

Tenth Meeting of the  
**United Nations Economist Network (UNEN)**

Monday, 19 October 2020  
8:30 – 10:30 a.m.

Mr. Elliott Harris, Assistant Secretary-General of the Department of Economic and Social Affairs and Chief Economist of the United Nations, opened the tenth meeting of UNEN, acknowledging all participants who joined the discussion.

Mr. Harris noted the main objectives of the meeting: (1) launch of the UNEN report “Shaping the Trends of Our Time”; (2) update on status of thematic briefs; (3) work on New Economics for Sustainable Development; and (4) UNEN’s contribution to country teams.

**Launch of the UNEN report “Sharing the Trends of Our Time”**

Mr. Harris congratulated the group on the launch of the report and thanked the chapter co-leads, the writing teams, and the organizers in OUSG for their hard work. He noted that the report contained a series of messages that were interlinked, which made the efforts to publicize it more complicated. There was an interview with DESA Voice, and DESA and UNEP are working on a joint op-ed. Also in the outreach pipeline are a possible podcast interview with Department of Global Communications head, Melissa Fleming; a webinar with Resident Coordinators; and regional webinars with country economists. Mr. Harris stressed that the report was a joint effort of multiple UN entities, which should be reflected in the report’s outreach events. He encouraged colleagues to continue publicizing the report, including in the form of blog pieces and op-eds. The group discussed using infographics to communicate the key messages of the report and the interlinkages of the megatrends. Mr. Harris noted the possibility of hiring an intern at DESA to design infographics, and ESCAP mentioned that the designer for the Economic and Social Survey of Asia and the Pacific could be available for creating infographics if given ideas.

Mr. Harris asked the group about their thoughts on the experience preparing the report. The group emphasized the need to translate the work done for the report into support to the UN system on the ground. Several participants noted the importance of highlighting the interlinkages of the megatrends. The outreach should be done coherently across the UN system, instead of having each agency promoting one megatrend. It was also pointed out that the report dived deep into analyzing the interlinkages between the trends, but less so on the policy linkages, which should be further explored. Feedback from policymakers on the report could help to inform direction of future research on the interlinkages. It was noted that the Review on the Economics of Biodiversity – commissioned by the UK Treasury and led by Prof. Partha Dasgupta – will be launched in coming months and the group could explore how the UNEN report could interact with the Dasgupta Review.

The group discussed the need of having a space to host the UNEN products, e.g. the UNEN report and future thematic briefs, which can be accessed by economists on the field. The possibility of an UNEN website was raised, but it was noted that it would need to be curated/managed. Another possibility is to create an UN Chief Economist page that can host the

UNEN products, which would also have wide distribution and credibility. Mr. Harris urged colleagues to propose ideas for a UNEN website – including how to resource and utilize it – and added that suggestions can be discussed at the next meeting. The group pointed out that this report is an example of how the UN can work together.

### **Update on status of thematic briefs**

Mr. Harris noted that many issues covered by the thematic briefs have become more pertinent in the post-COVID-19 world. The group will be spending a lot of time next year working on the topic of recovery, as countries move from response to recovery. If the thematic briefs are to support the country teams, they must include important policy discussions rather than being mere intellectual exercises. Issues to be covered by future thematic briefs need to be pressing for countries' recovery on the policy side and should be of interest to a large number of country economists. Environmental refugees and strengthening resilience were suggested in the discussion as possible topics for future briefs. Mr. Harris also suggested that briefs can help map out future issues and could have a link to New Economics for Sustainable Development.

Mr. Harris called for ideas of how UNEN can share its products, including through the Department of Global Communications (DGC), the Development Coordination Office (DCO) and webinars with country economists, as well as through collaboration with other international organizations (such as OECD), international financial institutions, academia, donors, etc. The importance of linking communications colleagues in different entities to the work that UNEN does was highlighted in the discussion, given the group itself does not have resources for marketing.

Thematic brief leads gave updates on their progress:

- UNEP informed that the two briefs on beyond GDP and nature-based solutions had been peer-reviewed by experts.
- UNCTAD noted that a first draft of the Global Green New Deal brief will be ready by 14 November, and Partnership for Action on Green Economy (PAGE) offered to provide inputs. UNCTAD will also share the brief on debt shortly.
- ILO informed the group that first drafts of the informal economy brief and social protection brief are on the way. UN-Habitat asked about the possibility of covering issues of eviction and temporary basic income in the ILO-led briefs, and ILO was open to having further discussion on including these issues in the briefs.
- There was no progress to report regarding the DESA-led taxation brief.
- The group awaits ECA to report on the progress of the migration brief. The Population Division of DESA offered to provide some inputs to the migration brief, including results of a survey on the impacts of COVID-19 on migration.

### **Work on New Economics for Sustainable Development**

Mr. Harris noted the ongoing work on sustainability and the increasing acceptance that pursuing sustainability is good for businesses. He urged the group to make new economics for sustainable development the next big topic, which would require providing people with the arguments and tools to push for this school of thought and to bring it to the public with a splash, much as

sustainable development was popularized by the UN. He noted that the time is ripe as the pandemic has generated significant demand for new economic thinking to replace flawed and dated economic ideas. He also noted the growing interest of the corporate and financial sector to move in this direction and the acceptance that non-economic factors are not in conflict with good business outcomes. A participant noted that there are greenlights for advancing new economic thinking centered on sustainable development, but there are also headwinds, including the current woeful state of multilateralism. It was also noted that the entire UN system needs to be convinced to advance new development models, as some parts of the system are still supporting the business-as-usual model. Some suggestions were made about potential focus in this area of work: role of entrepreneurs and SMEs, diversity of economic production models, and political economy.

Mr. Harris noted that Ms. Chantal Line Carpentier of UNCTAD had done work that discussed the different concepts of economy and asked her to share her work with the group. A participant called for broadening existing economic ideologies, rather than focusing on the ideological divide. It was also noted that many economic ideas that economists consider as mainstream are in fact no longer mainstream in the policy circle.

Measurement would be key in advancing thinking around the new economics for sustainable development. Mr. Harris noted that there is increasing interest in composite measures that capture different development dimensions, including biodiversity, environmental and social. The inclusive wealth index is a notable example. There is now broad acceptance of the need to move beyond GDP as the measure of progress, but also to improve and broaden GDP's scope as an indicator, moving towards the concept of Sustainable Gross Domestic Product (SGDP) that takes into account the environmental and social dimensions of sustainable development. It was raised during the discussion that – given the many different methodologies to measure dimensions of sustainable development – UNEN could consider devising methodological guidelines that help to mainstream measurement techniques. Mr. Harris noted that it is a very ambitious proposal that would need to be done in stages, should it materialize. The discussion also touched upon the advantage of having a single number/indicator that captures progress and drives policy discourse. Mr. Harris suggested that the lack of a single explanatory factor with a clear causality – such as global warming due to carbon emissions as the driver of climate change – could be a factor behind the unsatisfactory progress in preserving biodiversity.

The need to take stock of what the UN has done in the past was stressed in the discussion. It was noted that the group should build on the solid foundation of some of the existing work and be aware of the political resistance to some of the ideas. Mr. Harris pointed out that unlike in the past, there is now significant demand from the private sector for UN leadership in looking to the future of sustainable development. Methodology-wise, it was noted that PAGE already has an index that pertains to sustainable development. Other entities shared links to existing relevant work:

- UNRISD shared a database of papers on how the “social and solidarity economy” contributes to the SDGs: <https://knowledgehub.unsso.org/knowledge-hub/>
- FAO shared its work on nature-based solutions: <http://www.fao.org/fao-stories/article/en/c/1208516/> and <http://www.fao.org/3/CA2525EN/ca2525en.pdf>

- The Statistics Division of DESA reported on the ongoing work on updating the system of national accounts and the upcoming release of updated economic accounts that include inequality, unpaid household work, health, education, and other measures. It also indicated that they are willing to work with economists to develop theoretical underpinning of their statistical work.

### **UNEN's contribution to country teams**

Mr. Harris updated the group on his discussion with DCO and noted that there is a strong expectation that UNEN will support the country teams. However, he stressed that UNEN does not have the capacity to respond on a continuous basis to specific requests from country economists. He added that it is time for the group to provide a definitive answer on how UNEN can support country teams. Thematic briefs and exchanges with country economists around certain themes can be useful. Interactions with country economists so far have suggested that infrastructure investment, domestic resource mobilization and debt are issues of great interest. Country economists would be invited to attend UNEN meetings. It was noted that there are economists put in place in Resident Coordinator Office in more than 110 countries.

The group discussed possibilities of joint pilot projects between UN agencies to support country teams. ILO noted the work that the organization is doing on social protection and financing gaps. PAGE noted that they have projects that involve five UN agencies (UNEP, ILO, UNDP, UNIDO, UNITAR) and 20 partner countries. PAGE is working on a data observatory and modelling on green economy, among other things. Mr. Harris noted it could be a good model for kickstarting a joint pilot project, but the country choices are important. FAO noted that specialized agencies have relevant experience in helping to understand how countries can best make use of technical advice, which would be useful in the selection process.

### **Conclusion**

Mr. Harris concluded the meeting by asking the group to e-mail him ideas where best to host UNEN products and on how UNEN can support country teams, which will be discussed in the next meeting. He suggested including Ms. Carpentier's paper on emerging economic models on the agenda of the next UNEN meeting in November.