030 Agenda and the Sustainable Development Goals by 2030. Our world needs solutions through solidarity, sustainability and science. Thirteen out of the sixteen mandated processes of the seventy-seventh session of the Assembly are related to transformation. Time has come for a vision of transformation, which aims at lasting change and shall be sustainable in the long run. But we should honestly ask ourselves whether progress in implementing the 2030 Agenda is being made considering economic, social and environmental aspects in an equal and integrated manner and if we have sufficient tools to measure progress in the right way?

The Morning Dialogue addressed the complexity of economic, social and environmental factors that can drive such change and reflected on complementary ways to GDP on measuring progress towards achieving the SDGs. GDP is the main measure of a nation's economic progress and health, but it fails to take account of the quality of life and other social factors, environmental degradation, climate change and important measures of economic and social progress.

Based on experience and lessons learned, participants presented a wide range of perspectives and ideas on how to blend multilateral approaches to transformation (top-down) with action at regional, national and local level (bottom up) to respond to the actual development needs in various country contexts. Several participants stressed the importance of looking at national and local capacities to implement transformation in operative terms. Others underlined key sectors that proved to make a difference (education; fight against corruption; foreign capital injection accompanied by the right social capital and skills; innovation, digital, security; health; productive capacity development; governance structures, rules and regulations; solidarity measures; tax incentives). The policy shaping role of ECOSOC and regional integrations was highlighted. The moral consideration of weighting short-term national and individual ambitions against collective interests was also raised.

The exchange proved to be timely, in terms of interest and appetite by Member States to reckon that wellbeing and sustainability are multidimensional phenomena and therefore measures such as GDP alone can no longer meet the complex needs of this ever-changing global world. Progress towards the SDGs may be measured through the lens of well-being and long-term sustainability. The intention is not to replace GDP, rather to develop measurement system(s) with complimentary indicators, where SDGs will continue to provide further measures of success. However, transformation needs to happen more rapidly to achieve the goals by 2030. Possibly other, forward-looking measures and additional incentives are also needed to support them.

When it comes to defining success and measuring impact, it was suggested to involve whole of societies - with people at the center. A variety of indicators such as life expectancy, educational level, housing affordability and access to healthcare, as well as their interaction may provide a more comprehensive picture of economic and social health.

Taking into account environmental indicators like air and water quality, biodiversity and carbon emissions can help make more informed decisions about economic activities and ensure that assets of our environment are not sacrificed for short-term gains. If we are serious about creating a better, more equitable, and sustainable future for all, economic growth should not come at the expense of social and environmental progress. Interchanging one type of capital to another is also part of the equation.

Technology will undoubtedly be a critical part of the desired transformation. Multilateral governance has a role to cater for innovation to enable success. Public-private partnerships will continue to be important. However, business will likely need to transform as well and look beyond profits. More consistent frameworks and common metrics to evaluate impact would be needed for successful partnerships, which factor in the cost of non or slow action.

The UN system has a crucial role in driving this sustainability quest forward with transformation at the forefront. By focusing on science-based solutions, unlocking new commitments, and catalysing game changers we can accelerate transition, roll back detrimental processes, fight climate change, and boost our efforts to realize the SDGs.

Are Member States ready to move the needle and look beyond the 2030 milestone focusing on long terms gains?